

CORPORATE PARENTING SUB-COMMITTEE: MINUTES

Date: Wednesday 9 September 2020

Time: 4.00pm – 5.55pm

Venue: Meeting held remotely in accordance with The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020

Present: Councillors L Every (Chairman), A Hay (Vice Chairman), A Bradnam, A Costello and E Meschini (until 4.47pm)

Non-Voting Observer: J Priest – Chairman, Cambridgeshire Foster Carer's Association

155. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed John Priest, the Chairman of Cambridgeshire Foster Carers' Association, to the meeting as a non-voting observer.

156. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

157. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

158. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 15 JULY 2020

The minutes of the meeting on 15 July 2020 were approved as an accurate record. A copy would be signed by the Chairman when practical to do so.

159. ACTION LOG

The action log was noted.

160. PETITIONS AND PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No petitions or public questions had been received.

161. YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

The Participation Service remained active and was engaging with children and young people in a variety of ways. Physical events were not currently possible due to Covid-19 restrictions on social gatherings, but the Children in Care Council had continued to meet virtually over the summer and a virtual summer activity programme had been a success. A regular newsletter with fun activities and competitions had proved popular and a virtual art exhibition had attracted 159 hits to date. The feedback loop from young people was now embedded with services and had provided some insightful comments on service provision, education and healthcare in the light of Covid-19 which were being reviewed with senior managers. Children and young people accommodated

outside of Cambridgeshire were being encouraged to engage with the virtual Participation Service offer.

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- Welcomed the range of virtual engagement activities during the summer and the work which had been done to encourage children and young people accommodated out of county to get involved in these;
- Asked for more information about loneliness and how this was being addressed. Officers stated that a number of young people had raised this issue and this had been followed up direct with those who had given their contact details. The Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding stated that this was recognised both locally and nationally as a particular issue for care leavers. The situation in Cambridgeshire was being kept under close review and a national working group was being set up to look at the impact of Covid-19 on care leavers who were not in education, employment or training. The 'Keeping in Touch' programme was continuing to run locally and there appeared to be a greater appreciation of this amongst care leavers and older young people in the current climate. The Council remained as flexible as possible in its support offer to meet the individual needs of all of its children and young people in care and care leavers.
- Asked whether there were any problems with computer access for children in care or care leavers which might impact on their participation. The Lead Practice Improvement Manager stated that her team had identified a number of young people in need of a laptop. When this was raised with Children's Services she had been pleased to learn that those children's needs had already been identified and provided with the necessary equipment. The Lead Manager for Corporate Parenting welcomed this feedback, commenting that she had chaired a working group with colleagues from the Education Services team to ensure that laptops and tablets were provided to those who needed them.
- The Chairman noted that feedback from children and young people showed that some preferred the new focus on virtual interactions whilst others would favour returning to face to face contact. She asked whether a blended approach involving both virtual and physical events might be possible in future, where this was consistent with Government guidance on gatherings and social distancing. Officers confirmed that this would be the case.
- Noted the decline in the use of the Mind of my Own (MOMO) app during recent months and asked for more information. Officers confirmed that this decline correlated with Covid-19. Feedback from young people had not offered any specific insights into why this should be, but officers speculated that the increased use of virtual contacts and phone calls during this period might be contributing to this.
- The Chairman of Cambridgeshire Foster Carers' Association (CFCA) commented that the CFCA was working in partnership with the Participation Service to support young people's engagement with the virtual participation offer by posting details on their own website. Finding suitable activities outside of the house for younger children was a particular issue at present and it would be helpful if the Participation Service could signpost carers to appropriate events and activities around the county, such as swimming sessions or soft play areas. The Lead Practice Improvement

Manager welcomed this idea and undertook to look for practical external resources which could be signposted for carers.

ACTION

It was resolved to comment and provide feedback on the range of consultation events and activities the Participation Service provide for children in care and care leavers.

162. REPORT FROM CAMBRIDGESHIRE FOSTER CARERS' ASSOCIATION

The Chairman of Cambridgeshire Foster Carers' Association (CFCA) welcomed the opportunity which the Association had been offered to take part in Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee meetings and to engage directly with both the Service Director and Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding. The CFCA was not yet fully representative of all of Cambridgeshire's foster carers, but it was working on increasing its membership and welcomed the support which had been received from officers. The CFCA had three main aims:

1. To raise the profile of foster carers and to ensure that they were seen as fellow professionals by social workers others working in support of children in care.
2. To work in partnership with the Fostering Service to advance foster carers' views and improve the support, services and remuneration for foster carers.
3. To ensure the best possible care and service to all the county's children in care.

Much good work had already been achieved, including the production with officers of a draft charter for foster carers which the Association looked forward to seeing issued. The CFCA had also been given the opportunity to provide input into the Foster Carers' Agreement and was looking forward to this being published. The CFCA had been consulted on whether to renew the contract with Foster Talk or to seek an alternative provider and welcomed this example of foster carers' views being sought and acted upon. The Association was encouraging all local foster carers to take part in the consultation process on foster carer allowances and hoped that foster carers' views would be invited on other relevant issues such as pocket money and travel expenses. Analysis of the CFCA's email communication with foster carers showed that 80-90% of all emails were read and work was now underway to encourage more responses. The first Virtual Carers meeting had been due to take place the previous day, but had been re-arranged to Monday 14 September 2020 and the Association looked forward to seeing how many foster carers would attend. The CFCA wanted to get more involved both in day to day issues and also high level and strategic decision-making and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the themes of Health, Education and Placement which would be explored at Sub-Committee meetings. The CFCA Committee would contact carers inviting them to raise any issues or concerns in preparation for the January 2021 meeting theme of Education and share these with officers and through the Association's report to that meeting.

The Chairman welcomed having the voice of the CFCA represented at Sub-Committee meetings and emphasised that communication channels were always open. The Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee had an operational focus, but also fed into the work of the Children and Young People Committee which was responsible for policy decisions relating to the delivery of Corporate Parenting functions. The Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding stated that the new Sub-Committee working model was designed to use the feedback obtained from children and young people at

informal meetings as the basis for discussions with the CFCA and others before bringing a report to the Sub-Committee's public meeting for consideration. It might take time to get this process working properly, but once established it would ensure that the child's voice was placed at the centre of the Sub-Committee's work. The Chairman asked officers to look at how best to ensure synergy in looking into and responding to issues raised by children and young people and by the CFCA. **ACTION**

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- The Vice Chairman welcomed the level of engagement between the Council and foster carers which demonstrated the value which the Council attached to foster carers.
- The Lead Manager for Corporate Parenting stated that officers would ensure that all Cambridgeshire Foster Carers were consulted and kept informed about relevant developments, as well as engaging with those who had joined the CFCA.

It was resolved to:

- a) Note the content of the report.
- b) Raise any queries with the lead officers

163. VIRTUAL SCHOOL HEADTEACHER'S REPORT

The Virtual School (VS) had moved to a new way of working a year ago and the report set out the impact of that change. The introduction of advisory visits had established a more pro-active relationship with schools and supporting Designated Teachers. Work on improving the quality of personal education plans (PEPs) was also going well and was demonstrated by the quality of the PEPs and data which was now being returned. There had been an emphasis throughout the year on building relationships with schools, social care staff and external partners to establish and embed the new way of working. Tightening up on data would be a priority going forward as this would allow the VS to work with Designated Teachers to react to issues in real time.

The Chairman thanked the Head of the Virtual School for an excellent and detailed report.

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- Asked how Covid-19 had impacted on the exam results of children and young people in care and what could be done in the coming months to support them to achieve the best possible outcomes. The Head of the VS stated that the data in the report related to the previous year due to the way these were validated, so the results data for pupils sitting exams in summer 2020 would be reported this time next year. However, the VS had received the unvalidated data for the current year and was comparing this to the data in individual children's PEPs. The VS would be in contact with any children they judged might benefit from electing to sit an exam and would look to put appropriate support around them. The VS was also in touch with schools to see how children in other year groups were settling back into school. Government funding for 75% of the costs of additional tuition for vulnerable groups was available and the Council was looking

to pay the 25% balance through pupil premium payments. This would be discussed with schools as part of the autumn round of advisory visits. The VS's Educational Psychologist was also available to offer support in relation to attendance or engagement issues and a support line had been set up for any social workers, Designated Teachers or carers of any child in care or previously in care.

The Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding stated that there was also a role for social workers and foster carers in engaging with the VS's work to make PEPs a richer and more up to date resource.

- Expressed concern about performance at KS1 in comparison to national figures for the period covered by the report. The Head of the VS noted that this related to a small cohort of 14 children with a fluid composition so broad comparisons should be treated with caution. However, it did currently represent the greatest area of concern and would be an area of focus as these children moved forward. Enrichment options were being considered, but generally the best option was considered to be funding schools to embed the necessary support within their learning rather than delivering it to these children in isolation.
- Asked about school attendance levels for children in care during lockdown. The Head of the VS said that attendance figures had improved over time with 33% of eligible children attending by the end of the lockdown. This was comparable with the experience of other local authorities within the Eastern Region. The Chairman of the CFCA commented that some foster carers might not initially have been aware of this opportunity or might have chosen to keep children home where there were other children in the household who were not eligible to attend school at that time so that they had a shared experience.

The Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding stated that Government guidance had been clear about which children should and should not be in school during the lockdown. Where children in care could remain at home with their foster carers that was the best option, but where this was not possible school places were available to them. Most schools had been open to those eligible to attend. The Council was very much aware of the challenges which the lockdown had presented and the strain which this had placed on children in care and their carers. There had been a significant minority of foster carers in Cambridgeshire who were shielding so very careful thought had been given to which children should attend school and which should not. From September, the expectation was that all children would be in school, subject to guidance from the Government and Public Health, unless there were specific reasons why they should not.

- The Chairman asked whether the new work model was working out as officers had hoped. The Head of the VS stated that every school was different, but the new way of working had enabled the VS to take a more proactive and strategic approach. The changes seemed to have been welcomed by Designated Teachers and it was intended to carry out a survey later this term to get feedback on their experience. There was a recognition that schools missed the attendance of VS staff at PEP meetings, but the new way of working offered broader support to schools and would continue to evolve. Building strong relationships was key to this, but the VS would continue to provide challenge where needed. The Chairman acknowledged that the work of the VS was less visible to young people

than their relationship with their Designated Teacher, but commented that it would be good to explore young people's experience of the change as part of Sub-Committee members' informal meetings with young people **ACTION**

It was resolved to note and comment on the report, offering support and challenge as necessary.

164. DRAFT CORPORATE PARENTING ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

The Sub-Committee reviewed the draft Corporate Parenting Annual Report for 2019/20. It had been a busy period which had included a follow-up visit by Ofsted in January 2020. The visit had been ungraded, but had resulted in some useful discussions and positive feedback from Inspectors on the progress made since their visit the previous year. The introduction of the Family Safeguarding Model had resulted in more children remaining safely with their families. This in turn had led to a reduction in the number of children in care which allowed a greater focus on those children who did need to be in care. There had been a rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) during the summer months which reflected the typical pattern of seasonal arrivals. The care leavers' cohort continued to increase and capacity had been increased to support this group. The LiquidLogic system had been implemented and performance was improving in relation to social worker visits. The number of children going missing reflected seasonal trends, but robust processes were in place to ensure an appropriate response in each case. There had also been a welcome improvement in the recruitment of in-house foster carers.

The Chairman congratulated officers for producing the report so quickly after the end of the reporting period and welcomed its format which made it both attractive and accessible to a wider range of audiences. All county councillors were corporate parents and she would want to ensure that they all saw a copy of the final report. **ACTION**

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- The Chairman stated that she would want to look at how District bodies such as Community Safety Partnership Boards and Housing Departments could be made aware of the needs of children in care and care leavers **ACTION**
- The Vice Chairman commended the content of the draft report and its accessible format. She asked that hyperlinks should be added to the headings at the front of the report to enable the reader to jump directly to the relevant section of the report. **ACTION**
- Suggested that chapter and section headings should be made more clear, that consistent use should be made of capitalisation and that a final check should be made to remove a few spelling and grammatical errors **ACTION**
- Page 31: Asked that the data in the two tables should be presented consistently, either as two histograms or two line graphs **ACTION**
- Suggested that the Siblings Forever initiative should be mentioned, with recognition of the staff who volunteered to organise and run these events. The Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding stated that the focus of the report was on the children and young people themselves, but undertook to reflect

on how a more general recognition of the contribution of staff might be included, perhaps as part of the Chairman's foreword. **ACTION**

The Assistant Director for Children and Safeguarding thanked Members for endorsing the content of the report and confirmed that the presentational issues which they had raised would be addressed before the report was presented to the Children and Young People Committee in October.

It was resolved to approve the draft annual report for 2019/20.

165. SUB-COMMITTEE WORKSHOP AND TRAINING PLAN

The Chairman asked that the dates and arrangements for the workshop on missing and exploited children and the Members Seminar on care leavers should be confirmed as soon as possible and asked Members to send details of their preferred dates to the Democratic Services Officer. **ACTION**

166. AGENDA PLAN

It was agreed that the dates of Sub-Committee members' informal meetings with children and young people would be added to the agenda plan for completeness, but that this would make clear that these were private meetings and were not open to the public. **ACTION**

Chairman
(date)