

## **Child Care & Disability Directorate**

### **Introduction**

Family and Child Care services occupy a unique position in the social services by virtue of the range of statutory powers and duties which direct and inform the provision of services.

### **Point of entry**

The Directorate does not provide a universal service as does, for example, health visiting and deals only with cases which are referred to it. These referrals could be received from individuals or their families, or usually from a variety of professionals. The fact that somebody is referred to the Child Care Directorate indicates either they or another agency perceived that they have some difficulty at that particular time. The referrals generally come in to one of the 10 fieldwork teams where the team leader will make an assessment of the referral with regard to the urgency and this will be allocated according to that assessment to one of the qualified social workers in the team.

In accordance with the Children Order, any child referred to the Directorate must be assessed as to whether or not they are “a child in need” - this being the legal terminology. The criteria to be met under Child in Need is so wide it counts for virtually all referrals.

If a child is assessed as having been in need the Trust has a legal responsibility to provide services to meet that child’s needs. These may be provided directly by the Trust, or by services funded by the Trust, for example, the NSPCC Children’s Centre, Contact Youth.

The services provided can range from low-level support such as payment for a place in a playgroup to intensive intervention to protect children. All work in relation to child protection is in accordance with the Regional Policies and Procedures, which were launched in 2005.

It is also a legal requirement that we maintain a child protection register which is available for enquiries. We have an IT link up with the A & E Department in the local hospitals, therefore, selected members of staff can interrogate this to find out if someone is on the register. It gives them no more information than that if the answer is yes then they must come through the formal system.

We should note all enquiries to the register. The Director of Child Care is the Custodian of the Child Protection Register on behalf of the Trust.

### **Court Proceedings**

Social Workers become involved in the lives of families and individuals and can wield considerable power in so doing. They are required, both professionally and legally, to keep this intervention and invasion to a minimum and within child care it is clear that no legal Order should be sought if there is any other solution. This in legal terms is known as the ‘No Order’ principle.

When considering legal action the social workers must consider a range of possible options open to them starting with the least invasive.

Legal advice must be sought at all times and it is only after numerous and lengthy court appearances and considerable interrogation of the residents that the Trust social worker will be granted a Care Order. This gives the Trust considerable legal responsibilities but parents will generally retain some parental responsibility and it is imperative that staff work with parents to as great an extent as possible. It is at this point that the Trust Board's responsibility as Corporate Parents links with the work of the staff.

In considering how children who cannot be looked after by their own parents may be cared for, the Trust will always consider extended family first. In the absence of suitable family members the options will be foster care, residential care or in some cases, adoption.

### **Looked After Children**

Children who are subject to Care Orders, or indeed accommodated by the Trust on a voluntary basis, are subject to all the legal constraints and terms of Looked After Children (LAC). This specifies very clearly the reviewing timescale, who should chair reviews (a grade higher than senior social worker) who attends such reviews, the agenda for such reviews, the timescales for minutes going out, care planning written up and reviewed. This allows for no deviation and therefore absorbs a great deal of staff time. The Regulations in relation to this are set down in the guidance provided with the Children Order which comprises 6 books.

The Trust is legally liable for looking after young people who have been in the care system and the leaving and after care covers this.

We are also charged with finding appropriate placements for children who cannot be looked after by their parents. This is done both through residential units, directly provided by us, or residential places funded by us. The requirements in relation to these have just been renewed under the new Health Improvement Agency and are very specific. The units are inspected regularly, both through announced and unannounced inspections in relation to some of these standards and again children resident in these units are subject to all the LAC regulations.

### **Fostering and Adoption**

We also are charged with finding alternative parents for children. This we do through recruiting foster carers, recruiting adoptive parents and more increasingly recruiting what we call concurrent carers, those who are duly approved as foster parents and adopters. This means ideally when a child's future is uncertain, we place them with such carers, knowing that if rehabilitation does not take place, and the child is ultimately adopted, they will not have to move. Homefirst was at the forefront of such a development and in fact we are now 'the gold standard for the rest of Northern Ireland' following the Adopting Best Practice – Inspection of adoption services.

## **Early Years**

We are legally required to register childminders, renewing this registration on a yearly basis, registering and inspecting playgroups and day nurseries. This is a large piece of work with a great deal of beaurocracy attached and there is a constant backlog, certainly in terms of the childminding regulations. There are a number of very large day nurseries in the Trust area, which are run on a profit-making basis. There are obvious tensions between achieving quality day care for children and acknowledging that people can legitimately wish to make a profit from this business.

By law we must maintain a record of registered childminders which is available to the public.

## **Special Needs**

The Child Care Directorate also provides a very comprehensive service to families with children who have special needs. They come within the legal definition of children in need and therefore we are legally required to meet their needs. This can be through advice about benefits, aids, facilities and much of this is in conjunction with our Community Health colleagues. We also provide a respite service for families to enable them to continue to provide quality care for their children. This may be respite in a unit such as Whitehaven, Cherry Lodge or Hugomount, or family based respite with specifically recruited and approved carers. The assessment process for such carers is similar to the fostering process and they must meet the same legal requirements in terms of safety, vetting etc.