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update

Una Padel details the latest government ideas for child welfare in the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper, and the reform proposals in *Youth Justice – Next Steps*.

The Government Green Paper *Every Child Matters* published in September 2003 in response to the recommendations of Lord Laming's inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, sets out a range of proposals designed to safeguard children and enable them to achieve their full potential. Plans for additional provision contained in the consultation paper include:

- The creation of Sure Start Centres in the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods. These Centres would combine nursery education, family support, employment advice, childcare and health services on one site.
- Promoting full service extended schools providing breakfast and after-school clubs, childcare, health and social care on one site.
- Creating a Young People's Fund to pay for out-of-school activities.
- Increasing investment in child and adolescent mental health services.
- Ending the use of bed and breakfast accommodation to house homeless families with children.

The Green Paper's proposals focus on the areas of:

- Supporting parents and carers through universal services, targeted and specialist support to parents of children who need it, and compulsory action (Parenting Orders) as a last resort where parents are complicit in truancy, anti-social behaviour or offending.
- Early intervention and effective protection to ensure that children receive services at the onset of problems by improved information sharing between agencies, developing a common assessment framework, introducing a lead professional where children are known to more than one specialist agency, and the development of on-the-spot services through multi-disciplinary teams working at schools and Children's Centres.
- Accountability and integration – locally, regionally and nationally. This would be achieved by the creation of the post of Director of Children's Services, creation of a lead council member for children, the development of children's trusts, improved partnerships between public, voluntary sector and private agencies and the creation of Local Safeguarding Children Boards to take over from Area Child Protection Committees. The Green Paper also proposes a

new Children's Commissioner to involve children and young people and listen to their views and act as an independent champion for children.

- Workforce reform – the development of a package of measures to improve the skills and effectiveness of people who work with children
- Encouragingly prisoners' children were specifically mentioned as a group for whom no public service agency currently takes particular responsibility but which has a range of needs... but what about children who are also offenders?

Accompanying the Green Paper was a companion document entitled *Youth Justice – the Next Steps* which contained proposals for reform of the youth justice system. In response to the question of the most appropriate place to try young people accused of serious crimes it proposes that, rather than strengthening youth courts by involving a judge on such occasions, young people should continue to be tried at the Crown Court but by specially trained judges.

In relation to remand it proposes to require courts to have considered and rejected bail options before remanding a juvenile in custody. The expansion of remand fostering schemes and the development of community bail hostels for young people is also proposed. One of the main proposals is a change to the current aims and principles of sentencing – preventing offending, taking account of welfare and ensuring just deserts.

Instead sentencing of juveniles would have a single main purpose – preventing reoffending. The range of juvenile sentences is also to be simplified with one broader Action Plan Order replacing nine current non-custodial sentences available for juveniles. It would normally run for 1 to 12 months and give the Youth Court the power to impose up to two, or exceptionally three, interventions from a menu of options including fines, reparation, personal support from befrienders, drug and alcohol awareness programmes, anger management, mentoring, requirements to report to and comply with directions from a supervising officer, victim-offender mediation and family group conferencing. Discharges, fines and Referral Orders would be retained as sentences in their own right. A new sentence, the Intensive Supervision or Detention Order would be introduced for serious and repeat offenders. This will operate on the lines of the present detention and training order, with half the sentence spent in custody and half in the community under supervision. The removal of the separate restriction on such custody for a 12-14 year old unless he/she is persistent is proposed, and the maximum length suggested for that age group is 12 months with 24 months for 15-17 year olds. The minimum is to remain at 4 months.

Consultation on both the Green Paper and *Youth Justice – the Next Steps* closed on 1st December 2003.