

## **Advocacy for Looked After Children and Children in Need Conference**

*13 November 2006*

Rt Hon Hilary Armstrong MP

### **ADVOCACY FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN**

Delighted to be here – at a Conference which is important and timely in three particular respects:

Our recent Green Paper ‘Care Matters’, focussing on improving the support we offer to all looked after children;

The current movement on public service reform – looking for new ways to involve individuals in the services they use in the next decade;

And in the context of our renewed focus on Social Exclusion. Action Plan published in September set out a strategy for reaching out to the 2.5% who remain excluded in context of overall prosperity.

And the idea that brings all of these together is VOICE – creating opportunities for everybody – but particularly the groups we are still failing to reach – to express their views and meaningfully shape the services we provide for them.

This is where ADVOCACY for Looked After Children/Vulnerable children comes in.

Why is this so important? Because despite investment over the last nine years, Children in Care remain one of the groups who are still particularly vulnerable to exclusion and to poor outcomes:

A third will end up not in education, employment or training between the ages of 16-19;

Only 6% will go to university compared to 30% nationally;

And young women leaving care are three times more likely to become pregnant.

So there's no excuse for not listening to these young people when they tell us how the system could work better. We talk about the state as corporate parent – we have a responsibility to push for education, care and support for them of the same quality we would want for our own children. Eg 'This is not a suitcase campaign' – would we allow our own children to move house with a bin liner?

At their best ADVOCATES can be a way of offering young people in care something more like a real parent.

Someone who can not only listen to them and act pre-emptively on their behalf if problems arise but somebody who will argue on behalf of the child, not the system.

And just as important, challenge them to be ambitious for themselves. When doing focus groups for Green Paper, many LAC said "Nobody's ever asked us what we thought before". This has got to change – in line with our overall approach to providing public services – need to be much more focussed on those who actually use and experiencing them.

This is why GP set out proposals to revitalise the INDEPENDENT VISITOR scheme – provide 'independent advocate' who can argue powerfully on behalf of young person, challenge and encourage him/her, especially at

pivotal transition points (eg transfer to secondary school). (Importance of advocacy also set out in SEAP).

1. 'Friend for life idea' – children in care always tell us they want stability – while we try to tackle frequent movement between placements, looked after children could have a responsible adult to befriend and support them as soon as they enter the system.

Link to pedagogy (mention visit to Denmark) – high quality workforce important in residential care which is why GP set out a new framework of skills.

This is important not just for children in care but for CARE-LEAVING SERVICES too – all young people in and around the system.

2. But when we come to assess these residential/foster settings etc, why not involvement young people in care/care leavers by giving them the opportunity to give their own views on how these services work well, or could be better? We want to involve all other groups much more closely in shaping services – even more reason to do so with LAC, up till now such a disenfranchised group. This was an idea raised by a care leaver when a group came to meet the PM last month – I would like us to look at making it common practice.

And we should take this further still by involving young people in COMMISSIONING – ensuring that we use their experiences in securing the best services in the future.

Already lots of good practice – eg 'Investing in Children' in my own area. Praised by OFSTED for offering advocacy/voice to children with disabilities and traveller children. Challenge is to highlight these examples working well and promote them to include LAC.

But also intervention – we have a duty to come in where this is not happening effectively at local level. The SEAP spells out how we want to support effective service providers, but intervene where they are under-performing.

## Conclusion

No exaggeration to say state should be judged on whether we succeed or fail for these young people. Let's up the stakes and be as ambitious for them as we are for our own children – and as we want them to be for themselves.

**ENDS**