Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday, 20 November 2012

Meeting with People First (Scotland) Parents’ Group – Note of meeting

1. As part of its inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care, on Tuesday 20 November 2012 the Committee met four members of the People First (Scotland) Parents’ Group. This is a support group for parents with learning difficulties.

2. The meeting was facilitated by Jane Lewis, People First (Scotland)’s National Development Worker.

3. The following is a note of specific points that were made by members of the Group during the meeting—

   **Support for parents**

   - There is a need for ongoing, consistent support from pre-birth until the child reaches adulthood. Currently the level of support is reliant on good individual relationships. It was felt that this support should be flexible, from the start, ongoing, trusting, consistent and non-judgmental;
   - in the Group’s experience, there is currently a lack of support for parents (for example ongoing parenting support as well as support with bills and reading official correspondence);
   - the Group felt that parents with learning disabilities are not given a high enough priority by professionals, some of whom are not responsive to their specific needs;
   - Concerns were raised about documentation from schools not being available in accessible formats such as large print and simple language (eg homework assignments, letters) and about the lack of provision for parents who cannot read;
   - it would be more helpful if professionals could ask parents what they need rather than making assumptions;
   - Particular concerns were raised about the amount of support from social workers and their level of experience;
   - It was noted that, in some cases, social work support is only available once every two weeks;
• Parents should receive support to improve their own literacy;
• In general better support earlier would be more appropriate, and would save money on foster care and residential units;
• It was noted that there is still stigma around receiving social work support and that there is a challenge for society as a whole to change this perception;

Different agencies

• Concerns were raised that social workers and schools do not always communicate effectively with each other. It was, however, acknowledged that, this can vary from school to school;
• It was noted that a professional trained in working with children will not necessarily be skilled in working with adults. The Group thought this ought to be taken into account by agencies when training staff;
• It was also acknowledged that social workers have large caseloads and that what is considered to be intensive support by children and families professionals is not as intensive as it should be;
• People First (Scotland) is currently campaigning to have all GIRFEC care plans made available in easy read format;
• There were mixed views about the level of support by healthcare workers, with the general feeling that learning disability nurses provided a high level of support but that other elements of healthcare support were not as good;
• Concerns were raised that there is a perception that parents with learning difficulties are more likely to have their children removed than parents with drug misuse problems;
• Concerns were expressed that children and families social workers were not aware of easy read material and the good practice guidelines for supporting parents with learning disabilities;
• Members of the Group compared the treatment of parents with learning disabilities with the treatment of people with physical disabilities, arguing that attitudes that would be deemed unacceptable if adopted towards parents with physical disabilities were taken towards parents with learning disabilities;
• A concern was expressed that there is currently a divide between support given to parents (eg with housing) by one local authority department and support given to children by another. The Group felt that this ought to be more joined-up.

Children’s Hearings

• Although panel members are generally perceived as being helpful, going to a children’s hearing (or a child protection meeting) can be very daunting for someone with learning difficulties (partly due to the number of people in the room), and not many panel members have an awareness of the needs of parents with learning difficulties;
• It would be helpful if information provided for children’s hearings could be more accessible and provided earlier;
• Having easier access to advocacy/lawyers would also be helpful;
• The Group would prefer it if there were greater consistency among panel members (they rarely see the same panel member twice);
• Issues around permanence were raised. Particular concerns were expressed that children’s hearings tend to favour removal from the family home over the provision of ongoing support;

General

• The Group argued that the experience of parents with learning difficulties is broadly the same across the country;
• The Group was concerned that there is a general lack of joined up thinking between agencies and local authority departments and that there is a need for better communication;
• In this context, concerns were raised that some professionals are not aware of best practice guidelines for supporting parents with learning disabilities;
• When asked what one change they would make to the system to improve it, the Group provided the following thoughts—
  o there is a need for more accepting attitudes towards parents with learning difficulties;
  o there is a need for professionals and children’s hearings to think more about what would work best for the child and the family;
  o money should not be an issue;
  o more support for parents who are unable to read would be helpful;
  o more advocacy is required.