

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN
TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

**REVIEW OF SERVICES FOR
LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN**

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

AUGUST 2011

Task and Finish Group Members:

**Councillor Pauline Helliard-Symons
Councillor Prue Bray
Councillor Kate Haines
Councillor Claire Stretton (until June 2011)**

**Report approved by the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Panel
at its meeting on 12 September 2011.**

CONTENTS

		Page
Section 1	Introduction and Background	1
Section 2	Executive Summary	3
Section 3	Recommendations:	
	(a) Basic Services	4
	(b) Foster Carers	4
	(c) The Council as Corporate Parents	5
	(d) Care Leavers	6
	(e) Provision for Care Leavers' Housing Needs	6
	(f) Looked After Children's Views	6
Appendices		
Appendix 1	Information Gathering Reports:	
	(a) Basic Services	8
	(b) Foster Carers	10
	(c) The Council as Corporate Parents	15
	(d) Care Leavers	18
	(e) Provision for Care Leavers' Accommodation Needs	23
	(f) Comments from Looked After Children and Care Leavers	26
Appendix 2	Terms of Reference for the Review	29
Appendix 3	List of Witnesses	32
Appendix 4	Officers' Response to the Initial Conclusions of the Task & Finish Group	33

REVIEW OF COUNCIL'S SERVICES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Report by Task and Finish Group of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

1.1 The Joint Area Review of Children's Services in January 2009 found that the Council's safeguarding provision was inadequate. Following this report, changes were made within Children's Services, including changes in service provision for Looked After Children. In July 2010, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission carried out a specific inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children services. Their conclusion was that services had improved and each of the assessments were made as adequate.

1.2 However, although significant changes had been implemented and improvements in provision had been made, areas for improvement were identified, in order to continue to improve the quality of provision and services for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. One of these areas for improvement was related to provision for Care Leavers in their transition to employment, further education or training, and to adult social care.

1.3 At its meeting on 13 September 2010, the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel, agreed to set up a Task and Finish Group to review the services provided for Looked After Children.

1.4 The Task and Finish group met on 17 November 2010 and agreed the Terms of Reference for the review; the purpose of which was *'to ensure that the Council's Looked After Children have the best possible outcomes as adults (when preparing for adulthood); in relation to them being healthy; staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and to their economic wellbeing.'* The Overview and Management Committee noted the review at its meeting on 8 November 2010. The Terms of Reference were revised at the 6 December meeting.

1.5 The Terms of Reference for the Review can be found in Appendix 2 The Key Objectives were:

- a) to be satisfied that there are processes in place to achieve the 5 outcomes and whether the processes are working.
- b) to report what is good and make recommendations to Full Council as Corporate Parents, whether there are any areas where we can add more value to the lives of our Looked After Children.
- c) to ensure that all Councillors are aware of their role and encouraged to be effective Corporate Parents.

1.7 The Task and Finish Group was made up of four Councillors from the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Panel :

- Pauline Helliari-Symons
- Kate Haines
- Prue Bray
- Claire Stretton - who resigned June 2011

Administrative support was provided to the Panel by Tricia Harcourt, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

1.8 The Terms of Reference for the Review were set at the Group's initial meeting on 17 November 2011, and then the Group held several meetings to gather information from people who could help them understand the current provision of services for LAC within the Council; the experiences of foster carers; benchmarking with other local authorities; how outside organisations can be involved; provision for care leavers, particularly in relation to housing; and to receive updates on how things had improved from the Corporate Parenting Board and Children's Services Officers. Meetings were held on:

- 6 December 2010
- 26 January 2011
- 23 February 2011
- 22 March 2011
- 9 May 2011
- 1 June 2011
- 6 July 2011

The witnesses who attended the meetings are listed in Appendix 3.

1.9 In light of the sensitive nature of some of the information that would be provided, and to maintain the confidentiality of some of the witnesses, meetings of the Group were held in private.

1.10 The Group initially encountered some difficulty in relation to its plans to gather information directly from the young people themselves on their experiences and opinions on the services provided for them. The Group was advised against the idea of inviting some of them to come and meet the Group; and the suggestion of writing to all those involved to offer the opportunity for them to give the Group their views was rejected by those advising the Group. However following a more detailed discussion with Officers, Members of the Group were invited to meet with some of the young people at a meeting of the Children in Care Council.

1.11 Two Members of the Group attended a meeting of the Children In Care Council on 8 June, and subsequently Prue Bray spoke to another Looked After Child in a telephone call initiated by Christine Ames, the Children's Rights and Advocacy Officer. Further information relating to financial support for young people in care who have babies was supplied by Christine Ames.

1.12 At the meeting on 9 May 2011 an update on recent changes to the workings of the Corporate Parenting Board was given by Councillor Charlotte Haitham Taylor

1.13 At a meeting on 6 July 2011 Judith Ramsden, Head of Safeguarding and Social Care and Acting General Manager Children's Services attended to respond to the initial conclusions from each information gathering session that had been circulated, and to update the Group on things that had changed since those meetings

1.14 The initial conclusions reached by the Group following each information gathering session, as included in the text of the report were refined when the Group received updates from Charlotte Haitham Taylor and Judith Ramsden. They had provided information that since the beginning of the Review the provision of services for Looked After Children and Care Leavers had moved on and improved in many areas.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 The Task and Finish Group was pleased to acknowledge that Officers are already addressing many of the issues raised in the Review; and that the services for Looked After Children have been much strengthened over the last 12 months, including the establishment of a dedicated Looked After Children Team. We encourage the Corporate Parenting Board to monitor progress to ensure that the improvements continue.

2.2 It may be too soon to be sure that changes are fully embedded, but the Group recognises the commitment of all involved to deliver the best possible service. There are some areas where we think further improvement is possible, mainly centred on better communication between all parties.

2.3 It is also suggested that best practice should be shared with other Local Authorities, not only to learn from them, but to share our own innovative practice.

SECTION 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task and Finish Group considered reducing the number of recommendations, but believe they all have something to add to the lives of our Looked After Children. Many relate to initiatives that have already started, and will therefore not be difficult to build on, but could well enhance these initiatives.

That the Corporate Parenting Board consider the following recommendations with a view to further improving services.

That the Chairman of Corporate Parenting Board presents a report to Children's Services Overview Scrutiny Panel annually from September 2012 to show how the individual recommendations have been monitored and the progress made.

(a) Basic Services

1. That School Governing Bodies be asked to designate a governor with responsibilities to monitor and check on progress of any Looked After Children in the school.
2. That in schools, the member of staff with responsibility for Looked After Children needs to make themselves known to the Looked After Children, and to ensure other members of staff are aware of their responsibilities. The Looked After Children need to know the role of the Virtual Headteacher.
3. That the Corporate Parenting Board undertakes more liaison and benchmarking with other Local Authorities with a view to mutual sharing of best practice, for example: the Children's Rights Officer could liaise with Bracknell Forest Borough Council to discuss ideas around the development of the Children in Care Council; and Officers and Members could visit the Ealing Horizons Project.
4. That the Corporate Parenting Board report annually to Council to demonstrate the progress made in implementing the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

(b) Foster Carers

1. That in order to ensure clarity of communication; consistency of message; and to set accurate expectations, more detailed and explanatory written material should be provided for foster carers.
2. That senior officers meet regularly with a selection of foster carers to discuss any concerns they may have.
3. That ways are found to be able to check that all foster carers are clear about finance and how allowances can be spent.
4. That foster carers be asked whether they would like a Foster Carers' Association be formed.
5. That a 'compact' be produced to make clear what is expected from both the Council and the foster carers, the content of which should be formulated as a joint document between Council officers and foster carers.

6. That robust care plans are kept up to date and full details of what is in the care plan be shared at the start of every placement, with honesty around what would be involved in placements and full details should be given. Foster Cares should be asked about their experience of care plans.
7. That a professional working relationship between foster carers and social workers is maintained with both sides viewing the relationship as a partnership.
8. That all foster carers are made aware of the respite care scheme and how it operates, and of what out of hours support is available.
9. That training be tailored to foster carers' needs, following an enquiry as to what they require; and there should be dedicated training for foster carers to allow for networking opportunities, and that officers liaise with other Local Authorities such as Bracknell Forest Borough Council about specialised/specific training for foster carers, to share and save costs.
10. That support be given to foster carers as to how they can develop aspirations and self esteem and educational, emotional and spiritual needs of the young people in their care.
11. That social workers provide more guidance to the looked after children.
12. That a mentoring programme for new foster carers be set up.
13. That investigation be made into how foster carers can be given more freedom to decide what activities Looked After Children can take part in, and whether there can be a presumption that foster carers are allowed to do what they want unless there is a specific reason not to.
14. That it is made clear to all at what level decisions can be made regarding all aspects of the care of Looked After Children.
15. That there should be more and regular contact between the foster carers, young people and the Virtual Headteacher.
16. That consideration be given to involving foster carers in evaluating social workers, possibly by giving feedback in a 360 review, and social workers should participate more fully in the appraisal of foster carers.

(c) The Council as Corporate Parents

1. That a strong message be given that Corporate Parents should view all Looked After Children as they would their own children.
2. That there is an annual training session for all Councillors to remind them of their responsibilities as Corporate Parents, and there is more information available about what Councillors can do as Corporate Parents, with consideration being given to the preparation of an information booklet on their role.
3. That it be investigated whether Councillors could be a point of contact for foster carers in their ward and provide a link to WBC.
4. That consideration be given to setting up a similar Christmas present scheme for care leavers – (not necessarily organised by the Chairman of CPB)
5. That Members be encouraged to be more involved, with invitations to the Awards and Fun Days being sent early and if possible the date printed in the Council diary.
6. That the Pledge is renewed annually, all Members are given a copy and the Mayor signs it at full Council meeting. A copy of each page of the Pledge should be displayed.

(d) Care Leavers

1. That all parts of the Council be encouraged to recognise their Corporate Parenting responsibilities, and services be asked how they can support our Looked After Children.
2. That consideration be given to preparing an information booklet for care leavers giving details of the services provided for them; with information similar to that given in the Ealing Leaving Care Service book.
3. That the Children in Care Council look to develop the ideas for events similar to the Ealing Horizons Shout Out sessions.
4. That the facilities at the Children & Young People Resource Centre at 46 Church Road, Woodley should be further developed with additional support for skills in independent living
5. That, if not already organised the Looked After Children Team should hear a talk from Ben Marson on what support the Prince's Trust can give.

(e) Provision for Care Leavers' Housing Needs.

1. That Tenant Services formalise how care leavers' needs are considered and provide that information to Looked After Children, Personal Assistants, social workers and housing officers.
2. That consideration be given as to which services/teams from other departments as well as Children's Services should be involved in working with the Children in Care Council, on the implementation and review of and The Pledge; for example there could be better liaison with the Housing Department.
3. That the Pathway Plans include reference to the use of the safety net of Floating support, when support from Children's Services ends. A housing officer should be invited to attend meetings.
4. That the use of the furniture recycling scheme be encouraged, as this is what most young people starting their new home expect to have to do.
5. That the Council plans to increase the supply of supported lodgings.
6. That consideration be given to increasing the leaving care grant from £1200 to £2000, and that the use of the resettlement grant be investigated.
7. That Tenant Services consider decorating properties when care leavers move in.

(f) Looked After Children and Care Leavers' Views

1. That Personal Assistants are proactive in offering and providing help and assistance to Looked After Children.
2. That the new Connexions worker is more proactive in giving information and explanations about jobs and college courses etc.
3. That questions from Looked After Children to social workers and Personal Assistants are responded to in a timely manner and the Children clearly understand the time frame involved.
4. That social workers and Personal Assistants clearly communicate to Looked After children the reasons why something is happening or not happening.

5. That Looked After Children proposing to enter higher education are provided with details of the Access to Learning Funds that might be available to them.
6. That IT provision should be reviews regularly and systems should be in place for Looked After Children to report problems.
7. That the Council makes clear to Looked After Children what its policy is when birth parents refused to co-operate with the Council over their property.
8. That early screening should be in place for potential health/developmental problems, such dyslexia, which might need to be followed up, and relevant guidance be given to foster carers.

APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION GATHERING

(a) Basic Information about Services

1.1 At the meeting on 6 December 2010, basic information about the Looked After Children (LAC) was given to enable the Group to understand the current situation in relation to services provided for them. The witnesses were Councillor Rob Stanton, Chairman of Corporate Parenting Board; Andy Couldrick, General Manager Children's Services; Judith Ramsden, of Safeguarding and Social Care, Children's Services

1.2 The Officers from Children's Services provided an update on the progress of the implementation of the Action Plan prepared following the Ofsted/Care Quality Commission inspection in July 2009. They also provided detailed information in terms of:

- a series of organisation charts detailing the structure of the Safeguarding and Social Care Service;
- a copy of the Action Plan to address the improvements required to improve the quality of provision of services for LAC and care leavers which had been identified in the Ofsted/Care Quality Commission inspection in July 2009, with an indication as to progress made;
- a map showing the geographic spread of the locations of placements of LAC;
- a Profile of Children in Care giving statistical analysis by age, gender, ethnicity, current placements, and legal status; as well as details of the numbers of children allocated to each team and key worker;
- an analysis of the educational outcomes of our LAC at Key Stages 1, 2 and 4.

1.3 Although the Group had asked to interview the Virtual Headteacher, the manager of the Children in Care Team and the manager of the Fostering Service; Andy Couldrick, General Manager Children's Services and Judith Ramsden, Head of Safeguarding and Social Care for children, attended in their place to answer the Group's questions about LAC placements and foster carers.

1.4 The group was informed that placements for LAC are made at Service Manager level and ratified at the Commissioning Panel. There is a technical and professional matching to fit the needs of the child with the profile of the carer; including taking in to account the child's ethnic heritage. Siblings are usually kept together, but not always; the best interests of the individual children are considered in each case. Ideally the placements are within a 20 mile radius of their home, but sometimes it is necessary to keep children away from the wider family network.

1.5 Each LAC has an allocated key social worker and the aim is to build an enduring relationship between the child and their key worker. The key worker undertakes regular visits, including to those in out of Borough placements, on a six weekly basis at a time agreed with the child. The Independent Review Officers who carry out an annual review also visit the child in their placement. If there is a problem with the child working with

their key worker, there are checks and balances in place which would allow a change to happen. Also there is a Children's Rights Officer who acts as an advocate for the LAC and who would pass on concerns to a senior manager on behalf of the child.

1.6 In relation to the cost of placements, historically no account had been taken of the costs, and currently there were some very expensive residential placements. However the approach had changed and Officers were looking to increase the number of local foster carers and making placements within families. The best outcomes for the children are not necessarily achieved by the highest cost placements; children do better if they are cared for within the family. Wokingham had not overspent as much as the national average of 8%, and the volume of demand for high cost placements was being monitored.

1.7 In relation to meeting the children's physical, emotional, spiritual and educational needs, these have to be understood when placement decisions are made, and are considered at the LAC's regular reviews, with interaction from the social worker and foster carer. There is a designated LAC teacher in each school, and the Virtual Headteacher holds regular meetings with the professionals and the School Improvement Partners to challenge schools around adding value and raising expectations for the LAC. The Wokingham Virtual Headteacher works in a similar way with children placed in different authorities; there is liaison to ensure the same service. After April 2011, the Wokingham School Improvement Partners will be withdrawn, so work needs to be done on how schools will be monitored and challenged in future. The decision on which school the LAC attends is made by a number of people looking at the best school for the child, not necessarily the highest rated one.

1.8 The Group noted that following the Ofsted Inspection, which found that there were concerns about the provision of services through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), there had been a recent agreement with the relevant partners that assessments of mental health referrals for LAC would be done within two weeks by CAMHS. Also that partners providing other health services for LAC were working to improve their provision.

1.9 The Group were encouraged to note that the approach is to deal with every child as an individual noted that the way the Corporate Parenting Board works was changing, with new focus, and it was suggested that the Corporate Parenting Board investigates the legal restrictions on Corporate Parents,

(b) Foster Carers

2.1 The Group questioned Andy Couldrick and Judith Ramsden at the meeting on 6 December 2010 to find some basic information about foster carers. Officers were asked if they knew why it was difficult to keep foster carers and do legal/ bureaucratic barriers make life difficult for them. The response was that they were aware of such issues and a piece of work will be undertaken with the foster carers to look into the possibility of making the job easier, by identifying real and imaginary barriers, with the aim of having carers being considered as trusted and empowered partners. It was pointed out that there have to be rules which have to be maintained for good reasons; sometimes to protect the carers.

2.2 In response to a question about whether there were things that could be done to help the carers, such as having a list of vetted/approved babysitters, Officers said that now there was a more stable group of carers, they would be working with carers to find out what were perceived as barriers, and work to overcome them and give more support. The Panel asked whether foster carers were encouraged to keep in touch with the children once they leave care, and were informed that the carers have invested in the relationship with the children and they know that continuity is important.

2.3 The level of payment to foster carers is benchmarked with other authorities, and is equivalent to the others with a high level of respite care being offered. Independent Agencies try to recruit our carers, but they value the support they are given. The service is being reviewed to understand what type of person needs to be recruited.

2.4 In relation to the average time that children are with a carer and how many changes they had, officers said that it was variable, but overall there was good foster placement stability. Within the last 18 months there has only been one occasion when a child and carer had not got on and the placement had to be changed. There is a government measure relating to stability of placements.

2.5 The Panel asked how much the views of care leavers are fed into the process of providing services. Officers replied that this was starting to happen now that the Children in Care Team, has been amalgamated with the Leaving Care Team. Recently the Leaving Care Team had been involved in a pilot for a national scheme – Care to Work – and are involved with the Princes Trust in its support and mentoring scheme for care leavers. Some local firms are being encouraged to offer opportunities to care leavers, and it would be helpful if service delivery teams within the Council could think of supporting care leavers when making decisions about contractors.

2.6 At its meeting on 26 January 2011 the Task and Finish Group met two current fosters carers and a couple who had stopped being foster carers in mid 2010. They were asked a number of questions about what they did and what support they got from Council. They have a yearly review with the Fostering Panel when they have to complete a form to give information on what they have done throughout the year. Apart from that they have no contact with Councillors.

2.7 There seemed to be a lack of consistency in what carers are told in relation to keeping in contact when children leave their foster carers. Sometimes they are told not to keep in touch, but older children who leave care do keep in touch. The feeling was that the foster carers should be able to replicate normal family support for the young people after they leave care.

2.8 In relation to support in relation to the children's education, it seems to be up to the carer to build a relationship with the school and the designated LAC teacher, and there had been little contact with the Virtual Headteacher.

2.9 The main points made by the foster carers about improvements that could be made were:

- Recruiting the right standard of social workers – there had been a high turnover of foster carers' link workers, and children's social workers, and there seemed not to be a handover when personnel change, and the relationship breaks down
- Being consistent in what do and how do it –it was reported that the Council's policies were not being applied consistently, they seem to be interpreted and managed differently. Making decisions and sticking to it
- Social workers/managers should listen to the foster carers and the children
- Improve communication - it would be nice to get answers to our queries and that the answers are followed through, there is a difference between what we are told at meetings and what then happens. Issues raised were not dealt with; information on reports and following meetings is not recorded accurately.
- Care Plans should be completed kept up to date and be given to carers at the beginning of a placement so they know the child's history and what to do. The Council should be open and honest about what will be required of carers
- Better support from social workers – there is not a professional relationship with the link/ social workers, there seems no respect of the carers, they seen us as a low level asset
- When new, have a mentor/buddy with a more experienced foster carer – this used to happen and all the foster cares used to know each other. There should be opportunities to meet; there is a monthly drop in session for those with under 5s, but nothing for others ,
- training – there is a 6 week induction programme before they have a placement. It would be good to have training and support specific and with other foster carers, not general training with non foster carers, which would give the opportunity for networking and giving support. The impression was that the Council did not want them to communicate with each other
- there needs to be clarity over the financial support given, what it is for, don't keep changing
- children's social workers; look at the number of different social workers each child has, don't keep changing them. When they keep changing the children do not get to know them and do not build up a relationship
- Some rules around what foster carers are allowed too do with the children cause problems, this does not seem to be interpreted

consistently, or proper explanations given as to why there are restrictions.

- Opportunities for respite care need to be maintained – it seems to be left to the carers to arrange their own cover for respite, as it is almost frowned upon if you ask for respite. Even babysitters have to be approved.
- Provide more support - such as more help when emergency situations arise out of office hours, for example if a child absconds. Also some link workers are part time and not available when problems arise. If carers are not properly supported you will lose them - they will move to another authority

2.10 The initial conclusions made by the Group after hearing the evidence from the foster carers were:

- the Task & Finish Group felt dismayed at what foster carers said about the lack of consistency and poor communication with foster carers. There should be better communication, with clarity in all dealings between WBC and the foster carers
- there seemed to be different and incompatible messages from senior officers and foster carers about the level of services provided. There should be clarity around finances – what is covered, and how the allowances can be spent. Clarity of what is expected from WBC and foster carers – produce a ‘compact’ between Council and Foster Carers, the content of which should be discussed by both parties.
- Robust care plans that are kept up to date are needed, and full details of what is in the care plan should be shared at the start of every placement
- In discussing placements, there should be honesty around what would be involved; full details should be given. Some foster carers felt they had not always been told the truth.
- There should be a more professional working relationship between foster carers and social workers. At the moment foster carers feel little respected and regarded as a low level asset, not a fundamental part of the process or a partner. Some officers are not viewing the relationship with foster carers in the correct way there is a perception that they are different; but it should be a partnership
- There is a need for respite care to be provided, and for better out of hours support
- Training should be tailored to foster carers’ needs - ask them what training they would like. There should be dedicated training for foster carers allowing networking opportunities
- A mentoring programme for new foster carers should be set up
- There is a lack of guidance to the children from their social workers
- There needs to be a more information about what Councillors can do as Corporate Parents. There was a suggestion they could be a point of contact for foster carers in their ward and provide a link to WBC.
- foster carers say they find a lack of support for LAC to develop aspirations and self esteem and they struggle to meet their educational, emotional and spiritual needs. No Officers directly ask about these experiences

- foster carers should have more freedom to decide what activities LAC can take part in – the presumption should be that they are allowed to do what they want unless there is a specific reason not to
- Foster carers said that Council policies and practice are too risk averse and that too many social workers need to check with managers or don't make decisions
- There should be more contact between the foster carers and the Virtual Headteacher
- Foster carers should be involved in evaluating social workers; they should be asked to give feedback in a 360 review
- An effective audit of how things are going is necessary as there seems to be a lack of follow up to address concerns raised
- A senior officer should meet with a selection of foster carers to discuss any issues

2.11 The Group were aware of proposed changes in practice since the first meeting, and Judith Ramsden attended the meeting on 6 July to give an update. She indicated that at least another 10 mainstream foster carers were required and a recruitment strategy had been drafted, with various methods of advertising being used. There needed to be a dedicated focus on raising the profile of recruiting foster carers, and Officers were looking to set up a specialist foster care model by March 2012. The Fostering Team monitored why and when foster carers left; 14 had left during 2009/10.

2.12 The Fostering Team was a small resource and recently the service manager had made significant improvements to the Team, which was fully compliant with the relevant regulations and there had been an increase in kinship carer assessments.

2.13 In relation to social workers Judith Ramsden said that the move to a more permanent staff had been achieved, with only 5 agency staff. The service managers were strong and looking at where skills and competencies lay. Quality standards were being developed in consultation. It was important to have the right people in place, with checks and balances.

2.14 In response to concerns about the number of changes in a child's social worker, and the lack of communication as to why there had been a change, Judith Ramsden indicated that there would be a change, as the children did need to be informed.

2.15 In relation to training, the group was informed that there was a training package for foster carers, which was part of Wokingham's selling point in recruiting foster carers. There had been a questionnaire circulated to foster carers which covered a number of issues including training. It was important to manage their training needs and work was being done at the moment.

2.16 In relation to respite care, Judith indicated that when someone became a foster carer, the aspiration was that someone from their family was approved at the same time to help provide short break support. There was a list of approved baby sitters for disabled children. There was a need to manage expectations of the provision of respite care.

2.17 Judith stated that she liked senior officers, including herself to meet with foster carers, and hoped to establish a formal meeting with them at least once a year. She also received feedback from the Chairman of the Fostering Panel.

(c) The Council as Corporate Parents

3.1 The Group wished to understand how an adjoining authority carried out their functions as Corporate Parents, and invited Jacqui Ryder, Chairman of Bracknell Forest Borough Council's Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel (CPAP) to attend the meeting on 23 February 2011. She explained how the activities of the Panel had developed over the last four years, including setting up a Children in Care Council.

3.2 Jacqui informed the Group that Bracknell has a similar number of looked after children as Wokingham. The Panel has 6 members and meets 4 times a year, plus having a dedicated training session. There is an annual briefing session for all Councillors on their responsibilities. An annual 'fund day' is organised for LAC and their carers, to which all Councillors are encouraged to attend and help, as well as an annual education awards ceremony. The foster carers have set up a support group who organise social events and have invited Panel members to attend.

3.3 A Children in Care Council, named SILSIP, was set up following consultation with all their Looked After children. SILSIP meets every 3 months, with the support of officers, and one member of CPAP attends to provide a link and build relationships. The minutes of SILSIP meetings are sent to all LAC and to CPAP; and they produce a magazine twice a year with support from officers. The young people from SILSIP took the last training session for CPAP following their attendance at a national conference. A Pledge setting out promises from the Council to LAC was developed by the SILSIP, and presented to a meeting of Council. Councillors meet LAC, but not as individuals.

3.4 The Care Leavers Team kept in contact with the young people leaving care until they are about 22. As a way of Councillors keeping in touch with care leavers, Jacqui mentioned that she organised a scheme where Councillors buy or fund Christmas presents for care leavers, and their children.

3.5 In relation to educational attainment of LAC, there is an education officer and team responsible for monitoring their education and they report to CPAP.

3.6 Initial conclusions on how Members should carry out their functions as Corporate Parents were:

- All Members to be given a copy of the Pledge, and in the Council Chamber
- Setting up a similar Christmas present scheme for care leavers – (not necessarily organised by the Chairman of CPB) be considered
- To encourage Members to be more involved, send invitations to the Awards day and Fun day earlier.
- Suggest that Officers liaise with BFBC about specialised/specific training for foster carers, and share to save costs
- Suggest that the Children's rights Officer liaise with BFBC to discuss ideas around the development of the Children in Care Council.
- Suggest that a foster carers association might be formed.

3.7 The Group was aware of recent changes in the way Wokingham's Corporate Parenting Board, was functioning, and Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Vice Chairman of Corporate Parenting Board attended the meeting on 1 June 2011 to give an update.

3.8 She indicated that the Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) has now got clear aims and a new focus; two Looked After Children and two foster Carers now attend Board meetings. Each member has taken on responsibility for a specific issue, and terms of reference for these roles are being prepared. CPB has been discussing what monitoring information they require. The foster carers have suggested organising a foster carers support group and will be bringing details to the next meeting. The issue of inconsistent messages coming from social workers has been raised at CPB, and it was agreed that things needed to be made clearer; Judith Ramsden would be looking into this issue. The limitations on what foster carers can do with the children in their care need to be explained better; risks have to be assessed.

3.9 In relation to foster carers she reported that CPB had met with social workers and they felt that with the reduction in agency staff; the new structures and improved technology, things had improved. Hopefully this should improve consistency issues. A questionnaire is being prepared to ask foster carers for their opinions. There is now a night support number for foster carers.

CPB has a link with the Fostering Panel in that the CPB have general reports.

3.10 Information booklets are being prepared to let foster carers know what they are allowed to do. Also a leaflet explaining about the allowances for both foster carers and LAC is currently being printed. The Children in Care Council have been asked about the level of their allowances.

3.11 In response to the suggestion that social workers should be more flexible in the timing of their monthly meetings with the LAC, Charlotte explained that unplanned visits were also supposed to be carried out. Also that clear guidance will be set down about the level at which decisions about LAC should be made.

3.12 In relation to The Pledge, Charlotte reported that the document was finalised and will be presented to full Council on 21 July, when full support will be requested and its importance highlighted. Senior managers will also be asked to 'sign up' to it. It was noted that it was important to get buy in from the people who will be implementing the promises in The Pledge. A suggestion was made that The Pledge should be reviewed annually.

3.13 She mentioned that a Fun Day/Awards ceremony for LAC and carers had been organised for 6 July, but Group Members said they were not aware of the date. Following the meeting of CPB on 6 June, it was agreed to change the date to September/October.

3.14 The message should be that as Corporate Parents people should treat the Looked After Children as they would their own children; and not promise something that they cannot deliver.

3.15 In giving her update, Judith Ramsden said that the CPB should champion the needs of Wokingham's Looked After Children, ensuring that the Council was meeting and planning for all the needs of its LAC and monitoring that the correct measures were in place. A Corporate Parenting Strategy setting out how the Council will fulfill its corporate parenting responsibilities, had been prepared for approval at the next meeting of CPB. The CPB needed to be satisfied that the Council was meeting its statutory duty as Corporate Parents. The Pledge had been developed by the Children in Care Council with support from Officers for some time, and had been considered by the CPB. Children's Services were meeting with other teams and establishing support services.

3.16 At the Council meeting on 21 July 2011 The Pledge was presented to Members by representatives of Corporate Parenting Board, and the Children in Care Council. It was unanimously agreed that the Council's promises to Children in Care and Care Leavers be noted and endorsed. The Mayor was authorised to sign the Council's Pledge to Children in Care and Care Leavers on behalf of all Members of the Council. Copies of The Pledge were given to all Members along with a copy of the newly agreed Corporate Parenting Strategy, The invitation to the rescheduled Children in Care and Care Leavers Awards Ceremony on 1 October 2011 was given to all Members.

(d) Provision for Care Leavers

4.1 The Group met on 23 February 2011 when they met with a representative from the Prince's Trust to find out about what support could be given to care leavers from outside organisations. A basic factsheet giving a brief summary of the Prince's Trust had been circulated. Ben Marson, the Prince's Trust's Head of Programmes in London and the South East answered Members' questions.

4.2 He explained that currently the Trust was not doing any specific work with Wokingham, though he had had a number of meetings with officers involved in the leaving care programme. A number of individuals have come onto programmes being run in conjunction with Slough, Windsor & Maidenhead and Bucks. The care leavers' programme involves 12 months of intensive mentoring with a volunteer mentor. The aim of the programme is to help them towards independent living, and is targeted at getting them into education, employment, or training and to increase their self esteem. The cost is about £1200 per person.

4.3 In relation to the outcomes of the programmes, he said that there was usually a drop out of 15-20% initially and then three months after the end of the programme about 70% were still in employment. If there is a good match with the social/key worker, the volunteer and the Princes Trust then the programme works well, and there is a positive impact on the mental health and well being of the young person. Although there is no follow up in the longer term, some volunteers do keep in contact with the young people they have helped. It is hoped that the young people will keep in touch with the Trust and possibly access other programmes. The age range of the young people can be from 16 to 25, but is more usually those in the 16 to 19 group.

4.4 He went on to say that the young people need to be engaged themselves; leaving care is as very scary time for them. They have issues around finding accommodation, having little money and no family support. The mentoring scheme gives them the support they would get from parents, with the mentor providing a safety net, being an advocate and giving support and guidance throughout the whole process.

4.5 He indicated the in order to set up a viable programme for Wokingham there would need to be 15 to 20, but it could start with 5.

4.6 The initial conclusions and possible recommendations from this evidence were:

- Investigate taking part in the programme for mentoring of care leavers to help towards independent living, and to improve their self esteem.
- Approach a business partner to seek sponsorship for the mentoring programme
- Look into working with neighbouring authorities to reduce the cost
- The LAC and whole Care Leavers Team should hear a talk from Ben Marson on what support the Princes Trust can give.

- Put an article in the Borough News to highlight the work of the Princes Trust and to raise funds for work to support vulnerable children in Wokingham.

4.7 The Group met on 22 March 2011 to gather information on the provision of services for care leavers. It was planned to invite the following witnesses to attend this meeting:

- Councillor Bob Wyatt – as he has been involved with helping care leavers
- A representative from the Ealing Borough Council's Horizon Project
- Matthew Huggins from Care Matters Partnership
- Care leavers

4.8 However the Group had been asked not to meet with individual care leavers, even in an informal setting. It was suggested that a series of questions be formulated to be circulated to them via Officers in the Care Leavers Team.

4.9 Bob Wyatt indicated that he has not had dealings with care leavers for two or three years, and could not give an up to date picture.

4.10 No one was available to attend this meeting, from the Ealing Horizons Project,

but information on their activities was sent as follows:

- a copy of their Guide for young people leaving care;
- examples of the monthly timetable of activities at the Horizons Centre;
- a leaflet about the Horizons Shoutout Council; and
- leaflets about the Outreach Team and the Looked After Children Education Team.

4.11 This Project is based on the Horizons Education & Achievement Centre, and is part of Ealing Social Services leaving care programme which is carried out in partnership with Ealing Youth & Connexions Service. The Centre offers young people in care and those who have recently left care a 'safe space' where they can get support whilst in the process of leaving care. Young people can share experiences, seek information, help and advice in order to plan and prepare for independent living, in an informal and relaxed environment

4.12 Contact with Matthew Huggins could not be made as his organisation Care Matters Partnership had been taken over and he no longer worked for the new company.

4.13 However, Lauren Watts, Manager Looked After Children's Team, and Rashida Baig, Service Manager, Social Work, Children's Services, attended the meeting and gave an overview of what the new Looked After Children team does.

4.14 The Group was informed that the LAC Team had been created recently by joining the Children in Care team. Lauren was appointed as Manager, and joined in January 2011. The rest of the team is made up of

three social workers and two personal advisors. In the past children in care were monitored by the Children in Care Team and then handed over to the Leaving Care Team when they left care. The way forward with the new team is to prepare the young people earlier to move towards independent living. This is started by involving the foster carers in encouraging the young people to look after themselves by learning basic life skills. We talk to them about what their aspirations are, where they want to move to and what they want to do.

4.15 Now the young people will have a Pathway Plan which is prepared from the age of 16 and is geared towards providing independent living skills to prepare them when they move on. In future, the Pathway Plans will involve different agencies both within and outside the Council, and includes the Youth Service, Youth Offending Team, Community Safety, Community Wardens, Probation Service. These services will have a copy of the Pathway Plan, so that they are aware of the plans for each young person. The Plan will be reviewed every 6 months after the age of 18. The challenge is to provide the same service to those who are in placements outside the Borough. The aspiration is to improve the quality of the service provided by the Team. Social workers will be trained in developing the Pathway Plans

4.16 In response to a question about how the new ideas are put into action Lauren indicated that a service plan was being prepared with various partners. For housing, work is being done with housing advice and tenant services officers to ensure that appropriate advice is being delivered. A Housing Review Panel is going to be set up to look at each young person leaving care over the age of 18 to determine their needs and ensure they have a housing plan. It is hoped terms of reference will be agreed in May. The way accommodation is allocated is changing, and it is important that the accommodation provided is appropriate to their needs and we ensure that they have somewhere to go. Some go into supported or semi-supported lodgings within the Borough; or a shared house where they are supported. If they are ready, they are fast tracked into independent housing. They would only go into temporary accommodation if all the housing options had been exhausted.

4.17 The Council has responsibility for care leavers until they are 21, or until 24 if they are in full time education. Work is done with Adult Social Care, and other services, such as CAMHS and Community Care are made aware. Once they reach 21 most want to move on, and do not necessarily want our support, only financial help. Some do not want the stigma of being obviously supported; there has to be a balance between what they want and our duty. Young mothers receive support with an allocated social worker for the baby, which draws on a whole range of services such as housing, primary health care and parenting training.

4.18 In relation to the young people who are not in education employment or training, (NEET) work is being done to engage with them and improve their skills in sessions at the Children & Young People Resource Centre in Church Road, Woodley. A representative from Connexions attends those sessions and is available to give them advice; although the current person

has just gone on maternity leave. Lauren mentioned that they were aware of the Ealing Horizons project, and were hoping to visit them. The Team has had contact with the Princes Trust.

4.19 The Children's Rights Officer runs the Children in Care Council and other groups to support all looked after children. This gives them the opportunity to feedback their view and comments. Their feedback is welcomed and we want to create an environment where they can do it. Their social workers should also bring back their comments. The Children in Care Council has helped in the development of a document setting out the young person's entitlement to financial support.

4.20 Lauren and Rashid suggested that the things that Councillors could do to help LAC and care leavers would be to fully understand their Corporate Parenting responsibilities and to champion their cause in all relevant things. Also in helping all service departments and understand their responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

4.21 The Group was pleased to note that there was now good leadership and excellent ideas. The changes are encouraging but need monitoring; it is important to make sure that these changes happen – there has already been a slip in the timetable for agreeing the Housing Review Panel terms of reference. Also that there is good work happening on the Pathway Plans to manage the transition to independent living, but need to ensure that the Foster Carers are trained and supported to carry out the new tasks, and that this new work should be monitored.

4.22 Work being done to engage with those not in education, employment or training was acknowledged, but the input from Connexions should be maintained. Records should be kept of the progress of care leavers in relation to whether they stay in jobs or training.

When Judith Ramsden gave the Group an update she mentioned that the Council was keen to work with the Princes Trust, also that there were many other organisations that the Council could work with. They were pursuing the idea of mentoring with external organisations, and developing apprenticeships.

4.23 She went on to report that the facilities at the Child and Young People Resource Centre at 46 Church Road, Woodley were under development. A Connexions worker was now based there for two and half days a week, which might increase. Also it was hoped that the Looked After Children's nurse would be based at Church Road on a part time basis.

4.24 The initial conclusions made by the Group after hearing evidence about services for care leavers were:

- there is a need to get all parts of the Council to recognise their Corporate Parenting responsibilities, and ask the services how they can support our LAC
- The Ealing Leaving Care Service book is a good example of providing information for young people, something similar would be useful for our care leavers

- The Children in Care Council could look to develop the ideas for events similar to the Ealing Horizons Shout Out sessions
- The facilities at the Children & Young People Resource Centre at 46 Church Road, Woodley should be developed
- Suggest that the Corporate Parents visit the Ealing Horizons Project.
- There should be an annual training session for all Councillors to remind them of their responsibilities as Corporate Parents – and to ask ‘would it be good enough for my own child?’

(e) Provision for Care Leavers' Housing Needs

5.1 The Task and Finish Group felt that more detailed information about how care leavers housing needs are fulfilled was required, so on 9 May 2011 the Group met with Jude Whyte, Housing Needs Manager and Simon Price, Head of Tenant Services. Christine Ames, Children's Rights and Advocacy Officer also attended the meeting.

5.2 Jude Whyte explained the process around how care leavers are provided with accommodation. She said that in the past there had not been a particular way of dealing with care leavers, but following recent meetings with the new LAC Team Manager, the way things are handled are changing.

5.3 Currently care leavers come onto the Housing Register via Children's Services as fast track tenancies for planned re-housing. They also go on to the register if they want an opportunity to stay in the area, and vacancies are prioritised. Seaford Court is a shared young people's hostel, with 10 rooms run by the Stoneham Housing Association where some places are offered to care leavers via the fast track scheme. There are two private landlords who offer shared housing. There is some financial help available to cover advance rent and deposits.

5.4 In the new scheme being developed the Housing Review Panel, involving officers from the LAC Team, and the Housing Needs Team will meet to agree a set of actions to meet the young person's needs. There will be a housing pathway plan within their individual Pathway Plan. The information provided in the plan and future joint working should mean that the young person's needs are understood. A new protocol is to be agreed on joint assessment of the future care and housing needs of 16 and 17 year olds. Even those in out of Borough placements will have their housing needs assessed.

5.5 Once they move on from supported accommodation, they generally want to be in Wokingham or Woodley in a bedsit. There is only a small supply of Council bedsits, in those areas. The supply of one bedroom accommodation both within the Council and in the private sector is also limited. There is provision for giving a resettlement grant to help with furniture etc, but historically the Leaving Care Team did not take it up.

5.6 In explaining what Tenant Services provide for care leavers Simon Price said that if they accept Council accommodation they do not get a service over and above any other Council tenant. Their Personal Advisor and a Housing Officer will link up with the young person to agree a way forward in accessing an appropriate property. They will get an empty property which has not been decorated and the onus is on the young person to provide everything. There is no special provision or extra resource for care leavers. Simon went on to say that he felt care leavers should have accommodation that is ready to occupy, as it makes more of a home for them and helps towards making their tenancy successful. He suggested that at least the accommodation they were offered should be decorated before they move in.

5.7 Chris Ames mentioned that each young person leaving care is entitled to a Leaving Care Grant of £1200 to help them buy the things they need to live independently. One of the issues raised by the survey of LAC and care leavers was that they felt the grant was not enough. There is a national campaign to increase the grant to £2000. As a result of the survey, the Children in Care Council has prepared a list of the basic requirements they feel they need to help them set up on their own. The issue of offering second hand furniture was discussed and the conclusion was that it should be suggested to the young person, if suitable furniture was available at the time they needed it. However in her update, Judith Ramsden suggested that it was an important part of developing the care leavers' independence and life skills that they were able to make their own decision, and that a draft proposal was being worked on in relation to the leaving care grant.

5.8 The Group asked whether anyone checked on what care leavers are doing in the longer term, and were informed that their Personal Advisor keeps in contact until they are either 21 or 24 if still in full time education, but after that they are on their own. However in some cases there could be a referral for 'floating support' and they could be asked to prioritise a person for six months. Some young people do get support from their families.

5.9 The Group was informed that most young people were thrilled with their accommodation, usually a bedsit. Once they have passed the probation period as a tenant they can go on the transfer list, but as they are classed as 'settled' the chances of moving are quite slim. This is made clear when they take a bedsit tenancy, but as 86% of people on the waiting list want 1 bedroom accommodation, and this is only available in 12% of the housing stock, they would have to wait a long time.

5.10 If there was no accommodation to offer, Children's Services and Housing would have to see what was available. There are new regulations that care leavers should not be put in to 'bed & breakfast' accommodation unless it is an emergency.

5.11 Christine Ames reported that things are more positive around housing now that Children's Services and Housing are working together, and it would be a good idea if Tenant Services could formalise a policy around how to deal with care leavers, so that they all get the same service. The Pathway Plan, gives a more structure approach, with barriers being broken down and now that Social Care and Housing are working together the young people are not forgotten. She has a good links with Officers in Education and the Youth Offending Team.

5.12 She went on to say that following the presentation Children in Care Council's on housing, it was hoped that when The Pledge is reviewed housing will be included. Corporate Parenting Board should be monitoring all departments and services to make sure The Pledge happens.

5.13 The Group expressed concern that The Pledge had been prepared without input from the service departments, and suggested that greater involvement and communication at an earlier stage in the process might create more commitment to The Pledge.

5.14 Christine Ames invited the Group members to attend a meeting of the Children in Care Council

The initial conclusions made by the Group after hearing the evidence from the foster carers were:

5.15 The initial conclusions made by the Group after hearing evidence about the provision for the Care Leavers' accommodation needs were

- Pleased to see that cross team working between Housing and Children's Services is improving, with better coordination, but would like to see a closer working relationship.
- Consideration should be given as to which services/teams from other departments as well as Children's Services should be involved in working with LAC, and the Pledge; as the Pledge could involve a commitment to work by other departments, so they to be sure that they know about this and can deliver it. .
- Recommend that the Pathway Plans include reference to the use of the safety net of Floating support, when support from Children's Services ends. A housing officer should be invited to attend meetings.
- Consider decorating properties when a care leaver moves in.
- Encourage the use of the furniture recycling scheme, as this is what most young people starting their new home expect to have to do
- The Council should plan to increase the supply of more supported lodgings
- Suggest that consideration be given to increasing the leaving care grant from £1200 to £2000.
- Acknowledge that Tenant Services need to formalise how to deal with care leavers.
- Recommend that better use be made of the resettlement grant

(f) Comments from Looked After Children and Care Leavers

6.1 The Group was very keen to speak with the young people in care and care leavers themselves to find out their opinions and experience of the services provided by the Council. Two members of the Group were invited to attend a meeting of the Children in Care Council on 8 June 2011. At the meeting there were 4 representatives of Looked After Children, and following the meeting Prue Bray talked to a further representative on the phone. The meeting was facilitated by Christine Ames, Children's Rights and Advocacy Officer who was present during the meeting. She also initiated the phone call, but was not present during the telephone conversation itself.

The points made by the young people were:

6.2 There is still considerable turn over of social workers assigned to the LAC. Member were told of several short-term allocations within the last 8 months. There is a desire for greater stability and a hope that the changes being made to the team structures will improve the situation, but it did not yet seem to have bedded in.

6.3 The idea of providing Personal Advisors (PAs) from the age of 16 rather than 18 was welcomed, but there was a feeling that the PAs need to be more proactive in offering and providing help and assistance. There was a concern that when an individual PA was not available (on holiday or off sick) there was not sufficient cover available to provide proper backup. Also there was a concern that the process of allocating PAs had not been starting early enough, although there was a hope that this was being addressed.

6.4 The concerns about sufficient cover extended to the Connexions service; as did the desire for a more proactive service. It seems that information about jobs and college courses etc is often posted, with no opportunity to have an explanation or discussion of the material; there was a hope that this would improve now that a new Connexions worker was in post.

6.5 There were complaints about the length of time it takes to get responses to questions from social workers and PAs. Examples were cited of a week or a week and a half, which in terms of other Council responses may well be satisfactory, but the young people concerned clearly felt that it was a very long time, and action may be needed to either to speed up the responses or set realistic expectations.

6.6 There was a feeling that the reasons why something was happening or not happening were generally not well-communicated by social workers or Pas.

6.7 Respite care was not always well-managed. There was some discussion about whether the fostered children should go on holiday with the foster family (which appeared to be normally the case in long term placements but happened less often with short term); and also about who should become the carer of the foster child when respite care was needed.

New arrangements are being put in place to allow suitable members of the foster family to provide care in these circumstances, which the LAC felt was better than the children being placed with an unfamiliar family. A question arose about authorisation for foster families to take holidays in term time, as this appeared to have been allowed in at least one case, which will require respite care for the LAC (this does not include holidays already booked before the LAC placement started).

6.8 Members formed an impression that many of the issues that came up were affected by the individual members of staff involved, which would suggest that there is still not enough consistency in way the service is run.

6.9 There did not seem to be a system in place for ensuring LAC's who are at university to receive enough money to live on during the holidays. Although accommodation is provided, the student loan does not provide a great deal of income and students cannot claim benefits, so if a LAC who is student is unable to find a job during the summer they are at risk of not having enough money to live on.

6.10 Questions were raised about the provision of laptops. The first was whether it is really necessary to have such great restrictions on web access as are currently imposed, and the second was as to how long it is reasonable to expect a LAC at secondary school to manage without a laptop. The response from the Council when changes to a laptop were required was felt to be very slow (months, not weeks).

6.11 The new booklet which outlines what a LAC has the right to expect was welcomed.

6.12 One issue which was raised was what happened when birth parents refused to co-operate with the Council over LAC's property, and retained laptops, cameras, etc. The only option open seemed to be for the LAC to take the parent to court, which was not felt to be practical or helpful. The young people wanted to know what does the Council does in these circumstances, and what more could they do?

6.13 The question of the leaving care grant was raised, and the young people felt that the grant was too low at the moment. However, the LAC thought that it was a good idea to offer second hand furniture to care leavers, provided that it was of good quality.

6.14 Most LAC had had a positive experience with their school; however, they felt that the schools did not always communicate well with them; that the member of staff with responsibility for LAC did not always make themselves known, and did not always ensure other members of staff were aware of their responsibilities. The LAC had very little knowledge of the Virtual Headteacher or their role.

6.15 The LAC reported that there did not appear to be any problems with health checks or other medical visits, however, it was suggested that it might be useful for the LAC nurse to ask questions routinely that would show up potential problems such as dyslexia, which might need to be followed up.

6.16 The young person who was interviewed on the telephone was in a mother and baby placement as a teenage mother. The arrangement appeared to work well, and she had missed very little school even for the birth. Subsequent questions about the funding of mother and baby placements were answered by Christine Ames.

6.17 When a mother and baby are in care all the needs of both are met by the foster carer as they have been paid for a mother and baby placement. It would be expected that the carer would train the young mother in budgeting and all areas of care for the baby in preparation for the mother becoming independent.

6.18 When the mother is living in the placement but only the baby is in care, if it is an Independent Foster Agency Placement, full costs for all needs for both are given to the carer but the carer may pass over some of the money to the mother to purchase the child's needs. If it is an in-house placement, the baby would be fostered and all costs paid for by the carer; the mother would be placed as a Supported Lodgings Placement which means she would have her own money to budget with for her own needs. The carer may give money to the mother for the baby's needs.

6.19 When the mother and baby are in a residential unit and both are in care, this is a placement for the mother to undertake a parenting assessment, so the money for the baby's needs is given to the mother so she may budget. The placement would provide for some of the mother's needs but she would also have money for her own needs to show that she can budget. The mother can claim child benefit.

APPENDIX 2 TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S REVIEW OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN SERVICES

Purpose of Review:

1. To ensure that the Council's Looked After Children have the best possible outcomes as adults (when preparing for adulthood); in relation to them being healthy; staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and to their economic wellbeing.

Key Objectives:

1. to be satisfied that there are processes in place to achieve the 5 outcomes and whether the processes are working.
2. to report what is good and make recommendations to Full Council as Corporate Parents, whether there are any areas where we can add more value to the lives of our Looked After Children.
3. to ensure that all Councillors are aware of their role and encouraged to be effective Corporate Parents.

Scope of the work:

1. The review will focus on children who are in care, or who are care leavers up to the age of 25.

BACKGROUND:

Whilst Ofsted had inspected the Looked After Children service, it was suggested that a Task & Finish Group could have a wider focus (e.g. role of partner organisations); It was proposed that the review could increase the Councillors' knowledge of the bodies involved, and developing relations with external partners (e.g. other local authorities, the Prince's Trust). It was noted that on the matter of external partners, this was already a core responsibility of the Corporate Parenting Board

The review would not include consideration of how and why children became 'looked after'. It would focus on finding out whether the Council ensures that its Looked after Children are well prepared for the transition in to adulthood, with reference to the five outcomes in the Children's Act.

Timetable for Information Gathering, and Witnesses to be invited

Meeting 1 –Gathering basic information about our Looked After Children (LAC), and to understand the current situation in relation to services provided for them.

Lines of enquiry:

- basic information on our Looked After Children - age; placement/fostered; relevant academic results; whether NEET, attending PRU, had contact with police or Youth Offending Service, have mental health problems or teenage pregnancy
- progress of the Action Plan to address areas for improvement in the quality of provision and services for Looked After Children and care leavers as identified in the Ofsted inspection

- what is the process for deciding where the children go to be looked after - the cost and type of care, geographic spread? Does the money the Council spends affect the outcomes?
- how far are we meeting the children's physical emotional, spiritual and educational needs?
- how do we develop their self esteem and aspiration
- how well is the child's voice heard?
- why is it so difficult to find and keep foster carers?
- how do we know who the foster carers are, and do we understand them?
- do we give foster carers enough support?
- do we exercise common sense when dealing with foster carers?
- Do we encourage foster carers to keep in touch with the child once they leave care?
- Do we encourage foster carers to be more involved in decision making?

Witnesses –

- Chairman of Corporate Parenting Board - Councillor Rob Stanton
- the LAC Virtual Headteacher
- the manager of the Children in Care Team
- the manager of the Fostering Service

Meeting 2 – To understand the role of Foster Carers and what support they are given and how the Council can help them to deliver the 5 outcomes.

Lines of enquiry:

- why is it so difficult to find and keep foster carers?
- how do we know who the foster carers are, and do we understand them?
- do we give foster carers enough support?
- do we exercise common sense when dealing with foster carers?
- Do we encourage foster carers to keep in touch with the child once they leave care?
- Do we encourage foster carers to be more involved in decision making?

Witnesses

- a former foster carer
- one of the foster carer representatives on the Corporate Parenting Board
- another foster carer
- the Council's representative on the Fostering Panel – Councillor Annette Drake

Details of questions will be agreed at the previous meeting.

Meeting 3 – Benchmarking with other Local Authorities and contacts with wider other organisations involved in young people

Lines of enquiry

- benchmarking information on LAC from comparator authorities
- how to develop relations with outside bodies eg the Princes Trust
- could working with the Princes Trust benefit any of our LAC

Witnesses

- Bracknell Forest Borough Council's LAC Champion
- a representative from the Prince's Trust

Details of questions will be agreed at the previous meeting.

Meeting 4 – Provision for Care Leavers

Lines of enquiry

- what happens to LAC between the ages of 18 and 25?
- can the Council do more to support care leavers?
- do foster carers keep in touch with young people once they leave care?

Witnesses

- Councillor Bob Wyatt
- a representative from Ealing Borough Council's Horizons project
- care leavers
- Matthew Huggins – Care Matters Partnership.

Details of questions will be agreed at the previous meeting.

Meeting 5 – Comments from Looked After Children on what they think about their care and how the Council could improve.

Lines of Enquiry

- how well are they being looked after?
- are they happy with their care?

Witnesses

- Looked After Children.

Details of questions will be agreed at the previous meeting.

Meeting 6 – Formulation of report and recommendations.

The aim is to present the Review report for consideration at the Council meeting in July 2011.

DATES FOR MEETINGS

- 1 Monday 6 December 2010
- 2 Wednesday 26 January 2011
- 3 Wednesday 23 February 2011
- 4 Tuesday 22 March 2011
- 5 Monday 9 May 2011
- 6 Wednesday 1 June 2011

TIMESCALE

Starting: 6 December 2010 **Ending:** June 2011

Provide summary reports of the findings, with interim recommendations to the Corporate Parenting Board to keep the Board informed of the progress of the Review.

Terms of Reference agreed by: Task & Finish Group – 17 November 2010; amended 6 December 2010

Panel Members involved in the Review:

Pauline Helliard-Symons, Kate Haines, Prue Bray, Claire Stretton
(Claire Stretton resigned from the Task & Finish Group in June 2011)

APPENDIX 3 – LIST OF WITNESSES

6 December meeting:

- Councillor Rob Stanton, Chairman of Corporate Parenting Board
- Andy Couldrick, General Manager Children's Services
- Judith Ramsden, Head of Safeguarding and Social Care, Children's Services

26 January meeting

- Two current foster carers
- A couple who had stopped being foster carers in mid 2010

23 February meeting

- Jacqui Ryder, Chairman of Bracknell Forest Borough Council's Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel
- Ben Marson, Prince's Trust Head of Programmes (London and the South East)

22 March meeting

- Rashida Baig, Service Manager Social Work, Children's Services
- Lauren Watts, Manager Looked After Children Team

9 May meeting

- Jude Whyte, Housing Needs Manager
- Simon Price, Head of Tenant Services

1 June meeting

- Councillor Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Corporate Parenting Board
- Councillor Annette Drake, previously of Corporate Parenting Panel

6 July meeting

- Judith Ramsden, Head of Safeguarding and Social Care, Children's Services

On 8 June two Members of the Group attended the Children in Care Council meeting and met with four representatives of Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

APPENDIX 4 – OFFICERS’ RESPONSE TO THE INITIAL CONCLUSIONS OF THE TASK & FINISH GROUP

Officers Response to the Initial Conclusions report of the Looked After Children’s Task and Finish Group

Introduction

This paper is written in response to the task finish groups’ initial conclusions paper. (We have not had sight of the paper written after Judith Ramsden’s meeting with the T&F group)

[No further paper was written after that meeting on 6 July. The final report was agreed on 30 August 2011.]

Issues and Questions for Officers:

- When and by what route is the task and finish group’s final report going to the Corporate parenting Board, and is it planned to go first to the executive? (This has been suggested, but at the outset the ‘destination’ was agreed to be the Corporate Parenting Board)
- The sample size of some of the groups interviewed as part of this process makes it, in our view, unsafe to draw firm conclusions
- Benchmarking data does not seem to have featured in the process of building up a picture in regard to answering the key objectives of the scrutiny group. The section titled ‘Benchmarking’ is rather a description of activity in one other local authority
- The baseline for the exercise has not been explicitly set out in the initial conclusion report. The consequent lack of context could mislead. The service for looked after children at the time of the 2009 JAR was at or very close to inadequate. The current leadership team had a priority, driven by an Improvement Direction, to focus on the Council’s poor safeguarding services. It has been acknowledged by officers that services for Looked After Children are in need of attention and improvement and that this work is at an early stage. This is not apparent in the draft we have seen from the T&F Group

The next part of the paper will follow the model and themes within T&F Group’s initial conclusions paper:

Foster carers and services for children in care

General comments :

- The sample of foster carers within the review process is too small to justify expressions of ‘dismay’ about poor communication, or comment on how foster carers feel they are treated as ‘low assets’ (other than more specifically detailing how many were interviewed). That said, the need to improve communication and consistency in the models of communication is a priority across the CSC service
- The evidence for ‘different and incompatible’ evidence between senior officers and foster carers about the level of service has not been provided. Senior managers have not pretended that all is well: neither do we pretend that all is ‘dismaying’

- There is a comment in this section that 'respite should be provided' - it is, but it needs to be in the best interests of the child in care.
- The service offers out of hours support
- The service offers dedicated training for foster carers, however some courses were cancelled as numbers applying were low. The service manager has been working with the Learning and Development department to address this and deliver the schedule for 2011/ 12. All foster carers have their training requirements recorded as part of their annual review. We offer a NVQ programme to those who wish to gain a formal qualification
- There is clarity over finances and allowances by way of policies published and shared. The dialogue we are developing with all carers will enable us to identify areas of uncertainty
- The CAMH service has historically been poor: it was named in the Improvement Direction for that reason. There have been recent improvements. CAMH has agreed, in the last 12 months to prioritise the referrals of children in care (CIC) – they will be assessed within 2 weeks of the referral. For some children their emotional needs are difficult to meet and this is one of the reasons behind the development of a specialist foster carers scheme in 2011/ 12, which will include dedicated psychologist support for carers within the scheme.
- For some CIC their emotional needs will best be met through the provision of high quality, stable and consistent parenting within a foster placements or adoptive placements. This is what foster carers are there to provide. There are issues for some carers in terms of when they were recruited and what the expectations were at that point – for instance previous decisions that no contact with a child's birth family will occur within a foster carers home is being reviewed / developed because for a number of children this is in the CIC's best interest. The same could be said of the bullet point saying 'foster carers find a lack of support for LAC to develop aspirations and self esteem'- the foster carers have a role to play in this, CIC do not always need to receive some form of therapeutic or 'medicalised' intervention.
- Foster carers are invited to attend support groups, have 4 weekly supervision and are invited to talk about their experiences at the fostering panel. They are also asked to provide a written report about all aspects of the service to accompany their annual review – the model adopted in WBC is the model adopted in other LA's.
- It is a good idea to include foster carers in the appraisal of social workers in the same way that the managers are encouraging social workers to participate more fully in the appraisal of foster carers.

The service manager and team manager do meet with foster carers where requested and when there are issues that need formally addressing .What is currently being taken forward is a schedule of meetings throughout the year for the Head of Service to meet with foster carers, the first meeting is planned for Autumn 2011 following discussion at the CPB, and will be in addition to the Head of Service attending the fostering panel twice yearly, attending the Christmas party for foster carers and the annual celebration event and reading the monthly minutes

of the discussions that take place at the fostering panel (which is in addition to the review of all papers as part of the Agency decision Making function and role).

Background

Fostering services are independently inspected. Wokingham Borough Council's Fostering agency was inspected in 2007 where the inspector told then recently appointed service manager that the service close to, if not actually 'inadequate', but for a number of reasons the inspector was happy to issue an 'adequate' judgement.

In January 2009, WBC's Fostering agency was again inspected and the judgement was 'good'.

New care planning regulations came into force on 1 April 2011. There is also a new set of Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and National Minimum standards which we are required to comply with.

The regulations affect all aspects of care planning, but in relation to the fostering services the service has worked hard to ensure all policies and procedures are in place to ensure full compliance, this has meant a programme of work to update:

Fostering procedures, terms of reference and new timescales
Family and Friends requirements
Foster panel procedures and member requirements
New Children in Care guides and foster carer manual
Clear recruitment strategy
Foster carer training programme
Professional development programmes for carers
Develop specialist schemes
Develop children who foster group

The service currently recruits carers, assesses and supports both family and friends carers and traditional foster carers. Children's Social Care (CSC) has sought to place more children over the past 2 and half to 3 years within their family network, and the profile of who the service has actively recruited represents this.

Counter intuitively, CSC has traditionally - until early to late 2009 - placed too many children in residential care.

The CSC service has been strengthened over the past 18 months:

- November 2009 children's placements **Commissioning Panel** established to strengthen management oversight of care planning and placement provision, strengthen accountability and ensure value for money
- Service management structure created – with Service Manger to oversee fostering, adoption and external placements
- Dedicated Children in Care team established February 2010
- Children in Care Council established

- The long term strategy was effected to merge and co-locate the Children in Care team and leaving care team and permanent, high quality managers were recruited January 2011
- Between January and March 2011 the Children's Services Business strategy was implemented to ensure that the Department was fit for purpose, the merge of the fostering and adoption service was subsequently implemented in May 2011
- The permanent team manager was job matched into the role in April 2011, and a new permanent assistant team manager externally recruited and appointed in June 2011.

Current position

The amalgamation delivers more than economies of scale – it delivers a more robust and resilient service (over time), reduces some previously existing conflicts of interest, creates the ability to operate a full time duty system for fostering- a service previously only operating in the afternoons which was insufficient for social workers, foster carers and children in care or being received into care. The new team also offers a focused 'family and friends' section that will develop and deliver a tailored service to the needs of children living within family placements. The team is currently working hard to recruit to some vacant posts, have completed a national advertising campaign which has resulted in no posts being offered.

The business strategy also focuses on looking into the market for benefits. In 2011 the market and partners will be tested to consider if a more overtly mixed economy of provision and service design will be of benefit to children and foster carers. Specific activity will focus on the advertising / marketing and assessment for / of carers: over the past 3 to 4 years we have not recruited sufficient foster carers as the team have had to focus on the assessment of kinship carers.

The recruitment of carers is a current priority, both mainstream carers and carers for a specialist scheme which has been developed in 2011 and will go to advert in the autumn of 2011.

The commissioning intentions and recruitment intentions of the service are set out in the Commissioning strategy and recruitment plan, which have been presented to the CPB in 2011 to demonstrate how WBC will deliver on its sufficiency duty.

Recruitment activity for posts within the family placements team occurred in early summer 2011, unfortunately no one was appointed. There are vacancies in the team currently, some locum cover brought in and a new round of recruitment planned for September.

Cross regional recruitment and commissioning work is in place and being developed. This work includes:

- A consortium draft strategy to address the need to recruit adopters for 'hard to place children',

- o regional partnerships to ensure we have sufficient placements of high quality available to us which also deliver value for money; and
- o cross agency agreements on the sharing and funding of short term foster placements.

The loss of foster carers was highlighted as a concern in the paper. Foster carers always leave LA's, the reasons are tracked by the service manager for resources to inform planning and service improvement.

The profile of carers who left fostering for WBC over the past three years is set out below; no concerning trend or theme exists. The resignation of people has been as a result of people moving out of area or their personal circumstances changing.

Year	Resignation	Retirement	Termination	Kinship
2008/09	4	2	1	2
2009/10	8	0	0	0
2010/11	3	0	2	7
Total	15	2	3	9

When the service is benchmarked against other similar LA's, the model of support, allowances etc are comparable. Using such benchmarking data suggests that in some instances WBC offers more than some statistical neighbours when the training programme, offered over the past 2 years, is included in the data comparison.

Some larger LAs have their own fostering association, run by carers for carers. However Wokingham is a small LA and as with other LA's of a similar size this is less likely to be an option but this would be the decision of the carers themselves. Their choice would be supported by the service

CSC are wishing to create a foster carers forum which meets approximately three times a year, chaired by senior managers carers to have a further voice—

The foster carers are supported through:

- the allocation of supervising social workers who meet with the carers every 4 weeks
- monthly support groups for family and friends carers
- monthly support groups for mainstream carers , see attached programme and minutes
- out of hours support – all the supervising social workers are on a rota, plus access to the commissioned out of hours service
- respite offered
- Newsletters and 'Fostering Extra' briefings
- Invited to consult on policy changes
- Placement support meetings for placements requiring extra support
- annual free pantomime, seaside trip, Christmas party

- bespoke training plus access to children's services / council training , see attached programme
- Asked carers to contribute to appraisals of SSW's

As set out above support for foster carers is multi faceted, and includes training, support meetings, and access to of respite to cares .

The new management team began from early 2010 to challenge the approach to respite care on a case by case basis to ensure that the arrangements were always in the child's best interests (acknowledging that carers do at times need a break from their caring responsibilities in order to maintain the care of a child)

Other improvement work:

- Fostering panel:
 - A change in the chair of the fostering panel and the framework within which the panel will operate is planned for January 2012 - this will allow greater challenge and support of the social workers
 - All panel members will have clear objectives linked to their role and an annual appraisal.
 - The service manager of the service becoming a member of the fostering panel
 - A review and development of the fostering panel advisor is planned for autumn 2011- to strengthen their overall input to the fostering panel
 - A new QA model has been developed and implemented in July 2011 re: papers and the quality of the foster care assessments and reviews before they are submitted to the panel.
- Manuals for children in care have been updated in 2011 and we consulted with our children and young people plus the CICC.
- The foster carers manual is being consulted on in August (with foster carers) August with a launch planned for September 2011.
- A focus of the department since July 2010 has been to ensure that all of the children's care plan and pathways plans are up to date and of a high quality. Senior managers have conducted thematic audits focussed on care plans and are continuing to prioritise this area of work,

The priorities set out in this section of the paper are endorsed by officers: some of the priorities identified are already being pursued as part of the existing strategy for improvement; namely:

1. Recruiting the right social workers, looking at the number of social workers each child has, this priority already features in the:
 - CSC's recruitment and retention strategy
 - CSC 's service plans objectives for 2011/12
 - WBC pledge to CIC

The recruitment of social workers has been a key priority - and the initial result of recruiting experienced social workers was successful - turning the profile to 80% WBC staff from July 2010.

The highly effective workforce strategy continues to be prioritised – we have just completed the latest round of secondments onto the degree / masters course. The service now has a yearly commitment to offering student placements, and supporting staff to take up professional development courses and opportunities (rotation scheme as well as formal learning),

In terms of changes of social workers for children and families: there are 3 allocations (changes of social workers) built into the system. The potential negative of this is balanced against the ability to ensure lines of accountability and oversight to deliver robust and effective care planning and to ensure children in care are prioritised appropriately (when they were part of the area team- ongoing CP work was prioritised over CIC).

The management team are finding ways to capture the number of allocations/ changes of social work for children in care over.

There have been a number of changes of social worker for CIC due to staff retention difficulties in 2008 / 09. In 2009/ 10 further changes occurred as permanent staff were recruited and agency / interim staff left, changes when the children in care /leaving care team was established, and some changes as some permanent staff have been robustly managed out of the organisation.

- . A period of stability will be achieved in 2011/ 12 which will enable the longer term allocation model to be experienced, which of course underpins trust and stability for children in care and foster carers.
2. Improved communication, listening to foster carers and children in care will always be a theme from foster carers and will always be prioritised within WBC.
3. Delivering clarity over financial support is set out in the annual allowances and fees policies, which are reviewed and updated yearly in line with best practice.
4. It is a good idea to include foster carers in the appraisal of social workers in the same way that the managers are encouraging social workers to participate more fully in the appraisal of foster carers.

Benchmarking section of the initial report

The initial report offers examples, rather than benchmarking, of how other LA's have approached a particular agenda.

I would support the report referencing the need for the CPB to review benchmarking data as part of their ongoing work.

In terms of the examples given: WBC was part of a joint bid with the Prince's Trust earlier this year to develop a local mentoring scheme, which unfortunately was not successful. WBC has continued to seek a partnership with the Princes Trust.

We are currently in the initial stages of partnering with NACRO to establish accredited training for our care leavers via courses at Church Road which we hope will facilitate a pathway into more formal learning routes

We have a work plan to review the already established pathways to work scheme

The CSLT is preparing a strategy proposal for the Council Exec to support the development of an apprenticeship scheme, within which we hope care leavers will be prioritised for apprenticeships not just within the Council, but within any of our partners or commissioned agencies in line with the CPB work plan.

Provision for care leavers

There is a lot of work in train in this area, and some of the developments in this area have been noted earlier in the paper.

Improvements and developments:

- The merge and co location of the CIC and care leavers teams
- work plan / development plan is in place for this team and area of work; external audit work has been completed on case work of the team and manage, care leavers now have pathway plans in place
- The building has been re decorated, and internal moves are planned for the Autumn to make the building fit for purpose, funding has been identified and secured to ensure the IT and phone lines are fit for purpose, and a delivery date is awaited from the corporate team.
- Permanent management has been secured.
- Team development / investment has occurred and the joint team now have a set of self defined standards and priorities
- The supported lodgings scheme has moved from the old LCT to sit within the fostering team to ensure quality standards are achieved and the processes and support of the carers is in line with best practice and the new regulations
- The virtual head teacher sits within the CIC/ Care leavers team

- A virtual team meetings is convened on a monthly basis to track and manage CIC/ care leavers educational attainments, provision, support needs , provide personal education allowances and additional resources and supports.
- Agreements are being sought with the health provider for the LAC nurse to sit some of the working week within Church Road
- Other agencies now work more closely with the Care leavers /CIC team: Lac psychologist – who is based at Church road for some of her working week, likewise the connexions workers, YOS, housing
- The ‘lunch club’ for care leavers has been re developed to become the ‘working lunch’ from which young people can access their key workers, and do work and not just attend for lunch
- A leaflet was produced and is being printed re: the allowances for CIC and care leavers following a report and request from the CICC
- A joint CSC and housing needs panel has been established, the panel ensures that all young people have an agreed housing plan and pathway for support. The pathways to accommodation are clear and currently being strengthened by way of a newly appointed ‘accommodation finder’
- CSC are members of the case determination panel chaired by Community care colleagues to ensure case responsibility and transfer between the services is effective and smooth.
- The following manuals for children in care – two age ranges have been updated in 2011 and we consulted with our children and young people plus the CICC

Work in train

- The development of a joint action plan to deliver on the housing strategy in relation to young carer leavers. Judith Ramsden chaired the first meeting on 9 August to agree the programme of work for the next 12 months to deliver on the identified accommodation needs of young carers leavers. CSC staff already sit on the appropriate and various housing boards, including recently joining the Seaford Court steering Group. .
- Agreements are being sought with the health provider for the LAC nurse to sit some of the working week within Church Road

CPB: oversight and challenge

The CPB has developed in the last 12 months.

The Board has a forward plan which sets out how reports and data will be submitted to the Board for oversight and challenge. The plethora of reports

and data that will now be submitted in a routine way to the CPB addresses some of the issues and concerns raised by the task and finish group.

A substantial 'evidence pack' is available for the T&F Group in support of the elements addressed in this report

Judith Ramsden, Head of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding

Andy Couldrick, DCS

August 2011