

SOCIAL SERVICES AND HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 DECEMBER 2006

PROGRESS REPORT: CORPORATE PARENTING TASK & FINISH GROUP

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members of the Committee with an update of the work of the Corporate Parenting Task & Finish Group which includes consideration of a draft Corporate Parenting policy.

2. BACKGROUND – DEFINITIONS OF CORPORATE PARENTING

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Task & Finish Group was established on 15 December 2005 to consider issues associated with the Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities and how current approaches might be improved. For the purposes of more precisely determining the rationale and scope of the investigation, Members of the Task & Finish Group considered a wide range of reports, evidence and legislation in an attempt to generate a multi-faceted understanding of 'Corporate Parenting' rather than adopt a simplistic approach which may have narrowed Member's enquiry.
- 2.2 With regard to defining Corporate Parenting, the Task & Finish Group considered numerous reports that have examined the part that councillors have to play in safeguarding vulnerable children and young people, not least the Laming Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (2003). Members considered how the serious breakdown in communications and failure of agencies to work together led to tragic consequences and how the role of the elected Member was highlighted in not having adopted a thorough performance monitoring role in ensuring children in their Council's care were in receipt of integrated high quality services.
- 2.3 As part of the evidence given to Lord Laming, Councillors said that they were unaware of the scale of the problems faced by their agencies. The Laming Inquiry harshly criticised the defence of "*no one ever told me*" and stressed the importance of distinct lines of accountability. He insisted that

"Elected councillors and senior officers must ensure that they are kept fully informed about the delivery of servicesand must not accept at face value what they are told."

- 2.4 Other important sources of information used for defining the boundaries of the investigation included Government guidance on how Councillors may be good Corporate Parents, Government research publications on aspects of Corporate Parenting and the Government green paper entitled 'Every Child Matters' which formed part of the Government's response to the issues raised by the death of Victoria Climbié.

- 2.5 Some useful definitions identified during this initial research include the following which have been used to direct the scope of the investigation:

“The council as a whole is the “corporate parent”, therefore all councillors have a basic level of responsibility for the children in their authority’s care. This requires there to be mechanisms for all councillors to receive accurate information and be able to find out about the basic issues faced by such children in their area.” Taken from “If this were my Child” (2003).

The role of corporate parent is defined in ‘Think Child’ (1999) as the following:

- **find out** – get the facts and follow them up
- **make decisions** – play your part in the business of the council
- **listen to children and young people** – find out from them how your council’s services work for them and remember that children are citizens too
- **be a champion for children** – take a lead in your community in putting children first

The ‘Dobson Letter’ (1998) in support the Quality Protects initiative (written by the then Secretary of State for Health, Frank Dobson MP) outlined the responsibilities given to Councillors as ‘Corporate Parents’ in order to improve the life chances of looked after children and young people:

“Elected Councillors have a crucial role. Only you can carry it out. You can make sure that the interests of the children come first. You bring a fresh look and common sense. As councillors you set the strategic direction of your council’s services and determine policy and priorities for your local community within the overall objectives set by Government.”

3. PROJECT PLANNING THE INVESTIGATION AND PROGRESS TO DATE

- 3.1 With regards to planning the investigation, an outline scoping document was produced and agreed by the Group in March 2006 which is attached as Appendix A.
- 3.2 The scoping document provides a flexible framework for the undertaking of the investigation and provides the anticipated aims and outcomes of the Group’s work which comprise the terms of reference. Concerning the methodology outlined, it was decided to split the various research activities into two phases to accommodate the pressures faced by Children’s Services with regards to the improvements made to services and also to ensure that Member’s Corporate Parenting responsibilities were highlighted as soon as possible by means of developing a Corporate Parenting policy for consultation.

PHASE ONE

- 3.3 It was decided that the phase one of the investigation would concentrate on three related issues;

- (i) *Undertaking desk top research into key issues affecting looked after children and young people on a national level, i.e. consideration of the outcomes experienced by children and young people who have been 'looked after' by Local Authorities to better inform Members of the Task & Finish Group as to the direction of their investigation;*
- (ii) *Ascertaining levels of understanding amongst Councillors as to their Corporate Parenting role by means of a questionnaire to establish a baseline of Member engagement to inform conclusions concerning the effectiveness of Councillors as Corporate Parents in a bid to improve current approaches;*
- (iii) *Developing a draft Corporate Parenting Policy intended to provide a clear framework of the Council's commitment to ensuring the best life chances of every looked after child and young person, raise the profile of Member's Corporate Parenting responsibilities and provide a platform for future policy development through meaningful consultation.*

3.4 With regards to the Corporate Parenting questionnaire mentioned above, the results are currently unavailable to be discussed at the Committee's meeting of 4 December 2006 due to the wish of the Task & Finish Group to extend the timelines of the survey by an additional week to ensure the highest response rate possible. In collating the responses of Members of the Group were disappointed to note that only 65% of Councillors responded to the questionnaire despite repeated attempts to encourage replies. The results of the questionnaire are intended to be reported to the Committee on 8 January 2007.

3.5 During phase one of the investigation, the Task & Finish Group met for a total of 8 occasions in addition to participating in 8 whole Committee meetings where a presentation on Corporate Parenting was delivered by the Executive Director – Community and the Interim Assistant Director – Children's Services and the Committee engaged in detailed and thorough performance monitoring of Children's Services.

PHASE TWO

3.6 The second phase of the investigation will commence in January and February 2007 and will more precisely consider how the Council can retain the strength of existing processes and continue to improve Corporate Parenting. The methodology for achieving this aim will be based on a series of semi-structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and analysis of the research evidence received. It is intended that the second phase be completed by early April 2007.

3.7 It is also intended to seek the views of young people and care leavers themselves to determine perspectives on the effectiveness of the Council as 'Corporate Parent' and how it is believed current standards of service could be made higher quality. The Task & Finish Group intend to work closely with the Directorate in the undertaking of this part of their research to ensure that the

safety and well being of care experienced young people is in no way compromised by the undertaking of the project.

- 3.8 The key research questions to be considered for phase two are contained in the scoping document attached as Appendix A under the heading of 'Key Questions for Councillors'. The outcome of phase two will be a series of conclusions and recommendations for presentation to Cabinet based on analysis of the research base established at that time.

4. DEVELOPING THE DRAFT CORPORATE PARENTING POLICY

- 4.1 In developing the draft Corporate Parenting Policy (attached as Appendix B), the Task & Finish Group considered a range of documentation including:

- Corporate Parenting Policies and Strategies from the Isle of Wight, Buckinghamshire, North Tyneside, Doncaster, Rotherham, Torfaen, Torbay and Leicestershire.
- Members also examined the principles underpinning the work of the Who Cares? Trust which is a national charity working to improve public care for children and young people who are separated from their families and living in residential or foster care.
- Scrutiny Reviews of Corporate Parenting from Torbay, Rotherham, Doncaster and Sunderland.
- Findings from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Department for Education and Skills, the Improvement and Development Agency and the Social Care Institute for Excellence.
- Reports and Minutes of the Cabinet Committee – Children and Families, June to November 2006.

- 4.2 Members also considered in detail the Green paper 'Every Child Matters' which built on existing Government plans to strengthen preventative services by focusing on four key themes which were used to develop the Task & Finish Group's draft policy:

- (i) *Increasing the focus on supporting families and carers - the most critical influence on children's lives;*
- (ii) *Ensuring necessary intervention takes place before children reach crisis point and protecting children from falling through the net;*
- (iii) *Addressing the underlying problems identified in the report into the death of Victoria Climbié - weak accountability and poor integration;*
- (iv) *Ensuring that the people working with children are valued, rewarded and trained.*

4.3 Following consultation of the Green Paper, the Government published Every Child Matters: the Next Steps, and passed the Children Act 2004, providing the legislative spine for developing more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families. The aims and outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- *Be healthy*
- *Stay safe*
- *Enjoy and achieve*
- *Make a positive contribution*
- *Achieve economic well-being*

4.4 In line with the strategic intent of the Every Child Matters agenda, Members of the Task & Finish Group wished to incorporate the above five themes into Bridgend's draft Corporate Parenting policy to encourage organisations involved with providing services to children to team up in new ways to better share information and work together to protect children and young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life.

4.5 It was also felt important to include statements of purpose in the policy intended to more pro-actively seek the views of children and young people to enable them to have far more say about issues that affect them as individuals and collectively.

4.6 In capturing and expounding all that Members of the Task & Finish Group believed needed to be included in the draft Corporate Parenting Policy, twenty-one principle points were developed under the following five headings which sets out a clear statement of purpose regarding the Council's Commitment to fulfilling its Corporate Parenting responsibilities:

- (i) Improving Life Chances
- (ii) Empowering Children and Young People
- (iii) Providing Strong Leadership
- (iv) Supporting Families and Foster Carers
- (v) Continually Improving Performance

It is considered that the draft policy provides a basis around which useful discussions and debate may take place in order that the policy be refined and enhanced through consultation which seeks to encourage strengthened ownership of Corporate Parenting amongst Members and Officers in Bridgend. It is further hoped that the consultation process informs the development of a future Corporate Parenting strategy providing the bridge between policy and implementation.

4.6 The purpose of the 4 December 2006 meeting is to provide Members of the Committee with an opportunity to discuss, amend or approve the draft Corporate Parenting policy before it is sent out for internal and external consultation. If the draft policy is approved by the Committee, the Task & Finish Group will commence the consultation exercise by means of an engagement with Cabinet, the Executive Director – Community and the Assistant Director – Children’s Services to seek views and comments. Future progress reports detailing the results of the consultation exercise will be presented to the full Committee in Spring 2007.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The implementation of the final Corporate Parenting policy would have financial implications.

5. LINKS TO CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

5.1 The Corporate Improvement Plan 2005/08 contains the Authority’s Corporate Objectives, which in turn are directed and informed by the priorities embodied in the Community Strategy. One of the Authority’s Corporate Objectives is to Support Vulnerable Groups by looking after the interests of members of the community who have specific needs, including young people, older people and disabled people.

6. RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to:

- (i) Consider the progress made by the Task & Finish Group currently considering the issue of Corporate Parenting;
- (ii) Amend or approve the draft Corporate Parenting Policy in order that the document be sent for consultation.

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Date: 4 December 2006

Background Documents: *Bridgend County Borough Council Corporate Improvement Plan 2005/08*

Bridgend Community Strategy 2005 - 2016

Constitution of Bridgend County Borough Council

The Local Government Act 2000: Part II, Guidance

for County and County Borough Councils in Wales on Executive Arrangements - National Assembly for Wales (2001).

Government Green Paper (2003), Every Child Matters

Lord Laming (2003), Report of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry

Reports and Minutes of the Cabinet Committee – Children & Families, June to November 2006.