

Staffordshire's Commissioner for Children

Annual Report 2006-2007



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Contents

	Page No:
Introduction	2
Overview	3
Key Characteristics of the Commissioner's Role	4
Progress 2006/07	5
Conclusions	11
Appendix 1	13

INTRODUCTION

This inaugural report will detail how Staffordshire's Commissioner for Children is achieving the targets and objectives of the Every Child Matters Change for Children Agenda; the Children Act 2004; the Children and Young People's Plan and the Local Area Agreement, in ensuring that the views of children and young people are embedded into the planning, commissioning and delivery of services.

Public services and the way that they are delivered are changing; ascertaining the public's wants and needs is a pre-requisite and this includes asking children and young people. Indeed, an integral part of the Children Act 2004 is that Local Authorities are required to work closely with partners and consult with children and young people over their plans and services.

By April 2006 it was mandatory for all Local Authorities to produce a 'Children and Young People's Plan', outlining how they would deliver services in order to meet the five outcomes from the every child matters agenda, i.e., that children in their area will:

❖ Be Healthy ❖ Stay Safe ❖ Enjoy & Achieve ❖ Make a Positive contribution ❖ Achieve Economic Well Being

Staffordshire's Children and Young People's Plan is the delivery plan for the children's block of the Local Area Agreement.

OVERVIEW

Staffordshire has a population of almost 200,000 0-19 year olds and a multiplicity of agencies who work with children and young people. Staffordshire Children's Trust has been set up to improve the well-being of children and young people, and to achieve the targets and objectives of the Every Child Matters Change for Children Agenda. The Children's Trust includes representatives from all organisations working with children, both statutory and independent (Health, Social Care, Education, Connexions, Voluntary and Community Sector). It has a small Board, an Executive Group, and a number of under pinning agreements which includes a Wider Partnership Group.

The Commissioner works on behalf of the Children's Trust Board to take a high profile position in raising awareness of the views and interests of Staffordshire's children and young people, in line with the Government's reforms of children's services set out in the Children Act 2004. The voice of children and young people is represented throughout the Trust via the Children's Commissioner. The Commissioner has responsibility for actively seeking the views of children and young people about issues that affect them, including the planning of services for them, ensuring that those in positions of power and influence are aware of their views and that they can then translate them into action.

The Commissioner facilitates the Children and Young People's Participation Sub-Group, a work stream of the Executive Group. Either personally or electronically the commissioner represents children and young people at the following:

- ❖ Children's Trust Board
- ❖ Corporate Parenting Panel
- ❖ Executive Group (Integrated Strategy Group)
- ❖ Safeguarding Children Board
- ❖ Leaders' Advisory Body
- ❖ Community & Learning Partnership Project Board
- ❖ Anti Bullying Strategic Group
- ❖ 14+ Strategic Partnership
- ❖ County Behaviour Strategy Group
- ❖ Service Delivery Network, Staffordshire's Consortium of Infrastructure Organisations
- ❖ Partners in Paediatrics

Key Characteristics of the Role of the Commissioner

Key characteristics of the role of the Commissioner are to:

- Ensure the commitment of the Trust, elected members and senior managers across partner agencies whose decisions and actions affect children's lives, ensuring they are made aware of the views and interests of children and young people.
- Lead in co-ordinating the current arrangements for involving children and young people across the services in Staffordshire and to analyse existing policies and processes used to engage children and young people.
- Develop policies and strategies which facilitate the participation of children and young people in the planning, delivery and monitoring of children's services.
- Consult with children and young people.
- Work collaboratively with colleagues within the Children & Lifelong Learning Directorate, other partner agencies, children and young people, in setting priorities and local targets for their future involvement.
- Create effective mechanisms and processes for ensuring the views of children and young people are channelled into the planning processes for appropriate children's services and to monitor their effectiveness.
- Ensure the equal involvement of all groups of children and young people and to ensure that their views are incorporated into all children's strategies.
- Utilise and support research to inform people working with children and young people and to develop models of good practice identified in other areas.
- Work with a wide variety of other bodies to promote the effective delivery of services for children and young people, including County and district/borough councils; voluntary organisations; local businesses and local media.
- Develop strong links with England's Commissioner for Children, to inform local practice and input into the National agenda on behalf of Staffordshire Children's Trust Board.

PROGRESS 2006/07

Media Campaign: to raise public and professionals' awareness of role of the Children's Commissioner:

- Presenting at a wide array of arenas to raise the profile of the post and the issues that affect children and young people;
- Press releases in: The Sentinel, Staffordshire Newsletter, 0-19, Young People Now, Educ8 and Family Life in Staffordshire;
- Dedicated web site and monthly blog entry.

Children and Young People's Participation Network: a bi-monthly meeting of all professionals who undertake participation work with children and young people: Terms of reference Appendix 1.

- Establishing what forums for consultation currently exist;
- Establishing which forums work well/what don't work so well;
- Developing networks;
- Sharing good practice;
- Identifying research;
- Raising awareness of issues for children and young people;
- Location of forums;
- Examining consistency of approach used.

Framework for Participation: to ensure a consistent approach to children and young people's participation, a framework has been written and can be viewed on the web site: <http://www.staffordshirechildrenstrust.org.uk>;

- A 'children's champion' has been nominated by each agency;
- A 'participation pledge' has been signed by all Trust Board members to publicly demonstrate their commitment to the participation processes.

Staffordshire's Children & Young People's Plan: the children's commissioner has responsibility as the outcome lead to ensure that children and young people are able to make a positive contribution:

- Facilitation of workshops to simplify and produce 'child friendly' versions of the plan; (cited in Office of the Children's Commissioner 'Children and Young People's Plans: A review of the first year' November 2006).
- Two versions produced - written by young people, for young people - with a questionnaire to inform this year's refresh. (Almost 200 returns)
- Ipod prize draw selected by young people as incentive for completing and returning questionnaire;
- Countywide distribution of these versions to all partner agencies, including all middle and secondary schools; (offering the potential to reach almost 100,000 young people).
- Versions for children with disabilities and a version for primary school aged young children drafted – awaiting print;
- 2007/08 priority - to secure the active involvement of children and young people. Core group of professionals committed to supporting this have agreed an action plan to ensure this happens in future updates.

Shadow Trust Board: of children and young people is making slow but steady progress, in order to share their views with the Children's Trust Board:

- Children and young people will be members of a central shadow trust board for a period of twelve months;
- For a sixth month period, the shadow trust board will be actively involved in auditing and inputting into the Children and Young People's Plan;
- The shadow trust board will begin to formally report to the Children's Trust Board in February 2008, but will raise issues that affect them on a quarterly basis via the Children's Commissioner;
- District shadow boards are at varying stages of development; but it is anticipated issues will be considered concurrently with the central board
- Since younger children aged 8-13 years are underrepresented in the usual forums, a third sector organisation facilitated the first of several district wide 'development days'. From these, strong links with the various district forums will develop
- A central shadow trust board, district shadow trust boards and district wide forums for younger children should result in wider participation.

Links with 11 Million, Office of Professor Albert Aynsley Green, England's Commissioner for Children:

- Three meetings with the above office have led to Staffordshire's direct involvement in developing networks nationally with other 'children's champions'. Staffordshire's commissioner has easy access to this Office.
- Staffordshire's Children and Young people's Plan was one of twenty selected by the Office of the Children's Commissioner to be part of an initial audit of plans.

'Hear by Right' standards: are nationally recognised standards for the active involvement of children and young people.

These standards will underpin all future participation work undertaken on behalf of the Trust:

- Staffordshire Children's Trust Board Members have signed the Participation Pledge, agreeing to adopt these standards;
- Standards currently adopted by two partner agencies, but used effectively by only one;
- Members of children's planning network have undertaken training in the use of these standards;
- Action plan for Children and Young People's Participation Sub Group formulated, using the standards;
- Staffordshire's Children and Young People's Plan to be audited against these standards;
- Training to be offered to all district trust boards;
- Agreement has been reached that an additional two agencies will 'sign up' to using these standards in 2007/08;
- Action planning for Staffordshire's schools to be offered training to adopt these standards from September 2007.

Employment of vulnerable young people: following a direct approach to the Commissioner by a care leaver, this young person was provided with an employment opportunity. Over a period of twelve weeks in Sept '06, work included:

- Facilitation and development of the young people's version of the C&YPP;
- Seeking views of looked after children regarding the complaints system;
- Awareness raising of staff regarding the employment of young people;
- Work based experience in a variety of settings.

'Big Bruvver' diary room: For many agencies, the young people 'hanging about on the street' are often one of the hardest groups to reach. In order to be inclusive and broaden participation, the idea to use the momentum of Channel 4's 'Big Brother' reality show was conceived by the Children and Young People's Participation Sub Group.

Aims: to engage with this specific group and encourage them to participate in their local community:

- To ascertain their views about local services;
- To determine where there may be gaps in provision;
- To trial a different method of engaging with young people;
- To raise public and professional awareness of the issues that impact on this particular group of young people;
- To improve facilities in the local area for teenagers.

Utilising the current momentum from Channel 4's Big Brother show, young people are invited into a mobile diary room (a Fire service mobile 'incident unit') where they have one minute to have their say. Following initial pilot projects in the Biddulph, Cheadle and Burntwood areas; further events have taken place at Blythe Bridge and Newcastle-Under-Lyme.

Common issues are:

- Lack of services for young people aged 16-18;
- Section 30 ('curfew' legislation) – impacts greatly on young people;
- No where to go, nothing to do – particularly somewhere well-lit/safe/warm;
- Leisure facilities too expensive;
- More leisure activities/variety wanted;
- Availability and expense of public transport;
- More youth clubs needed;
- More 'things to do' needed on a Friday/Saturday night.

A small project group has met once and the youth service is now leading on the countywide roll out of this project, which has shown that potentially 'hard to reach' groups are not so; with a little innovation young people are eager to engage.

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Transportation of children and young people to prison: a small multi agency working party aims to change the current practice of transporting children in unsuitable vehicles that provide no seat belts, no food, water, ventilation, toilet facilities or 'comfort' stops, by:

- A snapshot survey to ascertain the views of young people who have recently been transported in this way;
- Raising awareness at a national level, to England's Commissioner for Children and the Minister for Children & Families;
- Offering the opportunity to providers of this service to change their current practice;
- Formally complaining to the Youth Justice Board (YJB) who commissions this service, that this is a safeguarding issue.

Youth justice, anti-social behaviour, ASBO's, Section 30 orders, the mosquito device and the media: young people are over represented in the statistics for Anti-Social Behaviour Orders issued across Staffordshire. Section 30 'dispersal orders' provide a legislative framework within which the Police have powers to disperse groups of young people. The mosquito device is a sonic device that emits a high frequency sound, allegedly only audible by teenagers. This is designed to cause such discomfort that the young people disperse, without consideration of the root cause of the problem, moving them on. Negative media coverage can result in young people being labelled and not being valued in their local community.

- Commissioner will continue to challenge these methods of policing where appropriate;
- Commissioner to seek a firm commitment to end the use of the mosquito device, particularly by partner agencies;
- Tentative meetings have begun, with partners, to formalise a campaign to counter the negative portrayal of teenagers by Staffordshire's media.

CONCLUSIONS

Staffordshire's Children's Trust publicly declared its commitment to valuing the contribution of children and young people when it became one of the first Counties to appoint a Commissioner for Children. Since taking up position in March 2006, this new and innovative role has progressed and is embedded across the Trust partnerships.

Considerable progress has been made over the last twelve months by the establishment of the Children and Young People's Participation Sub Group, a committed core group of professionals. This group has been fundamental in enabling the Commissioner to meet her wide range of duties and to have oversight and influence across the Trust.

The Children and Young People's Plan is in its second refresh, yet participation of Staffordshire's children and young people has been patchy and consultation often retrospective. However, with a strong action plan now in place, the Commissioner is confident that for future editions the active involvement of children and young people is secured.

For 2007/08, the Commissioner intends to prioritise the following areas of work:

- To continue to increase the number of children and young people who are actively involved in 'making a positive contribution'
- Further developing the Children and Young People's Participation Sub Group, to formulate an agreed twelve month work plan; this will include the development of an employment strategy for the most vulnerable groups of young people;

- Establishing a strong central shadow trust board, working closely with district shadow trust boards and other forums, including school councils;
- Ensuring that future edition of the Children and Young People's Plan have the active involvement of children and young people and that the priorities within the plan are as a result of genuine dialogue, feedback and needs analysis;
- Supporting partner agencies including schools, to adopt and use the Hear by Right Standards.

Other areas of work, as detailed on pages 4–9 will be ongoing but secondary to the above.

Gill Stanford
Commissioner for Children
June 2007

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference: Children & Young People's Participation Sub-Group

Aim:	Maintain, safeguard and contribute to the development of the Children & Young People's Plan
Objectives:	To attend Children & Young People's Participation Sub-Group To work in partnerships and share good practice Work towards the implementation of Article 12 UNCR (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child)* www.unicef.org/uk/tz/resources/resource_item.asp?id=32 Promote the use of the 'Hear by Right' Standards across agencies
Governance:	Reporting to Children's Trust Board Responsible to Shadow Trust Board
Responsibilities:	To feedback information from Children & Young People's Participation Sub-Group to own agency (their responsibility) and vice versa An individual responsibility to represent the views of Children & Young People; an advocate for their wants and needs
Membership:	See list of Members Required to attend at least three meetings per annum Six representatives for meeting to be quorate
Meeting:	Bi-monthly Administration will be undertaken by Children & Lifelong Learning, Children's Commissioner to feed back to and from the Shadow Trust Board.

* "Children & young people have the right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken in to account".