

THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA

SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE -13TH SEPTEMBER 2000

REPORT BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HOUSING AND SOCIAL SERVICES

THE WATERHOUSE INQUIRY - CHILD ABUSE IN NORTH WALES

The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of the Government's response to the findings of the Waterhouse Inquiry which investigated allegations of child abuse in North Wales. The report also informs the Committee of the action taken by the Department in response to the report.

FOR INFORMATION

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 On 17th June 1996 the Secretary of State for Wales, the Right Honourable William Hague M.P., informed the House of Commons of the Government's decision that there should be a Judicial Inquiry into the alleged abuse of children in care in the former County Council areas of Gwynned and Clwyd since 1974.
- 1.2 Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report, 'Lost in Care' was published on 15th February 2000. The Committee was informed of the Report's main findings and recommendations at its meeting on 15th March 2000.

2. 'LEARNING THE LESSONS' - THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE WATERHOUSE INQUIRY

2. 'Learning the Lessons', the Government's response to Sir Ronald Waterhouse's Inquiry was published on 29th June 2000. 'Learning the Lessons' sets out the Government's response to each of the recommendations in turn. Some recommendations are directed at central Government, or are specific to Wales, but 57 apply directly or indirectly to social services departments in England. Overall the Government has welcomed the report and reiterated its determination to improve safeguards for children.
- 2.2 The Government has accepted most of the Inquiry's recommendations, although in some instances it has rejected the specific mechanism for achieving a particular end while agreeing with the spirit of the recommendation. For example it rejected a recommendation for minimum statutory requirements for social work visits to children in residential care on

grounds of cost. The Government favours compliance with existing Children Act (1989) Guidance.

- 2.3 In many instances the Government points to action already taken or planned which it believes is sufficient to address the recommendation. The main initiatives referred to are Quality Protects, the revised Working Together document, the Care Standards Bill, the Children (Leaving Care) Bill, the Performance Assessment Framework and the Assessment Framework. There are also many references to existing guidance and regulations under the Children Act (1989) and other relevant legislation.

3. INITIAL ACTIONS WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT

- 3.1 A number of the Waterhouse Report's main recommendations are already addressed within the Department's existing policies and procedures.

For children and young people looked after by this Council, these include: -

- A climate of openness in the Council's own establishments.
- The existence of free, widely publicised helplines for young people.
- A greater awareness and training of staff in all key agencies as to the possibility of abuse taking place in both foster and residential homes.
- Regular inspection of private, voluntary and local authority residential homes including unannounced visits.
- Contact between children and members of their birth families is promoted unless there is specific exclusion by a Court.
- Looked after children receive an annual medical.
- Recruitment of residential staff adheres in most respects to the guidance recommended by Sir William Utting in "Choosing with Care".
- A widely publicised statutory complaints procedure for children and young people living away from home. All looked after children and young people are given information about how to complain at the start of their placements.
- Provision of an independent advocacy service for looked after children and young people.
- A review system for looked after children which focuses on the child or young person's views about their placement and contact with their family.
- Rigorous police and local authority checks on staff and foster carers upon appointment.
- On-going training for staff, particularly in relation to child protection and listening to children and young people's views.
- The establishment of the posts of Reviewing Officer and Effective Placements Officer which help ensure children and young people receive high quality residential care.
- An agreed inter-disciplinary and inter-agency protocol for investigating concerns.
- Foster Carer referees are personally interviewed by staff.

- 3.2 Officers are focusing attention on the recommendations which indicate the need to review practice and procedures in relation to complaints, serious allegations against staff and the Whistle-blowing policy. In addition, the Area Child Protection Committee is reviewing procedures for investigating allegations against staff of all agencies.

4. LISTENING TO CHILDREN

- 4.1 The Waterhouse Inquiry has highlighted the importance of ensuring councils listen to children effectively. This is being addressed within the Quality Protects Management Action Plan. Officers are working to commission a more proactive advocacy service for looked after children to assist young people in making their views known to staff.
- 4.2 The Department is currently working with a group of three looked after young people reviewing the current young people's complaints leaflet and is consulting with other young people about systems which would make it easier for them to make their views heard. Members will be informed about the results of this work in due course.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The Social Services Committee is recommended to note the contents of this report

FOR INFORMATION

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Executive Director of Housing and Social Services

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report

Lost in Care - 15th February 2000

Learning the Lessons - 29th June 2000

Officer contact

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