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Memorandum

to Amberdale Staff

Social Services

from Director of Social Services

cc - see below



Your ref

Our ref DSS/DW/CMC

Please ask for
Tel extension

Date 4.9.87

The Amberdale Inquiry

I have now received the report of the Amberdale Inquiry. The report is based very substantially on the interviews with staff, on an analysis of memoranda and reports and a reading of log books. The report provides a detailed assessment of the way Amberdale was functioning at the time of the incidents involving the former Assistant Principal. Whilst it acknowledges the achievement of Amberdale it is also often critical - both of Amberdale and Social Services Headquarters. In acknowledging both achievements and in its criticisms individuals are identified.

I know that there is considerable interest in the report and staff would wish, entirely understandably, to see it. However, I have had to conclude, after much thought and discussion with members of the Inquiry Panel that I should not circulate the report in its entirety. There are two main grounds for this: Firstly, I think that to circulate the full report would be unfair to some individuals as it is one thing to make criticisms and quite another to make them on what would be virtually a public basis; secondly, the report relates to the past and many of the practices which attracted criticism have now changed.

My preference is to make the criticisms known to the individuals currently working in the Department and to circulate in full the proposals of the Inquiry Panel to those affected by the report. In addition, I shall make available, in this memorandum, a series of comments based on the report. I hope you will agree that this is the fairest and most constructive method of approach.

The following are comments from the report to which I should particularly like to refer:-

1. The Inquiry Panel could not discover precisely why the incidents concerning the Assistant Principal occurred and decided not to "force conclusions" to what it thought would be an unjustifiable extent. However the Inquiry Panel took the view that there were good reasons to examine the context, both within the Secure Unit and Amberdale as a whole, within which the incidents took place.

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2. The Panel found that Amberdale and Social Services Headquarters were engaged in time consuming and frustrating arguments and a futile pursuit of goals which neither side seemed either clearly to understand or to be able to achieve. The conflict ridden exchanges, verbal and written, absorbed huge amounts of time and energy which should have been expended on the care of the residents and the support of staff.
3. The comments of staff in 1986 and 1987 were found to bear a remarkable concordance with comments which had been made about Amberdale, in writing and by various people, over a period of years. A persistent feeling was that a siege mentality prevailed which distanced Amberdale both from the Department and from developments on the wider child care scene.
4. The report is critical of the management of Amberdale and of a style sometimes described as "confrontational." It is also critical of Social Services Headquarters which failed to respond decisively to the problems in Amberdale and which was never able to change the direction which Amberdale had taken. In effect, the report concludes that there were faults on both sides.
5. The achievements of Amberdale are also acknowledged. The report notes that over the years Amberdale admitted, and cared for, many of the most difficult children to come to the Social Services Department. In view of the essentially negative and stultifying relationship between Amberdale and Social Services Headquarters the report thought that the commitment of the staff had often been remarkable. In referring to staff the report notes:

"Their achievements, and this remark applies to all staff at Amberdale, should not go unremarked and indeed should be acknowledged."
6. The Inquiry panel encountered particularly warm comments from staff about Team Leaders. Some staff thought that the Team Leaders had often been the group that had shored up the establishment. The Inquiry Panel found that the Team Leaders had often to work without clear management direction and support.
7. The report considered that the management style which had developed at Amberdale had become outdated and could not continue.
8. Staff were generally very critical about the absence of supervision, inconsistent and in some instances non-existent communication, the absence of induction programmes for new staff and an absence of management support.

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9. The Inquiry found conflicting views about the episode when the Amberdale care staff walked out on 20th November, 1986. Some staff said the walk out was an attempt to bring to a head concerns about the poor management at Amberdale. Others said that the walk out was manipulated by a small group of staff who were not representative of the majority of their colleagues. Whatever the reasons the Inquiry Panel regarded the act as being drastic and inexcusable and reflecting poorly on Amberdale and the Social Services Department.
10. The report found one of the most damaging aspects of the functioning of Amberdale to be the rift between teachers and care staff. The Inquiry Panel noted that the Social Services Department annually transfers approximately £330,000 to the Education Department to achieve certain educational objectives. These objectives had not been achieved and there were indications of dissatisfaction and isolation amongst the teachers. The report expressed concern about the management of education at Amberdale.
11. While Areas acknowledged some of the achievements of Amberdale there were also references to the damaging effects of the Amberdale "folklore." Comments also included references to a deliberate confrontational approach which was perceived at Amberdale.
12. The majority of staff were found to be unaware of the Policy Guide for Residential Establishments and had not signed it. A small number who were aware of it had either come from other community homes to Amberdale or had learned of its existence in preparation for or at interviews in other establishments.
13. The report commented on the absence of a formal induction programme for new staff and the reality of what appears to have been hardly any basic induction of new staff in practice. The Inquiry Panel received statements of new staff being 'thrown in at the deep end' with little support or guidance.
14. Very little comment was made to the Panel about black issues and the Panel took the view that this lack of comment did not reflect the very real needs of black children.

The following is a list of the proposals as stated in the report:

Proposals

1. Fresh guidance should be issued to staff about permissible physical contact. (see paragraph 23)
2. There should be specific training on dealing with violence, following the guidelines which have recently been issued. (see paragraph 28)
3. On mobility programmes a male member of staff should not alone accompany adolescent girls. (see paragraphs 17, 21)

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4. There should be female staff present at all times in the Secure Unit. (see paragraph 90)
5. There should be a clear, explicit and easy complaints procedure for children in the Secure Unit. (see paragraph 1)
6. All staff should have regular formal supervision sessions. (see paragraph 49)
7. The regime in the Secure Unit should become less focussed on security and much more treatment orientated. (see paragraph 30)
8. There should be serious and urgent steps taken to improve the training of staff. (see paragraph 74)
9. There should be a specific system developed to provide support and counselling for staff in the Secure Unit who felt they were suffering from stress. (see paragraphs 32, 74)
10. Improvements should be made to the building, furnishing and facilities generally. (see paragraph 5)
11. Improvements should be made to the relationships between Secure Unit and Open Unit and a re-assessment should take place in the arrangements for the exchange of staff. (see paragraph 30)
12. As a matter of urgency there should be an improvement in the poor quality of education which is provided. (see paragraphs 82 to 84)
13. Discussion should take place with the Education Department about whether the kind of education provided at Amberdale is either appropriate or what is needed. (see paragraphs 82 to 84)
14. Staff should have continuing opportunities to visit and discuss the way care and treatment is provided by other establishments both within and outside Nottinghamshire. (see paragraphs 44, 47, 51, 111)
15. There should be a review and improvement in relationships between the Secure Unit and Area social workers. (see paragraphs 89 to 92)
16. There should be a reassessment of the role of parents in the care and treatment of children in the Secure Unit. (see paragraph 103)
17. The importance of the staff group in caring for children should be reassessed, understood and supported. (see paragraph 73)
18. Urgent action should be taken to try to provide the staff with the training and experience which would best help them undertake their work. (see paragraphs 30, 41, 100)

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19. The Department pursues the transfer of the present conditions of Service of the Principal and Deputy from JNC to NJC. (see paragraphs 9 to 12)
20. The amount of time spent in direct contact of staff and children should be considerably increased and the therapeutic nature of this relationship developed. (see paragraph 112)
21. Each child, at all times, should have an individual to whom they could look for support and who would be responsible for them. (see paragraph 14)
22. Care and education should be integrated. (see paragraph 79)
23. Consideration should be given about the extent to which security is enforced, eg St. Charles allows its children to go outside alone, and to go to work by themselves. (see paragraph 92)
24. There should be recognition that the attitudes of staff have a profound effect on the behaviour of the children. Thus there needs to be a treatment perspective, if necessary, at the expense of the security perspective. (see paragraph 57)
25. Amberdale requires a new Principal and discussion should begin, as soon as possible, with Mr. Gilmour about his future and a new appointment made as soon as possible. (see paragraphs 58, 112)
26. The Policy, Procedure and Practice Guide should be reviewed, revised and re-distributed. (see paragraphs 93, 98))
27. Consideration should be given to the needs of black young people, the recruitment of staff and a means for their support. (see paragraph 101)
28. The location of Amberdale within the overall organisation of the Department, and the line management relationships of the Principal within Children's Division, should be clarified. (see paragraphs 49, 50, 52, 53, 105, 116)
29. The Department should review the support available to staff generally. (see paragraphs 60, 62)

DPA

- copies to:
- Councillor Mrs. J. Taylor, Chairman, Social Services Committee
 - Councillor F. Groves, Vice Chairman, Social Services Committee
 - Social Services Department Management Group
 - Mr. M. Scott, NALGO, cc Mr. R. Gurney
 - Mr. J. Freeman, NUPZ, cc Ms A. Harris
 - Mr. R. Francis, NAS/UWT
 - Mr. R. Tanner, NUT