

<b>3 March 2016</b>		<b>ITEM: 7</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Children in Care Council and Voice of the Child</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non-Key	
<b>Report of:</b> Natalie Carter, Open Door		
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Andrew Carter, Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> David Archibald, Interim Director of Children's Services		
<b>This report is Public</b>		

## **Executive Summary**

This report updates members of the Committee in respect to the functioning of the Children in Care Council and its actions in representing the voice of the child for looked after children and care leavers.

### **1. Recommendation(s)**

- 1.1 Corporate Parenting Committee support the role of the Children in Care Council.**
- 1.2 Councillors and senior officers attend the Children in Care Council meetings when invited.**
- 1.3 Corporate Parenting support and endorse the role of the Young People's Project.**

### **2. Introduction and Background**

#### Children in Care Council

- 2.1 The Children in Care Council is part of the Government's drive to ensure the voice of the child is an integral part of all the work undertaken within Children's Services.
- 2.2 The Government White Paper, Care Matters, Time for Change in 2007, made it a statutory duty for all local authorities to have a Children in Care Council

- 2.3 The document stated: *'It is important that children have a chance to shape and influence the parenting that they receive at every level – from expressing their wishes and feelings about the individual care they receive in their placements, through to helping shape the overall strategy for children in their area through a Children in Care Council'*
- 2.4 The Children in Care Council was transferred to Open Door in February 2012, following a review undertaken by former care experienced young people, "Leading Improvements for Looked After Children" (LILAC) in February 2011
- 2.5 The review stated: *"LILAC Assessors felt that potentially an independent body should take more of a hand in running the CHILDREN IN CARE COUNCIL so that issues can be explored fully, as currently members of the CHILDREN IN CARE COUNCIL feel they stop at a certain level of management and it may be possible for more to be achieved without any risk of a conflict of interest."*
- 2.6 The Children in Care Council currently have 15 active members who attend the monthly meetings, training and planning days and promotional events. Since the transfer there have been 26 young people who have joined the Children in Care Council.
- 2.7 The Children in Care Council have a Chair and Vice Chair nominated by the children and young people.
- 2.8 There is an agenda drawn up for each meeting and in the past 2 years they have devised a yearly work plan, which does change throughout the year depending on the current issues and the membership.
- 2.9 The Department provides Open Door with £8,000.00 per annum to assist with the costs of running the Children in Care Council.

#### Voice of the child

- 2.10 As mentioned, the voice of the child is an integral part of the work Children's Services undertake regardless of what the issues are.
- 2.11 The Children Act 1989, section 1 (3a) states that *'when determining any question with respect to the upbringing of a child, the court shall have regard in particular to the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his age and understanding)'*.
- 2.12 A further piece of guidance that is very important to note is that of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 states the following:
1. *Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

2. *For this purpose the child shall in particular, be provided the opportunity to be heard in a judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative, or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.*

- 2.13 Open Door work within the National Advocacy Standards (Department of Health, 2002), and as such is led by the young people.
- 2.14 The voice of the child is sought via many avenues within the processes undertaken within the Department and in practice. Examples of this are as follows:
- Within public court proceedings the child is represented by a Children's Guardian appointed by the courts
  - In Looked After Children's Reviews the Independent Review Officer will speak to the child/young person on their own to seek their views
  - It is expected when Social Workers visit the children/young people they are seen alone in order to obtain their views
  - Within **all** reports (i.e. assessments, care plans, pathway plans, court reports) it is expected that the views/wishes and feelings of the child/young person is recorded
  - We have the services of Open Door and the Advocacy Service, along with the Independent Visitors who will also represent the views of the children/young people.
- 2.15 The advocacy service is known as the Young People Looked After Project (YPLA), and is an independent project facilitated by Open Door. The project works with young people aged between 8 – 25 who are looked after or have been looked after and are entitled to an after care service.
- 2.16 The aim of the project is to give young people a voice in matters that affect their lives, particularly regarding issues that come about through being looked after or leaving care.
- 2.17 The project in the main works with individuals, but can provide a service for groups of looked after children/young people with identified common issues. It aims to nurture a trusting and honest relationship with the young people, but also with professionals.
- 2.18 The Advocacy Service is a confidential service but works within the statutory guidance for child protection.
- 2.19 The Project, wherever possible, aims to help resolve issues at the earliest opportunity to cause the minimum amount of distress and to prevent escalation to a formal complaint stage.

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

### 3.1 Issues

#### 3.1.1 Children in Care Council Activity

- 3.1.2 The Children in Care Council supported the Looked After Children celebration event held in May 2015, allowing young people to celebrate their achievements for 2014. Young people with their foster families had an evening of roller skating, attended also by staff, Councillors and senior officers. The event was very well attended.
- 3.1.3 The next celebration event was held on 16th February 2016 for achievements in 2015. Certificates of achievement will be presented to all young people including those who do not attend. Their certificates will be posted to them.
- 3.1.4 Nominations are made prior to the event. Two awards are given to three age groups, 11 and under, 12-16 and over 16.
- 3.1.5 In July 2015 the Children in Care Council facilitated a workshop for the social work recruitment day. This gave members the opportunity to be part of the recruitment process for new social workers who had applied to join Thurrock's social work teams. The focus of the workshop aimed to assess the applicant as to whether they had the qualities required to be a social worker in Thurrock.
- 3.1.6 The Children in Care Council have met with Health, Education, Team Managers and the Commissioning Team to consult on issues that particularly affect children and young people in care.
- 3.1.7 New social workers to the authority have visited the Children in Care Council as part of their induction
- 3.1.8 The Children in Care Council have been involved in the commissioning process in relation to foster care agency recruitment since 2012. They have contributed to the tendering process by devising 2 questions for prospective agencies. They were given the opportunity to mark the answers received as part of the tendering process organised by the Eastern Region Foster Care Select List, and give their feedback.
- 3.1.9 In 2014 Open Door, along with the Children in Care Council, was given the opportunity to take control of organising activities for the looked after children, especially during the school breaks. The Children in Care Council chose the activities suitable for all ages. They have evaluated what worked well and use this evaluation to plan future activities.
- 3.1.10 In 2015 an average of two activities were held each week during the school breaks. The children and young people are consulted on the choice of activities, and are given the opportunity to try new things, meet new people, build their confidence and self-esteem, whilst enjoying a fun packed activity.

3.1.11 The activities vary from using local venues to visiting London and beyond. Where possible public transport is used to allow young people the experience to become familiar with the various travelling options. Feedback and evaluation is obtained after each event to ascertain whether it was successful and how things can be improved.

3.1.12 Social Workers are always invited to these events.

3.1.13 The Children in Care Council invite senior officers and Councillors to their meetings. A number of dates were provided for this financial year, 14 July 2015, 13 October 2015, 13 January 2016 and 24 March 2016. Unfortunately some of these dates have not been well attended, but there will be further dates in the coming financial year that it is hoped all senior officers and Councillors will take the opportunity of meeting with the Children in Care Council

3.1.14 A request has been made for the Children in Care Council chair along with senior officers to attend full council meeting on the 27 February 2016. This is to present the revised Pledge and encourage all Councillors to sign up to it and promote the needs of the local authority's looked after children and care leavers as part of their role.

### 3.2.1 Voice of the child activity

3.2.2 In 2014-15 our advocates addressed and raised 95 issues on behalf of Thurrock Looked After Children, with one complaint moving to a formal process (i.e. Stage 1, Complaints Procedure).

3.2.3 The majority of the issues raised were dealt with and resolved at the informal stage.

3.2.4 The project is 'issue led' and young people are supported until the matter is resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

3.2.5 The current issues and work being undertaken by the project is as follows:

- Assisting a young person with unfair dismissal from a voluntary position
- Supporting a young person find appropriate education provision
- Mediation between young people and contact with their parents
- Supporting young people with accessing appropriate housing in Thurrock
- Regular liaison with Children's Services' staff and attendance at looked after children reviews
- Assisting with the completion of referrals to various organisations
- Requests for changes in social workers and placement moves
- Support during court proceedings
- Support with placement break downs
- Support with the transition to Adult Services

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 It is important that we have mechanisms to elicit the voice of children and young people.
- 4.2 The Children in Care Council is statutory, but we need to continue to increase the numbers of those engaging and create other means for communicating the work of this group, such as a web page within the Looked After children web site

#### **5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

N/A

#### **6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact**

N/A

#### **7. Implications**

##### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**  
**Finance Manager**

The Children in Care Council is funded by the Through Care team service budget. The budget enables Open Door to facilitate the Children in Care Council meetings which take place twelve times a year. This budget also enables the Children in Care Council to stage the annual celebration event for looked after children. The finance will also incorporate an element of staffing costs, travelling costs for the children and young people and administrative costs.

##### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
**Principal Solicitor Children's Safeguarding.**

The Local Authority has a duty to provide all the services mentioned in this report and will need to continue to provide these services in the future.

### 7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**  
**Community Development and Equalities  
Manager**

This service is available to all looked after children and equality data is monitored to ensure a representative voice amongst the young people involved.

### 7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

N/A

### 8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

N/A

### 9. **Appendices to the report**

Appendix 1 - Children in Care Council terms of reference

Appendix 2 - The National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services 2002

### **Report Author:**

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