



Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State

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To: Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members

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Dear Colleagues,

Follow Up to the Care Matters Ministerial Stocktake Report and Conference

I am writing to you with my reflections about what I learned from the Stocktake process and from young people who took part in the Stocktake event; and on what needs to happen now to ensure the quality of life of children and young people in care continues to improve, and that the progress being made for them is sustained and accelerated.

Naturally, the young people who helped to make the Stocktake Conference such a success were clear that they wanted their corporate parents to consult them on the big issues which matter to them, such as where they should live and go to school, and when they should leave care.

Like any other child or young person, they also wanted to be consulted on more routine matters, such as pocket money, bedtimes, and food. They said that a really effective way of consulting them collectively is via Children in Care Councils, which the majority of local authorities already have or are in the process of setting up. **We expect all local authorities to establish a Children in Care Council during 2010, if you have not done so already.**

I was surprised and disappointed that at the Stocktake conference, young people raised continuing concern about two everyday issues on which we have already made the Government's position absolutely clear – through Guidance and through other communications too.

The first is about giving black bin liners to children and young people to transport their belongings when they move placements. They have said repeatedly that they find this practice humiliating and degrading, as I am sure we can all readily appreciate.

The second is about the parents of friends with whom children in care have overnight stays being required to have a CRB check. This approach immediately singles out children in care as 'different' and gets in the way of them developing and enjoying friendships like their peers. It is therefore



children, schools and families

profoundly unhelpful, as well as unnecessary. Like parents, carers should be expected to use their good judgement to take account of any risks and to make sensible decisions in each individual case.

I thought that both practices had now entirely ceased but children at the Stocktake event reported that they still continue in some places, so please can you **check** what happens in your authority and, if necessary, take immediate action to ensure such bad practice stops.

Over the next year we will be asking the Children's Rights Director to talk to children and young people across the country about their experiences in these respects, and I hope they will report that these approaches have been well and truly consigned to the past.

Strong Corporate Parents

Overall, the Stocktake report shows that outcomes for children in care are steadily improving and I want to acknowledge the hard work and commitment that lies behind this progress. However, we need to go further and faster, as the gap between children in care and their peers is still much too big, and rates of progress are highly variable between different authorities, including between those with apparently similar circumstances and care populations.

As Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members you are crucial in leading positive change for children in care – both within your authority and across your Children's Trust. At the Care Matters conference some delegates asked us to re-issue an updated list of questions Lead Members should be asking their officers to help them to discharge their corporate parenting responsibilities effectively; this is attached.

Virtual School Heads

In August we published the evaluation of our pilots on virtual school heads (VSH), which showed that where a senior manager in an authority rigorously monitors and champions attainment, it has a real impact on the educational attainment of children in care. **Across the country, the majority of local authorities have now appointed a VSH and we would ask all to do so by Easter 2010.** To support the creation of this role we have provided funding in the Care Matters Grant, which forms part of the Area Based Grant.

From Care2Work Programme

Earlier this year I launched the *From Care2Work* programme, which is being run by the National Care Advisory Service, with funding from Government. Under this excellent programme 30 national employers, including this Department, have already signed up to provide individual career pathways and employment opportunities for care leavers. I'm delighted that 131 local authorities have joined the programme to date; **if your authority has not yet signed up I would strongly encourage you to act now and in any case to do so by the end of January 2010**, since it is clear that *From Care2Work* is

making a real difference to the young people who are taking part.

I recognise that there is considerable pressure on children's services, but I am sure you will agree that it is crucial that we continue to make progress in improving the lives of children in care. We know that these most vulnerable children and young people can and will achieve if we give them the right support. It is up to all of us to ensure that this happens.

I have asked Delyth Morgan, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children, Young People and Families, to look at progress in improving support for looked after children. She will be writing in the new year to those authorities which are performing least well on a range of indicators for looked after children, to ask what their plans are for listening to children and young people in their care and acting on their views.

If you were unable to attend the Stocktake conference you can see a short extract of the Q&A session with the young people at www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/childrenincare

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ed Balls'.

ED BALLS MP

QUESTIONS FOR COUNCILLORS TO ASK ON CHILDREN IN CARE

All Councillors - whether Cabinet members or backbenchers - should receive regular reports on children in care. The following is a list of questions that members should ask of their authority.

General

- How many children are in the care of our authority?
- What is their ethnic and cultural background?
- Has your authority set high aspirations for their outcomes and is progress regularly reviewed using both quantitative and qualitative data?
- Have you developed a strategy for commissioning children's services in partnership with health, and other local agencies?
- Have the authority set up a Children in Care Council and does the Director and Lead Member regularly attend its meetings?
- Does the authority set an annual Pledge on how it will improve its services to children in care?
- Do all children have an allocated social worker?
- How does the authority ensure children's views are taken into account of decisions that affect their lives?
- Do all children have a named Independent Reviewing officer? who has the skills and authority to challenge decisions on their behalf?
- Are children allowed to take part in normal and age appropriate peer activities as would normally be granted by the parent to their peers?
- Are children encouraged and enabled to make and sustain friendships with children of their own age, including being able to stay overnight in friends households based on a reasonable assessment of risk (but without the requirement for CRB checks) in line with Government guidance?

Placements

- What type of placement are children in - foster care, residential homes or secure units?
- How does the authority ensure emergency placements are only made in exceptional circumstances?
- How many placement moves have children had in a year? Is the number who move 3 or more times a year reducing?
- How many out of authority placements are made?
- How does the authority assess and review the quality of placements etc?
- Are regular reviews held to ensure the placements are working well?
- Is there a strong focus on training for foster carers to develop their skills and competencies?
- Does the authority provide range of quality support services to carers and children to prevent placements breaking down?
- Do all Foster carers have a named supervising social worker?
- Do all residential staff receive training and development opportunities that equip them with the professional skills required to meet the needs of the children and the purpose of the setting?
- Does the authority give children appropriate suitcases and boxes to move their belongings when they move placements?

Education

- Does the authority have a virtual school head (or senior official) who has responsibility for monitoring the progress of looked after children at school?
- Have all schools appointed a designated teacher?
- How many children attend school regularly and how many are excluded from school? Is this number going down?
- What progress are children making and what are their test scores and examination results? Are these going up? Is the gap between

them and their peers reducing?

- Does the authority use the £500 Personal Education Allowance to support every child who does not reach the expected standard?
- Are children in care prioritised to receive one-to-one tuition?
- Does the authority pay a £2,000 bursary to all care leavers who undertake a designated course of higher education?

Health

- Is there effective co-ordination and commissioning of health services, including CAMHS?
- Do strategies to address health inequalities and health promotion, include specific actions to support children in care?
- Are all children registered with a GP and have access to a dentist?
- Are all foster carers given basic training on health, hygiene issues and first aid, with a particular emphasis on health promotion and communicable diseases?
- Are there systems in place to monitor whether the health needs of: children placed out of authority; disabled children; black and minority ethnic children are being met?
- Do leaving care services ensure that health and access to positive activities are included as part of young people's pathway planning?

Missing from Care/Offending behaviour

- How many children run away or otherwise have gone missing from residential care and foster care?
- Are there strong protocols in place with the Police when children go missing, in line with national guidance?
- Are there particular processes and systems in place to identify and safeguard children suspected of being trafficked into the country?
- How many children are involved in offending behaviour? What action is the authority taking in partnership with other agencies to reduce this?

Care Leavers

- How many young people leave care at the ages of 16, 17 and 18?
Is the number leaving at 16 reducing?
- What is their ethnic and cultural background?
- How much is spent on after care services, including direct financial assistance to care leavers?
- Does each care leaver have a pathway plan which takes account of their views and is regularly reviewed?
- Do local commissioning strategies involve housing agencies and ensure that care leavers have a range of suitable supported accommodation options?
- How many care leavers live in suitable accommodation in line with national guidance? Is this number going up each year?
- How many care leavers participate in employment, education, or training? Is this number going up each year?
- Has your local authority signed up to the *From Care2Work* Programme?