

Summary Sheet

Council Report

Title: Rotherham's Right 2 Rights Service 19th January 2016

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Linda Harper, Interim Strategic Director

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

All Wards are affected

Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide a preliminary update, post Ofsted Inspection, focusing on the developments of the Right 2 Rights .

The Children's Rights Service commenced in 1999 with the introduction of the Children's Rights Officer post which has gradually evolved into the current Right 2 Rights Service. We provide services for children and young people who are, or who have been, looked after by the local authority. We also work with children and young people with learning / physical difficulties or disabilities who access services at the Orchard Centre.

The recent agreement to increase staffing levels within the service in order to address the difficulties faced by the service, and which were highlighted by the Ofsted inspection, has increased the capacity within the team. The overall aim / outcome is to provide a more focused and timely response to the young people, so they know their rights and have their voices heard via an effective and well-

resourced Rights, Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service. This service is offered for all of Rotherham's looked after children, placed both in and outside of the borough.

Recommendations

- 1.1 That Corporate Parenting Panel note the contents of the report.
- 1.2 That Corporate Parenting Panel note the key role that the Right 2 Rights Service currently play in supporting looked after children and young people and in ensuring that their wishes and feelings are acknowledged, recorded and appropriately acted upon.
- 1.3 That Corporate Parenting Panel note the recommendations of the report entitled Development of participation and engagement with Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

List of Appendices Included

None

Background Papers

- The Children Act (1989) Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review.
- The Children Act (1989) Schedule 2, Paragraph 17
- The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (s.17)
- Definition of Independent Visitors (Children) Regulations 1991 Statutory Instrument 1991 No 892.
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013)
- United Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

No

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Title: Rotherham's Right 2 Rights Service, Interim Report.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That Corporate Parenting Panel note the contents of the report.
- 1.2 That Corporate Parenting Panel note the key role that the Right 2 Rights Service currently play in supporting looked after children and young people and in ensuring that their wishes and feelings are acknowledged, recorded and appropriately acted upon.
- 1.3 That Corporate Parenting Panel note the recommendations of the report entitled Development of participation and engagement with Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Children's Rights Service commenced in 1999 with the introduction of the Children's Rights Officer post which has gradually evolved into the current Right 2 Rights Service. We provide services for children and young people who are, or who have been, looked after by the local authority. We also work with children and young people with learning / physical difficulties or disabilities who access services at the Orchard Centre.
- 2.2 The service was one which, during the initial years, developed well and the additional finance from funding streams such as the Children's Fund enabled the service to develop innovation in rights and advocacy provision. Unfortunately cessation of government grants and budget reductions led to a decline in investment and support for the services which has inevitably impacted upon the ways in which RMBC's looked after young people were supported.
- 2.3 The Ofsted Inspection in October, 2014 highlighted;

**“The Right 2 Rights Service provides independent
Visitors and advocacy services, which children like”**

It is positive that Ofsted acknowledged the work that was being undertaken to support LAC and those placed out of authority as it demonstrated that where capacity allowed the service worked well. The key issues raised related to capacity, it was highlighted that there was a high level of referrals awaiting allocation for an Advocate or Independent Visitor (IV). As part of the CYPS improvement plan agreement was reached to recruit additional staff members this comprised one full time business support post, one full time advocate post, one 30hr advocacy posts and an increase of 7 hours to the established children's rights assistant/advocate post.

The new staffing structure has been in place since the beginning of November 2015. The impact of this has been immediate and is Outlined below.

3. Key Issues

The main elements of the service are as follows;

3.1 Rights

- **Information and advice** regarding the rights of Looked after Children is a key element of the service. Activity has commenced to re-brand the service and update materials. Newsletters will be sent out on a quarterly basis, the winter one is to be distributed in December, 2015. These publications will contain information and also ways in which RMBC's Looked after Children can raise issues and be involved in the further development of the service.
- An area of improvement highlighted by Ofsted was to, **"Ensure that all looked after children and young people and care leavers have a clear understanding of their rights and entitlements"**. The service is now in a better position to develop the website and make better use of creative ways of engaging looked after children and young people living both locally and those living in out of authority placements.
- **Rother-Link Service** - This is a service for children and young people living in out of authority placements. Initial attempts to engage LAC in this project were not entirely successful and the methods have been revisited. The service intends to have a more direct approach which will focus on **all** children in such placements and rather than developing a 'writing and responding' approach will be directly targeting the children, offering initial visits, phone calls etc. and setting up a group which will be managed at 'arm's length' using technology such as Skype and conference calling alongside the usual forms of communication such as mail and email processes.

Children and young people will be offered incentives to remain involved with the service such as vouchers and competitions and this will ensure that the voices of those living away from Rotherham are sought, acknowledged and used to help inform service delivery and future developments within the authority.

They will form a group in their own right which will complement the work of the LAC Council.

- **Visits to all children and young people over the age of 5 years**, entering the care system, will commence 1st January, 2016. The service will visit each child within their first month of becoming looked after and this will also include those who are placed out of authority.

From the outset newly LAC will have the opportunity to meet an advocate, explore services available to them and will receive encouragement to become involved in meetings such as their LAC reviews to express their wishes and feelings. They will immediately be made aware of the Right 2 Rights Service and how to contact it. They will also be advised of the Comment and Complaints Process and will receive a gift and information pack for future reference.

Children's Group – It is the intention to form a children's group for those aged 5 to 11 years. This is intended to commence during February half term 2016. The voice of younger children is an area identified for priority development to ensure that their experience and wishes and feelings are informing our service delivery and planning.

Disability Group – There was previously strong representation from the children attending the Orchard Centre with groups such as the Orchard Flyers and the Orchard Stars but this has declined over the years. Attempts have been made to re-engage and energise this initiative and the increase of staffing will allow renewed efforts. This is a particularly vulnerable group and it is therefore essential that the authority seeks their views, wishes and feelings.

3.2 **Advocacy**

Advocacy provides; information, advice, advocacy, representation and support. Looked after children and young people are empowered to express their views, wishes, feelings and needs in creative and informative ways. If they are unable or unwilling to interact with professionals or carers the service will intervene and assist.

Work is time limited and the service strives not to unnecessarily undermine or damage relationships with carers or professionals whilst equally ensuring that RMBC's looked after children and

young people are fully involved in important processes which involve them and impact upon their lives.

- **Advocacy Referrals and Allocations**

The service supports RMBC's looked after children and young people irrespective of where they are living and the injection of new advocates into the team has seen immediate improvements in service delivery around advocacy. The service is able to respond more effectively to requests and all current advocacy referrals are allocated to an advocate. Verbal feedback from complaints is that they have already seen rise in the number of complaints progressing through more formal channels with the support of advocates.

There is a clear referral system which gathers appropriate information and sets targets for work to be undertaken and identifies outcomes to be achieved. Referrals are received directly from children and young people or from social workers and other professionals and carers.

Agreements with the each Looked after child / young person at the commencement of the relationship to explore desired outcomes and to support clear boundaries and roles. Children and young people are expected to give their consent to the service although there is some undirected advocacy for younger children and those with disabilities or learning difficulties who are unable to give consent or direction.

Advocacy Referrals January, 2015 – November, 2015	
Active referrals carried forward from 2014	39
Referrals received January, 2015 – November, 2015 Inc.	56
Advocacy referrals closed	37
Advocacy referrals refused by the child or young person	1
Advocacy referrals withdrawn by social worker	2
Numbers awaiting allocation	0
Number of current active advocacy cases	55

Since the beginning of November, with the new advocates, the service is currently allocating all cases upon receipt of referrals. Further awareness raising in relation to the service via new publicity materials and entry visits to new LAC is expected to lead to an increase in referral rates, demand levels will be tightly reviewed.

As a way of addressing some of the anticipated increasing demands there is to be further exploration of the use of volunteers in the provision of advocacy. The service is also looking to offer student placements for those wishing to undertake rights and advocacy work. The manager is now in a better position to support and co-ordinate such placements which will benefit this service whilst widening the student opportunities within Rotherham.

- **Business Support**

The additional full time business support officer is enabling the manager to refocus activity as a result of reduction of administrative duties. The service is also better able to record and track referrals and information and improve materials and information for LAC. The business support role is vital in supporting the recruitment, training and support for volunteers.

3.3 Independent Visitor Service

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council is duty bound by legislation to provide a Volunteer Independent Visitor Service for looked after children and young. Initially The Children Act (1989), Schedule 2, Paragraph 17 stipulated the specific duty to appoint Independent Visitors for specific children and young people in circumstances where;

- It appears that communication between the child or a parent or any person who is not a parent but has parental responsibility for the child has been infrequent; or
- The child has not been visited (or has not lived with) a parent or any person who is not the child's parent but who as parental responsibility for the child, during the preceding 12 months

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) now places a duty on us to make Independent Visitors available to all children in care if this is deemed to be in their best interests.

The Independent Visitor (IV) role is that of a befriender, once trained and matched with a child or young person they will function independent of the authority. They will not receive regular close supervision or be case managed however, risk assessments will be conducted as part of the matching process and safeguards and support measures will be put in place for emergency situations. They will be expected to attend support sessions at six weekly intervals and further training opportunities will be available.

The relationship is a confidential one and information is only shared if the child or young person agrees, dependent on age and understanding, or if safeguarding issues arise.

Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers

It has been extremely difficult to keep pace with the recruitment and retention of volunteers; however, focused efforts have enabled the recruitment an additional 4 volunteers. Unfortunately turnover has resulted in the loss of 5 volunteers.

Some of the volunteers have been with us for four and five years some expressing a strong wish to remain with the child throughout their care experience. Whilst the service cannot dictate how long a volunteer stays, efforts are made to emphasise that this is a long term commitment and that is expected that they remain with the service for at least 2 years. Most volunteers appreciate the nature of the commitment and that they need to give time to build up appropriate relationships with the child and to ensure that they are not further 'let down' by failed commitments to them.

There has been a clear reduction in volunteers applying to Rotherham and it is felt that this is partially due to the difficult times we have faced recently as an authority and the negative media coverage. We used to receive many responses and enquiries from the Sheffield Universities, indeed, several of our volunteers are qualified social workers who have remained committed to the role after completing their studies and commencing social work duties in other authorities.

Volunteer Independent Visitor (IV) Service January, 2015 - November, 2015	
Fully trained volunteers	16
Volunteers IV's allocated to LAC	10
Volunteers in matching process with named LAC	4
Volunteer on hold	1
Dual Role – Volunteer Independent Reviewing Officer/Advocate – on hold	1
Children awaiting allocation	8

A new phase of training for six Volunteer Independent Visitors is due to commence in the first week of January, 2016. The additional staffing structure has freed up the manager to commence further training phases in April, 2016 and September, 2016.

- **Involvement of children and young people**

The involvement of looked after children is actively encouraged in recruitment and training of new Advocates and IV's. The current group who are linked with Independent Visitors also become involved in inspections and consultations arising within the authority such as a recent questionnaires regarding health provision for Looked after children and young people.

An event is planned for December, 2015 which will be a Christmas celebration for our IV's and their linked child but this will also be a consultation exercise to explore the Independent Visitor Provision and identify ways to continually improve the service and how to better involve Looker after children and young people.

- **Referrals for LAC placed in out of authority placements**

Two children currently awaiting the allocation of an Independent Visitor are living in out of authority placements. This is a problematic area nationally and one which is discussed frequently at the Regional Independent Visitor Coordinator Groups.

One of the young people lives in West Yorkshire and was matched briefly but this relationship needed to end due to personal issues regarding the Independent Visitor. The child is receiving a regular advocacy service which is appropriate for her current needs and we will support her whilst we attempt to identify a new Independent Visitor for her.

The other child lives in Lincoln and we are currently providing the social worker with information regarding a possible Independent Visitor Service within the area which will provide this service for a fee.

It is difficult to recruit Independent Visitors who are prepared to travel long distances to fulfil the role. Equally attempting to set up reciprocal arrangements is not currently being met with enthusiasm or commitment due to pressures placed upon providers to supply volunteers for the children for their local authorities.

The service has Independent Visitors who have committed to travel to areas such as Newark, Manchester, Wakefield, Chesterfield and West Yorkshire. However, this can be extremely time consuming for the IV and incurs expensive travel costs to the service it can also lead to a less frequent visiting pattern than is the ideal.

3.4 Strategic Involvements – Voice of the Child

The manager has remained focused on ensuring that the voice of the child is central to strategic developments within the authority. She is regularly in attendance at;

- Corporate Parenting Panel
- Foster Panel
- Looked After Children Strategy Meeting
- LADO Strategy Meetings
- Missing From Home Strategy Meetings
- M2/M3 Managers Meetings and Extended Leadership Meetings
- Consultation and Training Events
- Statutory Reviews, Pep Meetings, Professionals Meetings etc.
- Attendance at occasional IRO Team Meetings

4. Options considered and recommended proposal

4.1 None

5. Consultation

5.1 None due to the restricted time scales available. Children and young people will be consulted in depth for the Annual Report and their direct comments included. We will also provide anonymous case studies and request that a group of young people and volunteers attend the Corporate Parenting Panel in June, 2016 which is our usual practice.

6. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

6.1 Not applicable

7. Financial and Procurement Implications

7.1 None

8. Legal Implications

8.1 None

9. Human Resources Implications

9.1 None

10. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

10.1 Over the next six months it is expected that we will see continued improvements within our service delivery and support to Our Looked after children and YP. As outlined in the report the increase in staffing has ensured that we are now more able to meet the rights and advocacy and independent needs of RMBC's Looked after population. Equally the manager is now able to focus upon the recruitment of IV's and the development and performance of the team. The manager will equally be able to contribute to developing strategies to ensure that the voice of the child is truly embedded in practices for the individual and within the organisation as a whole.

11 Equalities and Human Rights Implications

11.1 It is an expectation that looked after children have equal access to services regardless of where they are placed. Advocacy services for such children and young people is vital, we will ensure that every effort is made to engage and consult with **all** LAC, empowering and supporting them to understand their rights and to challenge services when necessary. We equally need to involve them in the future development of services, supporting them in highlighting positive experiences and proposing changes when required.

12. Implications for Partners and Other Directorates

12.1 None

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 None

14. Accountable Officer(s)

14.1 Elaine Redding – Interim Head of Safeguarding and QA

Approvals Obtained from:-

Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services:- Named officer – Michelle Armeson (feedback awaited)

Director of Legal Services:- Named officer - Neil Concannon – 11.12.15

Head of Procurement (if appropriate):-

Rebecca Wall – Operations Manager CC's and IRO's
Lynne Grice – Saddington – Rights to Rights Team Manager

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