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**Analysis: Looked-after children - Care Matters: white paper verdict**

27 June 2007

As the Government delivers its white paper, Care Matters: Time for Change, Sarah Cooper questions the professionals on whether they believe the proposals are workable in the field and sufficient so that looked-after children will thrive.

Plans for improving services for children in care were outlined last week when the Department for Education and Skills launched the Care Matters: Time for Change white paper.

The policy document finalises the plans mooted in the Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care green paper, which the Government consulted on at the end of last year.

Here Children Now examines the main points of the white paper.

**EDUCATION**

Education is one of the most important considerations in the white paper, with children in care being given the highest priority in school admissions.

Local authorities will be able to direct schools to take looked-after children, even if they are full, and they will have to ensure these children are not moved during years 10 and 11.

David Holmes, chief executive of the British Association for Adoption & Fostering, praises these plans. He says: "It was good to see the education proposals: getting children into the best schools and not moving them unless it is exceptional circumstances."

To help looked-after children who are failing to meet educational standards there will be £500 available each year to go towards support services, such as one-to-one tuition.

Children's minister Beverley Hughes says: "The money will be for children failing to meet standards, to make sure they achieve those standards. It could be for any activities to help that child progress."

Virtual head teachers, who will have responsibility for the education of all looked-after children in their area, will be introduced in every local authority area.

Schools will be required to appoint a designated teacher for looked-after children who will support and monitor the education of these pupils.

Jonathan Stanley, acting director of the National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care, says: "We welcome putting the role of designated teachers on a statutory footing - it will help the residential sector's engagement with schools."

Children in care going into higher education will get a bursary of at least £2,000 from their local authority to give them financial support.

**HEALTH**

Many professionals feel the DfES has not sufficiently covered health in the white paper. Among the proposals are plans to get local health services to focus more on the needs of children in care and the possible introduction of a new indicator on the emotional and behavioural difficulties of children in care.

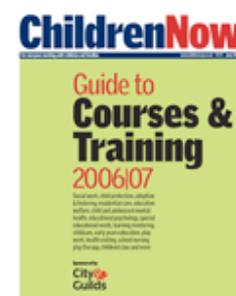
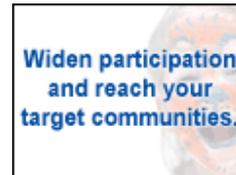
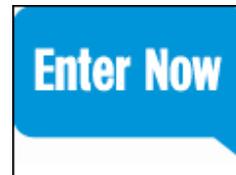
The white paper also proposes more work to examine the benefits of appointing named health professionals responsible for looked-after children's health care. In addition, foster carers are to be given guidance on sex and relationships education.

Paul Ennals, chief executive of the National Children's Bureau, said the white paper does not have enough detail on how the health service can help looked-



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after children. Susanna Cheal, chief executive of The Who Cares? Trust, agrees: "The health and wellbeing part is not as strong as the rest of the paper. That will need to be addressed in the future."

Clare Tickell, chief executive of the charity NCH, adds: "The health stuff is weaker than it should be. There was little on emotional support."

But some professionals believe the white paper has progressed since the green paper, containing much more guidance on health and wellbeing.

John Coughlan, director of children's services at Hampshire County Council, says the DfES has done better: "It has made substantial progress since the green paper. It's much more clear now."

Holmes adds: "The health proposals are firmer than in the green paper, but still need to be firmed up."

Hughes said more work will be done on health once the Department of Health knows the outcome of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

#### SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES

One of the most controversial plans in the white paper is for independent social work practices. The idea was widely criticised in the consultations and has been a topic for debate ever since they were proposed in the original green paper.

Education secretary Alan Johnson says there was controversy about the plans, but the fact the Social Care Practices Working Group recommended they be piloted and that many social workers backed the idea, was a very good reason to go through with them.

The Government now plans to legislate to establish several two-year pilots, using both voluntary and private sector agencies. The practices would be autonomous organisations, similar to GP practices, where social workers would have the freedom to concentrate on the children in their care and would be accountable for their outcomes.

The local authority that commissions a practice would remain the corporate parent of the looked-after child.

But the practices are still being viewed warily by professionals. John Freeman, director of children's services at Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and joint president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, says: "Of the proposals, social work practices are the most questionable. I don't see how they are going to be particularly powerful. The Government is committed to piloting them and I will be interested in what happens."

John Harris, director of children, schools and families at Hertfordshire County Council, agrees: "I think it needs more careful exploration. There's an opportunity through the debate on the white paper to give people more sense of what the practices might do."

#### CARE PLACEMENTS

Good commissioning is vital to providing good-quality care placements, according to the white paper.

The Government has already started pilots of regional commissioning units to see how local authorities can work together to find the most suitable placements for looked-after children. The units will give local authorities a choice of placements tailored to meet the child's needs.

National occupational standards for service commissioners will also be developed. The legal framework will be tightened to ensure no children can be placed outside of an authority unless it is in the child's best interests.

Holmes says: "There is a strong emphasis on giving children in care a sense of permanence and stability."

The white paper contains a number of proposals on foster care, including the revision of the national minimum standards for foster and residential care and a requirement that fostering services publish details of their payment structures.

But Robert Tapsfield, chief executive of the Fostering Network, says: "The white paper fails to address registration of foster carers, although this was originally in the green paper. The omission of such an important policy is very disappointing."

Other proposals include pilots of social pedagogues in residential care, based on those already used in other European countries, and giving Ofsted the power to tell residential care providers how to address failures to comply with regulatory requirements.

## OTHER PROPOSALS

The white paper outlines plans for each local authority to set up a "children in care council" that will give looked-after children a forum where they can make their views known to directors of children's services.

These plans have been welcomed by professionals. Coughlan said the plans are "fantastic". Harris says: "Ensuring that we have a good framework in which we listen to the views of children in care is particularly important."

The white paper also outlines plans to allow young people to remain with foster carers up to the age of 21. Will McMahon, chair of the Care Leavers' Association, says: "Why a pilot is required to assess whether foster parent support is needed up to the age of 21 is beyond us - this is not rocket science. Young people should be able to stay in care for longer, just like most other young people who live with their parents."

Up to the age of 25, care leavers will also be entitled to the support of an adviser, if they are in education or wish to return to education. However, there were areas that professionals felt had been neglected.

Tickell says: "The paper was disappointingly silent on youth justice, unaccompanied asylum-seekers and the role of the voluntary sector."

Additional reporting by Shafik Meghji WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The DfES is now looking to introduce the legislative and regulatory framework as soon as it can, although there is no clear time frame.

In terms of funding, there will be £13.5m in 2007/08 with a total Government package of £305m over the next four years.

The Government will also introduce a partnership approach across statutory and voluntary sectors to help achieve the white paper's aims. It also has plans to work with the private sector to help increase opportunities for children in care.

Work on many of the pilot schemes is ongoing, with others due to start between now and the end of 2008.

## INTERVIEW

### Birth of a new approach

Children's minister Beverley Hughes has been the driving force behind the Care Matters: Time for Change white paper and has devoted much of her time at the Department for Education and Skills to getting it right.

Speaking at last week's launch she compared the work to having a baby - being with it from gestation until the birth of the final product. She is passionate about the paper achieving what it has set out to do. She says: "What we have all had to realise is that this isn't something that will get better on its own if we keep doing it the way we have always done."

So dedicated are the team that has devised the paper, she says, that there are more than 100 changes compared with the green paper published in October last year.

"How we have changed from the green paper is a measure of how we were listening in the consultation. A lot of these proposals are from what we heard from young people themselves and their families."

Outlining the plans, Hughes talks about how local authorities will have a duty to provide stable and good-quality placements, and how children will have more time with their social workers and more stability in the best schools.

She says a lack of good-quality placements often forces local authorities to move children. There will now be a presumption on local authorities not to place a child outside their area, she adds. Authorities that do place a child outside their area will need to demonstrate to a high level why it is in the best interests of the child.

Other plans include a duty on social workers to visit and talk to children when they are alone and the just-announced regional commissioning pilots, which will look at working together to deliver better placements and value for money (Children Now, 20-26 June).

"We need to pilot everything we do for children in care and hold it to account. We need to open up opportunities for children in care as any parent would do," she says.

Talking about the more controversial issue of social work practices, she says they would have the day-to-day responsibility for a child and she believes the practices are worth trying out. She says: "I am prepared to try anything that will make a difference."

The finer points of how these practices will work are yet to be established and Hughes hopes the pilots will be able to define their function. "We're breaking new ground, a lot of detail about how they will be set up and work, and any other issues, need to be developed and worked through."

She believes the paper has addressed all it can on the issue of health since the Department of Health is still waiting for the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review, but this will be revisited once funding has been confirmed.

"There's a strong recommendation that after the Comprehensive Spending Review there will be a much stronger focus on health and that's going to have an impact on children in care as a specific group," she says.

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