SUBJECT

The Islington Plan for Looked After Children and Young People 2008 - 2011

1. Synopsis

This report presents the Islington Plan for Looked After Children and Young People 2008 – 2011 for approval (Appendix 1). The Plan has been developed during 2008 by the Islington Executive Corporate Parenting Board, based on extensive consultation. Islington and its partners have made immense progress over the past five years in terms of the quality of services provided for looked after children, and the outcomes those children are now achieving. Because Islington is ambitious for its looked after children, it is determined to address the significant gap between the outcomes looked after children achieve and those achieved by the wider community of children and young people. This Plan sets out the outcomes Islington is seeking and the specific objectives it will take forward to deliver them. The Plan is consistent with the One Islington vision as it seeks provide quality services for this very vulnerable group of children and to ensure they are fully part of the Islington community.
2. Recommendation

To approve the Plan.

3. Background

3.1 Over ten years ago the Quality Protects programme focussed attention on the plight of children and young people in the care system. It highlighted how children in care often received a very poor standard of care and achieved very poor outcomes in terms of their education, health, mental health, and transition to a happy and fulfilled adulthood. Care leavers were overrepresented amongst the homeless, those in prison and amongst those families who were struggling to cope, as the cycle of deprivation and failure repeated itself. The failure was not just one of resources: it was a more fundamental failure to care, and to apply the same expectations and standards to the lives of these children as any good parent would for their own children. Quality Protects challenged this double-standard, and raised the profile of these children. It introduced the idea of “corporate parenting” by stating that the mark of a cohesive and caring community is that everyone makes a contribution to the parenting of looked after children: all statutory agencies and council departments (not just “social services”), all councillors, voluntary and community organisations and local residents.

3.2 Islington and its partners have made great strides over the past years to improve services for looked after children, and this commitment has resulted in considerable improvements. Full performance details are contained in the body of the Plan, but the main areas of improvement include:

- A range of evidence-based family support services in place and development, enabling children to remain within their families and consequent reduction in the number of children looked after.
- Increase in the number of children in family placements and reduction in the number in institutional care.
- Increase in the number of Islington foster carers and in the number of children with Islington carers.
- Improved school attendance.
- Improved GCSE performance.
- High performance in respect of children receiving regular health assessments, dental checks and having up-to-date immunisations
- Greater stability of placements for children.
- More looked after children having permanent family arrangements through permanent fostering, adoption and special guardianship.
- A settled workforce with the great majority of social work posts filled with permanent staff.
- A nationally highly-regarded employment service for looked after young people and care leavers
- Significantly improved leaving care services.
3.3 Islington recognises, however, that the gap between outcomes for its looked after children and the rest of the community must be narrowed. The Government also recognises this gap and in June 2007 published the White Paper Care Matters: Time for Change. The White Paper set out a challenge to local authorities and other statutory agencies and stakeholders which constitute the “corporate parent”, to take a quantum leap in how services for looked after children are planned and delivered. The aim is to achieve a significant improvement in outcomes for looked after children – to narrow the gap between the outcomes these children achieve and those of other children in the community; a gap which nationally, as the White Paper makes clear, is still very wide and in some respects greater than it has been historically.

3.4 Islington and its partners have therefore reviewed services and policies for looked after children in the light of the White Paper and set out the objectives they will be taking forward to narrow the gap. The Islington Plan for Looked After Children and Young People has the following objectives:

- To review Islington’s current position in terms of services for, and outcomes of, looked after children.
- To set out the vision and key requirements contained in the White Paper.
- To set out the outcomes Islington is seeking to achieve for its looked after children.
- To set out the key objectives to deliver the outcomes.

3.5 There is not a statutory requirement to develop such a plan. However, because looked after children are a major priority for Islington and its partners it was decided that a clear plan would help to provide a clear framework for service development. The Plan has been developed under the auspices and direction of the Islington Executive Corporate Parenting Board and is informed by extensive consultation. This Plan is consistent with, and a natural development of, Islington’s statutory Children and Young People’s Plan.

3.6 Next Steps: Setting Targets and Action Plans

Once the Plan has been approved, more detailed work will be undertaken on the project planning of specific objectives, including the specification of measurable targets and milestones. When setting targets, the Executive Corporate Parenting Board will be seeking not just to specify absolute, objective targets that can be compared with other authorities; it will also be seeking to measure and recognise the progress that individual children make within their personal situation. The Executive Corporate Parenting Board will be monitoring the implementation of the Plan.

4. Executive Summary

Section 1: Corporate Parenting: getting it right

Corporate Parenting is the concept that all councillors, council departments and partner organisations / contractors have a responsibility to promote the well-being of children and young people in a council’s care. In essence, they are all expected to be good parents and to use their roles to promote the well-being of this most vulnerable group. Without this level of commitment and determination, looked after children will remain on the margins of the community. A key element of Corporate Parenting is the need for looked after children and young people to have a voice that is heard by those with power and to be able to influence not just what happens to them as individuals but the local care system of which they are part.
The Government sees Corporate Parenting as a critical factor in getting it right for looked after children, stating in the White Paper that: “Improving the role of the corporate parent, as part of children’s trusts, is key to improving the outcomes for children in care. It is with the corporate parent that responsibility and accountability for the wellbeing and future prospects of children in care ultimately rest. A good corporate parent must offer everything that a good parent would, including stability. It must address both the difficulties which children in care experience and the challenges of parenting within a complex system of different services. Equally it is important that children have a chance to shape and influence the parenting they receive”.

Islington has a good record of effective corporate parenting arrangements, but recognises that these need to be modernised to meet new challenges. Key elements of the new corporate parenting arrangements will be:

- **A Children in Care Council** comprising looked after children and young people, which help shape strategic and operational developments that affect looked after children

- The Islington *Pledge*. This will set out those commitments that the local authority will commit to delivering for looked after children.

- **An Executive Corporate Parenting Board** comprising lead councillors and senior officers from Children’s Services, Cambridge Education and Islington PCT. The key responsibility of which will be to develop and drive forward the Islington Plan for Looked After Children and Young People.

- **A General Corporate Parenting Board**. This Board will bring together officers from a wide range of council departments, partner agencies and the independent sector to focus on the contribution they will make to achieving the outcomes on the Plan.

- Greater focus on hearing the views of birth parents.

**Section 2: Family and Parenting Support**

Islington’s approach for several years has been to reduce the number of children becoming looked after by setting in place evidence-based services which help families to stay together safely, and for the children in those families to achieve positive outcomes. This approach is endorsed by *Care Matters* which makes clear that local authorities and their partners should do more to prevent children coming into care in the first place by having proven, evidence-based services in place to support families and children in need in the community.

Islington has been highly successful in reducing the number of children who are looked after (487 at 31st March 2002 to 336 at 31st January 2008). This has been achieved through:

- the development of a wide range of effective family support services, several of which are multi-agency / multi-disciplinary
- the wider development of preventative and early intervention services in the borough (e.g. Sure Start Children’s Centres, extended schools, more support for disabled children, integrated ways of working).
- effective multi-agency gate keeping
- effective care planning enabling children to leave care e.g. to return home, or through adoption.

Islington and its partners will be taking forward a range of service developments which will provide greater support to vulnerable families in the community. These will include:

- The development of Area Children and Young People’s Partnerships
• The completion and rolling out of the social worker in schools pilot
• The implementation of the Family Pathfinder (focusing on parental mental ill health) and Family Nurse Partnership programmes
• Review of mentoring services
• The development of a service to involve local Islington people in providing direct support to vulnerable families and the become part of a virtual extended family for them.
• Engagement with adult employment and literacy services
• New focus on domestic violence with the Islington Safeguarding Children Board.

Section 3: Care placements: a better experience for everyone

The placement is where a looked after child lives and is cared for. Islington’s approach is that if being looked after is going to have a positive impact on children’s lives, it is essential that they are in placements which will meet their needs, and that the placements are settled and permanent. What causes damage to children is when they have no settled and permanent placement. Care Matters also expects local authorities to place their looked after children in placements in their own area so there is no disruption of educational arrangements and friendship / family contacts.

Islington’s placement commissioning strategy has had three objectives:
• To increase the pool of local Islington foster carers
• To reduce the number of children placed with private fostering agencies and the number of independent fostering agencies used
• To increase the number of children in family placements and reduce the number of children in residential care.

Islington has been successful in increasing its pool of foster carers and the number of children placed with them (102 in January 2008, 62 in March 2005). In the same period the number of children in residential placements has dropped from 63 to 15. The number of children with independent fostering agencies is still high, but “preferred provider” arrangements have been set in place to develop partnership working and greater efficiency.

Islington has significantly improved the stability of placements as measured by number of placements moves in a year, but we must aim to improve the long-term stability of placements. Islington has been successful in achieving permanence for children through adoption, Special Guardianship and permanent fostering. Finally, Islington has set in place a range of measures to provide additional support to foster carers, especially those caring for challenging adolescents.

Key new objectives will include:
• Review and refocusing of both fostering and adoption recruitment strategies – with a focus on pro-active direct outreach to organisations and individuals in the community.

• Development of a placement stability plan to improve long-term stability

• A review and reconfiguration of fostering, adoption and placement services and business processes to ensure they are fit for purpose in light of the higher expectations.
Section 4: Delivering a first class education

Islington gives high priority to the education of looked after children. A happy, stable family placement, continuity of education in a good school and continuity of relationship with an effective social worker are the keys to good outcomes for looked after children. There remains a major gap between the educational achievements of looked after children and those of the wider child population. This is the case in Islington and all local authorities, and for all Key stages. For example, in 2006 / 2007, 15% of Islington’s looked after children achieved 5+ GCSEs, A*- C, compared with 49% for other children in Islington and 62% for children nationally.

Islington has achieved some improvement over time in Key Stages 2 and 4 for its looked after children, but there has been no sustained improvement for them in Key Stages 1 and 3. Islington has been highly successful in improving school attendance with 9% of looked after children missing 25+ days in 2006/07, compared with 18% in 2003/04. Ofsted’s inspection of the fostering service highlighted the active role of foster carers in supporting children’s education.

Key objectives designed to improve educational outcomes include:

- The establishment of a virtual school for looked after children with a Head Teacher. This school will mirror the arrangements for a mainstream school, including the completion of a “Self Evaluation Form” and prioritisation for support and challenge. The Head Teacher will be a champion for looked after children in respect of other head teachers and schools out of borough.
- To review and strengthen the role of foster carers, social workers and birth parents in promoting educational success.

Section 5: Promoting health and wellbeing

Islington and the Islington Primary Care Trust have been effective in delivering a range of specialist health services to looked after children. This has been important because, as Care Matters points out, looked after children experience poorer health than the rest of the child population in many areas, including mental and emotional health. Because of Islington’s effectiveness in getting the foundations in place (immunisations, high quality and regular health assessments, regular dental checks) the focus has now started to move onto the “wellbeing” dimension of health including in particular the engagement of looked after children in enriching cultural, leisure and sports activities.

Research undertaken by Islington has shown a reasonable degree of engagement in these activities but there is more that can be taken forward and the Plan puts emphasis on this. It also contains proposals to refocus child and adolescent mental health services to better meet children’s needs, and new approaches to prevent teenage pregnancy and substance misuse.

The Plan includes objectives to better meets the needs of young people arising from sexual orientation and identity.

Finally, the Plan recognises the diversity of looked after children in terms of faith, and includes an objective to analyse this further to identify if more needs to be done to meet children’s needs arising from faith issues.
Section 6: Transition to adulthood

Islington has in place a range of services to support young people once they leave care. Most importantly, Islington’s policy is that young people should remain in their foster placement until they leave care at 18 to maximise their experience of family life and support. Islington commissions Shaftesbury Young People to provide a range of support service for young people until they are 21. Good arrangements are in place with HFI to provide accommodation, and Islington had introduced some innovative schemes to help care leavers into employment, education and training: e.g. the Career Start employment scheme; a £3000 pa bursary for those going to university. Care Matters recommends developments that Islington has had in place for some years.

However, the Plan recognises that more needs to be done. Standards for and understanding of the support of care leavers have risen over the past five years and the forthcoming end (2010) of the contract with Shaftesbury Young People provides the opportunity to review needs and develop a new service specification that will be tendered for core support services. As all good parents know, you don’t stop being, and needing to be, a parent when a child reaches a particular age. Thus the Plan sets objectives to strengthen relationships with adult social care and mental health services, and to find ways of ensuring care leavers have continuity of supportive relationships well into their adulthood. Finally, the Plan sets objectives to increase the level of engagement of care leavers in further and higher education, and the expansion of the Career Start employment scheme.

Section 7: The role of practitioner

The professionals who work with looked after children need to be skilled and committed; they also need to stick with children for as long as possible so that children can benefit from the relationship. Social workers are key professionals for looked after children. For these reasons Islington has introduced a range of initiatives over the years to create a stable social work service. This has been successful and the vast majority of social work posts are now filled with permanent social workers.

Islington now wants to focus on developing the role of social workers and those who work with looked after children. In particular, the plan is to introduce a concept of “Team Around the Child” so that the different players really do work as a team in the same way that parents would. How social workers spend their time will be reviewed to increase the amount of direct contact time with looked after children; Islington will also be piloting social workers having a budget that they can control to support the children they are responsible for, in order to create a more responsive and less bureaucratic form of decision making.

Islington has already brought together all services for looked after children (social care, health, education, Shaftesbury) into a single Children Looked After Service to promote more effective joint working. A major capital development is being planned so that all these staff can be located on one site in Elwood Street.
Section 8: The role of the private and voluntary sectors
Islington currently commissions a range of services from the independent sector to support both children in need and children looked after. However, there is capacity for greater involvement of the private and voluntary sectors, where appropriate – and there is certainly scope for greater involvement of individual people who live and work in the borough, again where appropriate.

Section 9: Resources
Islington has committed considerable resources to services for looked after children and young people. These resources are bearing fruit as demonstrated by the improved outcomes that have been achieved. Moreover, there are several examples of initiatives that have been taken to achieve the best outcomes for the children, for the best value, from the resources that are available, and this will continue to be a priority. In addition, Islington will be seeking to increase the proportion of social care spending that funds services to children in need in the community, in order to reduce the number of children that need to be looked after.

Islington will also be taking forward two major capital projects:
- The development of the Elwood Street site to create purpose-built accommodation for the Children Looked After Service
- The development of supported flats for care leavers.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial Implications
The objectives set out in the Plan for Looked After Children and Young People need to be achieved within the current and planned budget allocations. This will require the re-direction of resources within existing services and continued improvements in achieving value for money in order to invest in family support services and improve outcomes for looked after children.

5.2 Legal Implications
The Children and Young Persons Bill reforms the statutory framework for the care system by implementing the proposals in the White Paper Care Matters: Time for a Change that require primary legislation.

5.3 Equalities Impact Assessment
An Equalities Impact Assessment was completed on 15th September 2008. The Assessment showed that the Plan would have a positive impact on all looked after children and young people. However, the plan will have particular benefits for the following groups:

- There is an overrepresentation of children of “Black / Black British” ethnicity and “Mixed Parentage” in the looked after population. This will be analysed carefully to determine whether and how preventive services need to be more focused on the needs of these groups.

- It is proving particularly difficult to find adopters for Black male children. The Plan sets an objective to develop a new adoption recruitment strategy to address this.
• Local Islington children are underrepresented in the young people who go on to further and higher education. The Plan’s objectives for further and higher education will help to address this.

• Whilst the small numbers make it difficult to reach firm conclusions, there are indications that “White British” children in particular are not achieving as well as other groups in respect of GCSE performance (5 GCSEs A* - C). The Plan sets out an objective to thoroughly review the ethnicity and gender dimensions of all forms of educational achievement to identify the lessons we need to learn and changes we need to make.

• The Plan recognises that more work needs to be done to identify the needs of looked after young people arising from their faith, so that any appropriate initiatives can be taken forward.

• The Plan has an objective to develop a strategy to identify and meet the needs of young people who are dealing with issues of sexual orientation or gender identity.

• The Plan recognises the need to engage more fathers in the work that is done to support both children in need and children looked after.

6. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

The Islington Plan for Looked After Children and Young People sets challenging objectives which, if implemented effectively over the next three years, would result in a significant improvement in outcomes.

Background papers:
None

Final report clearance

Signed by  .................................................................................................................  .................
Executive Member for Children and Young People  Date

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