

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING CABINET COMMITTEE

13 JULY 2010

### REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR – CHILDREN

#### WELSH AUDIT OFFICE STUDY REGARDING THE EDUCATION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN: PROGRESS UPDATE

#### **1. Purpose of Report.**

- 1.1 To inform the Committee as to progress made regarding the Welsh Audit Office (WAO) study to review arrangements to improve the education of looked after children.

#### **2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Plan / Other Corporate Priority.**

- 2.1 Looked after children are a key responsibility for the Council as corporate parents; this connects to the corporate theme of “Young Voices”.

#### **3. Background.**

- 3.1 It is well-known that looked after children do less well than their peers in terms of educational attainment and are less likely to progress into further education or training. There are a range of reasons for this but, in general, where a child is failing at an early stage of their education, not attending school regularly, with little support and encouragement at home, they will do less well at later stages. Children become looked after often as a last resort and many are already disengaged with education. It is a challenge for all agencies to raise standards and ensure that these young people regain an interest in education and achieve their potential in terms of educational outcomes.
- 3.2 The number of looked after children in Wales is increasing but there is continuing concern about the outcomes for these children including their educational attainment. The WAO acknowledged that it was not clear whether the range of initiatives, guidance and legislative changes in the last 5 years had led to sustained improvement. Consequently a project team consisting of stakeholders from the WLGA, Estyn, CSSIW and WAO was asked to consider whether these activities have been sufficient to significantly improve the educational outcomes for looked after children. Alongside Cardiff, Pembrokeshire, Powys and Gwynedd, Bridgend volunteered to participate in a study to help find answers to this question by:
- identifying the current educational outcomes for Looked After Children;
  - assessing whether current actions addressed the main barriers, and
  - assisting the Welsh Assembly Government and councils to improve the educational outcomes for Looked After Children.
- 3.3 The project team asked each local authority to complete a detailed self-assessment form. The assessment form required the Local Authority to judge its performance against a wide range of areas to check whether it has robust arrangements in place ensuring that it effectively discharges its duties. The areas considered included:

- Standards of strategy and leadership
  - Are elected members and officers aware of their duty to promote the education of Looked After Children?
  - Is Corporate Parenting fully understood and owned by elected members and officers, both individually and collectively?
  - Is the leadership for improving the educational achievement of Looked After Children clear and at a senior level?
  - Does the Authority understand the diversity of the Looked After Children population and is there a sound basis for strategic planning?
- Standards of effective management and successful implementation
  - Is there effective performance management to ensure that improvements are made, targets are met and that the council is informed of the outcomes that are being achieved?
  - Are initiatives evaluated to assess their effectiveness and to share good practice?
  - Do elected members scrutinize performance effectively and are concerns followed up?
- Standards of educational experience
  - Do Looked After Children have access to good quality early years provision?
  - Does the Authority encourage its Looked After Children to set ambitious targets for their achievement and are barriers to progress tackled effectively?
  - Do Looked After Children experience continuity and stability in their education?
  - Are there designated teachers for looked after children in place in every school and are they able to fulfil their roles?
- Standards for supporting educational attainment through the care planning system
  - Are educational needs, regardless of the child's age, accurately identified as part of the Core Assessment?
  - Is education given due weight in care decisions, care plans and at reviews?
  - Do Looked After Children receive consistent support from suitably qualified social workers?
  - Does every Looked After Child have an up to date Personal Education Plan?
- Standards of residential and foster carer support
  - Are residential staff suitably qualified and is good quality care maintained despite high vacancy/temporary staff levels where this exists?
  - Do residential staff and foster carers receive regular training and support including joint training with designated teachers?
  - Do carers help children if there are problems in school?
  - Do Looked After Children have suitable space, equipment, books and access to IT where they live as well as support for out of school activities?

- Standards of health, safety and wellbeing
  - Do elected members and officers fully recognise the impact of health, safety and well-being on educational achievement?
  - Are the needs of Looked After Children considered holistically within a common assessment framework?
  - Are Looked After Children able to report their concerns about their health, safety and well-being and about their care and treatment?
- Standards Involving children and young people
  - Does the council communicate effectively with Looked After Children using a range of methods?
  - Are staff trained and encouraged to listen to, and hear Looked After Children and support their active participation?
  - Are the key messages from children and young people known at all levels of the council and by partners?
  - Do the views of Looked After Children contribute to shaping council services and initiatives?
- Standards of reliable data and information
  - Is data on education of Looked After Children owned and seen as important at a senior level?
  - Is data on education of Looked After Children analysed effectively and used to determine priorities for action?

#### **4. Current situation / proposal.**

- 4.1 Bridgend County Borough Council responded to the study by completing the questionnaire and rating itself using evidence and commentary of not met, partially achieved, largely achieved and fully met. This report was returned to the WAO in 2009 and we subsequently received details of the responses submitted by the other local authorities taking part in the project. The Wales Audit Office concluded that Bridgend's self-assessment was accurate across all dimensions, though it was disappointing that it appears that they have 'taken as read' the commentary from each of the 5 authorities who have taken part, without any further observations. The Directorate has developed an action plan to progress areas of practice that require improvement. The final WAO report is not yet available but will be presented to the Committee as soon as it is published. Unfortunately to date we have yet to receive further information from WAO about any next steps for the project.
- 4.2 Notwithstanding, the Authority has continued to progress with developing an Action Plan to consider ways to improve our arrangements and practices. It has been interesting to note that despite providing detailed evidence of our arrangements to WAO we were more critical of our performance than some other authorities which provided less evidence to support judgements. This is perhaps an indication of the high standards we are striving for and the belief that there are always improvements to be made to give our Looked After Children the support they need and deserve. This is included as appendix 1 to this document.

#### 4.3 Evidence of progress achieved so far includes:

- All elected members have a copy of 'If this were my Child' to promote and facilitate greater understanding of roles and responsibilities. This is complemented by the availability for members to attend training events and to meet young people who have been Looked After in order to further enhance their understanding of the needs of Looked After Children and young people.
- Work experience, traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities for young people who are, or who have been, in care have been developed to help improve their employment prospects.
- Joint meetings between Education and Safeguarding and Family Support Service have been established to monitor and improve performance. The terms of reference are included in appendix 2. A shared database has been developed. This will aid the monitoring of academic attainment and completion of Personal Education Plans; and the identification of areas to target e.g. exclusions, attendance, where children and young people are falling behind in their academic ability, etc. It is also envisaged that we will be able to identify and share good practice and link schools together to contribute their experiences to aid improved practice. We will also use this forum to consider how to improve our services to children and young people who have had to be placed out of county in order to have their needs met, so that in future there will be more local arrangements to support children and young people with complex needs.
- We have appointed a Disability Index Coordinator to develop a multi agency database. This links with the Disabled Children's strategy and Autistic Spectrum Disorder Strategy and will aid service mapping.
- We have revised arrangements for the Out of Authority panel to monitor and agree placements for Looked After Children whose needs cannot be met within local provision.
- Performance monitoring arrangements in place to analyse local and national performance indicators regularly, in some cases monthly.
- Information and consultation events with foster carers are held on a quarterly basis and provide opportunities to increase awareness about the needs of Looked After Children.
- We continue to celebrate the successes of our Looked After Children with the annual Mayor's Awards Ceremony which has grown from strength to strength to each year.
- For 2006/07 – 2007/08 Looked After Children in Bridgend performed 'markedly higher in their average GCSE point score than the Welsh average.' It is also important to appreciate that Bridgend had a significantly higher percentage of Looked After Children with Special Educational needs in 2007/08 and yet the average point score was still higher as compared to the other 21 Welsh authorities. The RAISE (Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education) programme also noted that Bridgend's performance for attainment was favourable. They stated

that 'the average number of sessions of education lost by Looked After Children in Bridgend has dramatically decreased between 2006/07 and 2007/08.'

- The average number of days spent out of school on fixed period of exclusion has decreased in 2009/10 to 5.4% from 8.8% in 08/09 and 9.2% in 07/08.

**5. Effect upon Policy Framework & Procedure Rules.**

5.1 None.

**6. Legal Implications.**

6.1 None.

**7. Financial Implications.**

7.1 None.

**8. Recommendation.**

8.1 It is recommended that the Committee notes this report on the progress of our actions in respect of the Welsh Audit Office Education of Looked After Children study.

**Hilary Anthony**  
**Corporate Director Children**  
**25<sup>th</sup> June 2010**

**Contact Officer:** Lindsay Harper  
Head of Safeguarding and Family Support

**Telephone:** (01656) 642314

**E-mail:** lindsay.harper@bridgend.gov.uk

**Postal Address** Children's Directorate, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Sunnyside,  
Bridgend, CF31 4AR

**Background documents:** None