

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 NOVEMBER 2006

FOSTERING TASK GROUP

Report from: Rose Collinson, Director of Children's Services

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Fostering Task Group
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1 Purpose of item

1.1 To outline the initial findings of the Fostering Task Group and consider its recommendations as set out in paragraph 2.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to consider the proposed recommendations of the task group, as set out below: -

- (i) That Officers continue their development of the review on payment structures for carers and feedback to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on their findings.
- (ii) That the current carer out of hours service is restructured to provide a comprehensive professional management of the out of hours situation or emergency if found to be appropriate – currently under review.
- (iii) That in terms of out of hours service: -
 - (a) there be a re advertisement for a carer to retain an out of hours emergency bed.
 - (b) the out of hours service be compared with provisions at statistical neighbours and other unitary authorities.
 - (c) a process be formalised to measure numbers of complaints and unmet requests through the out of hours service.
- (iv) That training methods be reviewed and the possibility of gaining an accreditation scheme of the carer training, from a local university, be explored and reported back to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3 Background

3.1 The Committee agreed at its meeting on 3 May 2006 to set up a Fostering Task Group to review the following issues: -

- Payment structures for carers
- Training of foster care providers
- The out of hours pilot scheme
- The major review and restructure of carer supervision policy and format.

3.2 Payment structures for carers

3.2.1 After discussion officers noted the key issues that had arisen and undertook to give them further consideration, which were as follows:

- To widen consultation
- To consider issues around respite care
- Increased/improved support and training
- To find out why some carers are currently deciding to stay with Medway Council, as opposed to registering with an Independent Fostering Agency.
- To find out what the main incentives are for foster carers.
- To codify structures in a way the people outside of the business can understand.

3.3 Carer Supervision Policy and Format

3.3.1 All carers must sign an agreement on foster care supervision, which stipulates expectations of both the carers and the Council. Every carer must have their own safe care policy on things such as how to manage travel, bedroom arrangements, privacy, photography, babysitting and internet use and have a health and safety audit carried out on their home.

3.3.2 It was confirmed that carers with additional needs were provided with help. There was a difficulty in recruiting carers from ethnic minority groups, however, information on fostering was provided in six different languages to help encourage involvement.

3.4 Out of hours pilot scheme

3.4.1 This scheme had been introduced to run in addition to the Kent County Council (KCC) helpline to provide an additional avenue for carers who needed to talk a problem through or ask advice. It consists of very experienced foster carers being on call, 6pm-11pm, on a one-month rota to answer such calls from other carers.

3.4.2 However, the scheme was a concern in previous CSCI inspections who recommended that the service should involve professional bodies to take problem calls from carers. On investigating the setting up a Medway helpline staffed by professionals, it was found that this would be far too expensive and not a cost effective option for the Council. Officers felt that the current use of Kent's out of hours hotline, in conjunction with Medway's peer support

service, was adequate and the most effective way for the Council to provide out of hours support for its carers.

- 3.4.3 On hearing the conflicting issues around the scheme, Members felt that the current Carer Out of Hours service should be restructured to provide a comprehensive professional management of the out of hours situation or emergency, that there be a re-advertisement for a carer to retain an out of hours emergency bed, that the out of hours service be compared with provisions at statistical neighbours and other unitary authorities and the process be formalised to measure numbers of complaints and unmet requests through the out of hours service.

3.5 Training

- 3.5.1 All carers are provided with training portfolios and with different training options to suit each carer. A steering group had been set up and a new post created to provide guidance on courses needed and support on training. Accreditation from a local university was something that the group felt should be explored.

4. Director's comments

- 4.1 The Children's Services Directorate welcomes the scrutiny focus by elected Members on support provided to foster carers in Medway. The outcomes of the review on payment structures will form part of the proposed future budget build for the relevant service. Members will be reassured that provisional feedback from a recent CSCI inspection report on the Fostering Service in September 2006 was satisfied with the current level of support to carers out of hours. Officers are reviewing training and accreditation options for existing and new carers.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 Any enhancement or alteration to the payment schemes will have some financial consequences. The costs associated with 'payment for skills' are currently being assessed and will be taken into account in the budget setting process for 2007-2008

6. Legal implications

- 6.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations of this report, however, the Council must meet the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services.

7 Background papers

None

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