

Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee Minutes

Date: Thursday 14 July 2021

Time: 16:00pm – 18:35.

Venue: Bluntisham Village Hall, Mill Lane, Bluntisham PE28 3LR

Present: Councillors A Bradnam (Chair), A Bulat, A Hay, P Slatter (Vice-Chair)

Kevin Arrowsmith – Chair, Cambridgeshire Foster Carers' Association
(non-voting observer)

1. Notification of the appointment of the Chair and Vice-Chair

Councillor Bradnam was appointed as Chair, and Councillor Slatter appointed as Vice-Chair of the Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee for the municipal year 2021/22 by the Executive Director of People and Communities in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Children and Young People Committee and the Children and Young People Committee Spokes on 18 June 2021.

2. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Councillor M McGuire, Councillor D Ambrose Smith substituted.

3. Minutes – 13 January 2021 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2021 were agreed as an accurate record following the amendment of Kevin Arrowsmith's title to 'Chair'.

The action log was noted and an oral update was given. The officer reported that:

- Minute 161 – The reintroduction of holiday activities for children in care following eases in lockdown were advertised to carers through monthly newsletters and automatic updates.

District bodies could be made more aware of care leavers housing needs, but that there was a housing committee with a designated public advisor whose role was to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping.

- Minute 174 - Feedback on the positive difference interaction with social workers had on children in care would be reported upon in the Participation Report and training.

4. Petitions and Public Questions

There were no petitions or public questions.

5. Participation Report

The Sub-Committee was briefed on the activity of the Participation Service for children in care. Virtual adaptations were made in response to the pandemic and client feedback. This increased participation by those further afield. Following the easing of restrictions, there had been an increase of in-person activities on offer to children in care and care leavers.

The service also amplified the voices of service users through a Children in Care Council (currently with eight core members), and a Young Recruiters Panel which allowed young people to influence staff hiring.

In response to Members' questions, the officer also noted that the Children in Care Council summer programme included the development of a leaflet for those entering care, inspired by those distributed through Peterborough County Council.

It was resolved to:

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

6. Report from Cambridgeshire Foster Carers' Association

The Sub-Committee was provided with an overview of the role of the Foster Carers' Association and the work they have undertaken alongside the Fostering Service. It was noted that the service had recently been restructured and that a Statement of Purpose would soon be launched. Included as an appendix to the report was a survey which took place to consolidate and benchmark changes occurring to the fostering service as a result of restructuring. The survey was distributed to current foster carers and received 113 responses. Findings included: foster carers desiring greater involvement in all aspects of the foster service; a desire for more information about the children prior to their entry into a household; and a general weariness in response to lockdown, home-schooling and reduced in-person support.

In response to the report, Members:

- Raised concerns that the 21% who responded that they would not recommend the service may leave. Members suggested asking 'why' following negative responses to questions in future surveys, to ensure these problems can be resolved and foster carer retention increased.
- Suggested looking at the geographical distribution of survey respondents to enable targeted action.

Officers' responded to Members' questions:

- Appendix 1, Question 1: Do you feel fully supported by the Fostering Service/ Local Authority?

Explained that foster carers may receive less information about a child entering their care if the move was unplanned; or if the child came directly from an unsuitable residence for which their experiences were not documented. Further changes in environment may cause children and young people to exhibit previously unseen and therefore undocumented behaviour.

Officers explained that previous foster carers provided information in planned moves, and that Placement Planning meetings (which occurred after the child or young person entered the home) were an opportunity for foster parents to receive more information. Going forward, work with corporate parenting and family safeguarding would occur to increase information distributed to foster parents prior to the child or young person entering the home.

- Appendix 1, Question 2: What improvements or changes within the Fostering Service Department would assist you to reach your full potential in your role as a carer?

That in response to requests for further training, the virtual training offer had been increased and a training brochure created. While there was a diploma in foster care, officers noted the benefit that an additional recognised route for foster caring training could have on increasing foster carers' feeling of professionalism.

- Appendix 1, Question 3: As a foster carer do you feel your thoughts, opinions and experiences are valued and taken into consideration when decisions/plans are being made for the child/ young person in your care?

Explained that the 'Skills to Foster' training course used foster carers as speakers, and that applying this to Q&A sessions was being explored.

It was resolved to:

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

7. Fostering Service Annual Report 2020/21

The Sub-Committee was provided with an overview of key activities within the fostering services for the year 2020/21. The officer reported an overall increase of children provided with foster care: twenty-five new households, an additional ten being assessed, and nineteen fostering households resigning.

In response to the report, Members celebrated district councils offering traveller cultural awareness training.

In response to Members' questions, officers responded:

- With regard to concerns for the seven safeguarding allegations made against foster carers:

Explained that, following an allegation, a Standards of Care investigation took place with additional scrutiny and recommendations from a foster panel. The continuation of the placement following the allegation was dependent upon the situation and severity of the allegation, but that a support network existed for foster parents against whom allegations were made.

- In response to questions regarding how the Fostering Service ensured strong cultural awareness:

Stated that, prior to placement, placement matching included culture matching and a requirement for foster parents to prove a level of cultural awareness, despite the county not having a largely diverse foster carer population. Following placement, placement planning meetings ensured a foster household could meet the child's cultural needs. Foster carers could also ask staff for advice. Managers attended equality, diversity and inclusion training which it was hoped would be rolled out to staff and foster carers.

- Explained that, especially for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, trauma as well as cultural differences could influence a placement and that trauma training and anti-extremism training were offered to carers.
- Recognised that unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people often had different needs which meant they were often better suited to independent living with contact from colleges, the Red Cross, and support from the local community including mosques and churches.. A buddy system was also in place to connect young people with similar experiences. Officers noted the successes of this cohort, who had gone into engineering and university.
- Offered foster care training for Members. **Action.**

It was resolved to:

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

8. Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2020-21

The Sub-Committee were given details of the service performance of Independent Reviewing Officers [IROs]. The service currently has 9.8 IROs, who each monitor 62 children in care, review Care Plans, and escalate concerns. Areas of concern for the service included accountability and record keeping. Positive statistics included an increase of children in 'permanent' arrangements, a reduction of children in care by 75, and a stable number of placement breakdowns throughout the pandemic.

In particular, the reporting officer highlighted:

- That throughout the pandemic, service levels had remained the same, with many social workers continuing in-person meetings. Other work, such as monitoring or Care Plan reviews with Independent Reviewing Officers, occurred online.

Following the ease in lockdown, the service had moved to a person-centred hybrid approach for meetings. This catered for children who felt less exposed online or preferred not having professionals within their home.

- That children were given the opportunity to chair their care reviews, control non-standing items on the agenda, and ask people to attend (such as advocates).

Officer's responded to Members' questions /concerns by explaining that:

- The IRO role was one of oversight, rather than operational, making the caseload manageable.
- Tutoring services were procured through the Virtual Education team.
- National Youth Advocacy Services was a voluntary service that all young people in care could access, should they feel dissatisfied with the service they received or desire an advocate at a meeting. The officer reported a reduction in children using them, perhaps because of the increasing virtual offer.
- That the delay for children awaiting long-term foster care was an area of concern for IROs. To improve this the Corporate Parenting service is revisiting the existing processes by which long-term foster placements are sought and matched with children who need them.
- Recording arears were another area of concern.

Members' thanked officers for the qualitative feedback gained from anonymised reviews.

It was resolved to:

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

9. Clinical Services

The Sub-Committee were briefed on the new clinical service on offer in Cambridgeshire, previously delivered by a combination of staff from the Council and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Foundation Trust.

Expected benefits of the new service included: an operating service developed in collaboration with foster carers; quicker responses to service changes; a focus on supporting children in care by supporting their foster carers; a multidisciplinary team which catered for the individual by providing a variety of evidence based offers.

Changes to the service had resulted in staffing vacancies, but services continued to be provided with support from interim clinicians for referrals.

Members' praised the training session on the psychology of children in care they had received. Officers would provide Members with links to further their training.

In response to Members asking about the role of the specialist clinician and assistant psychologist, officers clarified that specialist clinicians (such as occupational therapists) were allocated to the child at a formulation meeting and assisted by psychologists.

It was resolved to review and comment on the report.

10. Corporate Parenting Performance Report May 2021

The Sub-Committee received a standing report which broke down the placement types of the 664 children in care throughout Cambridgeshire.

- In-house foster carers: 242 young people
- Independent Fostering Agencies: 212 young people
- Living with parents on care orders: 9 young people
- Residential care: 54 young people
- Semi-independent living with a dedicated care worker and care provision: 86 young people

(This occurs post-16, dependent on whether the young person was assessed as ready)

The officer explained that the Stepping Out document was an evidence-based tool used to assess whether a child was ready for independent living. If they were not, post-18 provision could be sought from organisations such as the YMCA.

Members requested the number of children housed outside the county was added to the report. **Action.** In response to this concern, officers explained that children might be housed outside the county for a multitude of reasons including: improved culture matching, foster carers relocating but remaining in the service, and the location of necessary specialist care outside of Cambridgeshire.

It was resolved to:

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

11. Health Data Update Report July 2021

The Sub-Committee received a report which detailed the continued work of health services throughout the pandemic. It noted the Clinical Commissioning Group's monitoring and quality assurance systems for children in care, and the performance of statutory requirements including Initial Health Assessments, Review Health Assessments, and the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire. The pandemic had resulted in these assessments taking place virtually, with a movement back to in-person assessment following the lifting of lockdown restrictions.

Initial Health Assessment and Review Health Assessment: These are assessments completed for children in care that provide a holistic overview of the child or young person's health. Issues in data reporting had caused this to be raised as an area of concern in the previous Sub-Committee meeting which resulted in the development of a different reporting service capable of registering health declinations. The officer reported that now, when a decline was recognised, a pathways conversation on health would occur with the young person.

The Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire: A behavioural screening questionnaire completed by the foster carer. Typically, this was completed in the Health Assessment, but the move to virtual assessments had resulted in the questionnaire being sent via email, causing a reduction to 27% in questionnaire returns. As a result, a sub-group of the Health of Children in Care Partnership Group had been formed and developed a Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire Pathway. Members requested a copy of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

The Designated Nurse for Children in Care responded to Members' questions, stating that:

- The CCG commissions health services across Cambridgeshire including physical and mental health in both community and hospital settings; whilst NHS England provides in-patient mental healthcare for young people.
- That an audit of thirty review health assessments and ten initial health assessments had concluded the quality of service was good.
- Her concerns included access to dental checks reducing over the pandemic, however outstanding checks were captured in the Health Action Plan for foster carers and social workers to pick up and action when services are available.

It was resolved to:

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

12. Regional Adoption Agency Update

The Sub-Committee received an outline of the structure of the Regional Adoption Agency, progress around staffing issues, and information on the work undertaken in the first six months since the agency started on 1 December 2020.

While consultation and restructuring had taken place, the officer explained that the service remained similar, with three distinct teams: Recruitment, Family Finding, and Special Guardianship.

Staffing had been impacted by the restructuring of the service, but the officer reported a solid staffing structure and no managerial vacancies.

In response to the report, Members expressed a desire to reduce adoption waiting times.

It was resolved to:

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

13. Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee Training Plan

The Sub-Committee resolved unanimously to note its training plan and complete the following actions:

- Circulate training dates for fostering and mental health awareness. **Action.**
- Circulate a list of potential training session topics from which Members would select four to undergo. **Action.**
- Noted that other corporate parenting events could be found on the Cambridgeshire County Council website.

14. Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee Agenda Plan

The Sub-Committee resolved unanimously to note its agenda plan.

Chair