

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 29 October 2015 at 7.07 pm

- Present:** Councillors Susan Little (Chair), Bukky Okunade (Vice-Chair), James Baker, Leslie Gamester, James Halden, Cathy Kent (substitute for Steve Liddiard) and Joycelyn Redsell
- Natalie Carter, Thurrock Open Door Representative
Christina Day, Children in Care Council
Jackie Howell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
- Apologies:** Councillors Steve Liddiard
- In attendance:** Patricia Perolls, Designated Nurse, NHS Basildon & Brentwood CCG
Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services
Andrew Carter, Head of Children's Social Care
Paul Coke, Service Manager (Children & Families)
Simon Shardlow, Interim Service Manager, Placement and Support
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer
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Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

10. Minutes

The Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee, held on 18 June 2015, were approved as a correct record.

The Chair asked Officers to report back on the questions raised at the June committee.

The first question was asked by Christina Day, Children in Care Council, who asked for clarification on the difference of payments for those care leavers going to university and those undertaking an apprenticeship.

Paul Coke confirmed that there were 11 young people currently in university and three young people in apprenticeships. In terms of the finance that is provided, a payment of £2000 is paid for higher education as part of the education bursary and provide accommodation payment for 22 weeks (within the Easter, Summer and Christmas breaks) of £125 a week.

The second question was asked by Councillor Okunade, asking for the total number of recruited approved foster carers in Thurrock and those that were currently in assessment.

Andrew Carter confirmed that at present there is a capacity to place 120 children in terms of in-house foster care. There have been to date six approvals at panel and nine sets of parents in assessment.

The Chair asked Officers for a response to a Motion raised at Council by Councillor Ojetola regarding the radicalisation of youths.

Andrew Carter confirmed that this motion would be a key objective for the Corporate Parenting committee and agreed the motion from an Officer's point of view that it would be in within the council's remit. All members were in agreement.

11. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

12. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

13. Recent External Placements for Young People

Paul Coke introduced the report which updated members on the range of issues regarding the placement choices which were made for looked after children. This report was presented at each committee and this report covered the period 28 May 2015 to 4 August 2015 and confirmed there had been 21 new entrants into the system.

Paul Coke clarified the age group numbers of looked after children and explained to the members the different provider definitions and further explained that there had been a significant rise in the number of children 16 years and over placed in residential and other provisions. This provision was a challenging area but was working with providers and the In-House recruitment team to ensure that the right placement was being made.

It was also explained that there had been an increase to 14 young people aged between 12-17 years of age becoming looked after in this period, of which a third were unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

Councillor Gamester asked the Officer that if the increase of unaccompanied asylum seeking children was a growing concern and was funding available. Andrew Carter confirmed that the situation was a growing strain on finances but there was still a need to protect vulnerable children. It was confirmed that a proportion of costs were paid by the Home Office but this payment did not cover all costs. An example given was a young person, under 16 years of age on average costs were about £95 per night, totalling £665 per week per child.

For an unaccompanied asylum seeking child costs would be in the region of £900 per week, the difference was very evident.

Councillor Halden asked for clarification on in house fostering and independent fostering figures in regards to a breakdown of number of the out of borough placements used as a necessity against those out of borough placements used where there is no provision available locally. The Officer confirmed that it was a mixture of both, but with pressure of 338 looked after young people with a rise nationally in the number of people and care proceedings, so the pressure is capacity with not sufficient foster carers to meet the needs. Actively trying to recruit more foster carers for adolescent young people and that Thurrock have an arrangement with Essex County Council where they offer any surplus foster carers.

Councillor Halden asked that the next report on recent external placements for young people contain more in-depth information and explanation behind the rational of using out of borough placements. Andrew Carter confirmed that this could be made available whilst keeping the identity of individuals confidential.

Councillor Okunade asked the Officer to explain the Placement Panels and other panels used to ensure management oversight is consistent throughout the process. Paul Coke explained the process of the placement, threshold, transition and the Looked After Children Surgeries.

RESOLVED:

That the members of the committee continue to challenge the provision of placements for looked after children to ensure that placements were of a high quality, promote good outcomes and were value for money.

14. Adoption Report Outlining Process and Performance

Simon Shardlow introduced the report which fulfils the requirement of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption. The report provided members of the committee with an update on the activity and development undertaken over the last six months in the Fostering, Adoption and Placements teams since the last report in March 2015.

Simon Shardlow confirmed that Thurrock Council is in partnership with Coram Capital. Coram will specifically undertake the recruitment and assessing of the adopters' function. The proposal to work with Coram over the next three years will realise the benefits of grant money available as well as the benefit from Coram's experience in developing fostering to adopt placements and referred members to the current targets in the report.

Councillor Redsell asked the Officer if there was anything that could be done to reduce the time of 18 months to place a child with an adoptive family.

Simon Shardlow confirmed that the partnership with Coram and moving to a module of earlier identification which will be used by a social worker from tomorrow for the first time. As part of the monthly tracking meeting, a team manager from Coram will now sit on that meeting and where possible look at early identification for families coming through as part of the tracking mechanism. Earlier linking will be used and Andrew Carter confirmed that current performance rates had dramatically improved.

Councillor Halden commented that although the adoption performance times had improved he asked Officers for reassurance that these will continue to improve and that the performance average figure of 557 days is based on one child and not a combination of results of more than one child. The Officer confirmed that every effort is being made to bring down the timescales as part of the regionalisation and national agenda in the delay in the adoption process. Complicated cases going through court may be subject to delay which may affect the figures potentially which may be a risk.

Andrew Carter confirmed that the process was going through the system quicker but encouraged the Committee to push Officers harder to ensure no child has to wait any longer than the average time.

Councillor Little asked what recommendations had been identified on the Action Plan and how we were addressing those improvements. Andrew Carter confirmed there were a couple of issues. The first issue was the Scorecard Timeliness and how effectively we could improve and were still at this time waiting for a new average. The Recruitment of Adopter's, how Thurrock could speed up the process of adopter recruitment and approval and look at recruiting adopters from the BME and LGBT communities. We have addressed these issues in term of own recruitment and as part of the partnership with Coram. Andrew Carter agreed to bring the Recommendations and Action Plan to the next committee to reassure members that these had been signed off.

Councillor Okunade asked Officers that with the new partnership with Coram were there any implications for the current adoption panel. Simon Shardlow confirmed that the function of the panel will continue and an active piece of work is currently being worked on is how the panels were constituted and will feedback at the next committee.

Councillor Little confirmed that a useful meeting was held with the fostering and adoption teams to discuss how best to move forward and incorporate both panels as experienced members sat on both panels. Therefore possibly one panel could do both jobs but would not want to lose the expertise and it was agreed to carry on with the next meeting in December.

Councillor Halden asked Officers if the budget was balanced or if there were any overspends. The Officer confirmed that the budget is currently not balanced but when the budget was set there was not a decision at that stage with relation to the adoption support grant. The government has introduced a fee for inter-agency which Thurrock does not overly benefit from. There were

allowances and pressures on that budget for special guardianship which comes out the adoption budget where financial responsibility continues for three years until the child is 16 years old and in some cases 18 years old so there is a need to manage those financial pressures.

Councillor Gamester asked the Officers what the benefits of having internal individual members on the panel. The Officer confirmed that there were clear advantages to having an independent voice with no connects to the agency that will be able to influence and carry through decisions. Officers will need to work closely with the panel to ensure that quality assuring and scrutiny is being undertaken.

RESOLVED:

That the members of the Corporate Parenting Committee considered the report in line with the regulations of 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2011.

15. Independent Review Officer Annual Report 2014-15

Andrew Carter presented the report which set out the annual summary of activity which had been undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) who provide Independent Scrutiny of the department's care plans for all the Children Looked After by Thurrock Council.

Andrew Carter apologised that there was an error in Report, Page 45, Section 3.6 – it should read 2015 and not 2014.

Councillor Little asked the Co-Optee members for their views of the Independent Review Officers. Jackie Howell stated that she had good experience with IROs, each IRO works differently, looked after children know when they can challenge the IRO and that they were very supportive. Christina Day stated that over the past five years she had good expertise of IROs who she felt able to turn to but not always comfortable when discussing medical issues with parents present. Sharon Smith agreed with the above comments and suggested that the medical plan could be split into two areas, one when the child stays in the room for the discussion and the other when the child leaves the room.

Councillor Little asked for clarification on what process is in place for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children when they arrive in Thurrock. Andrew Carter confirmed that a translator would be provided to assist the child and provide translation of any documents. The team work closely with representatives from the local community and Open Door.

Councillor Little asked for clarification on the ending of the SERCO contract and what impact this would have on Children's Services. Andrew Carter confirmed that the 78 hours administration support will continue with no immediate change to Children's Services.

Councillor Little asked Officers to ensure that a member of staff is always available to answer telephone calls. On occasions when Councillor Little had rang her call was directed straight to voicemail. Andrew Carter agreed that it was unacceptable and that as a corporate issue this will be taken forward as a matter of urgency.

Councillor Halden asked the Officer for feedback on the number of complaints received from Looked After Children. It has agreed that this item should be added to the work programme to allow Officers time to prepare the report.

Councillor Redsell asked the Officers for a breakdown of age groups of those children aged under 4 of age who participated in the review. It was agreed that Officers would supply this at the next meeting.

Councillor Redsell left the room at 8.07pm.

Councillor Kent asked the Officers what reassurance was in place to prevent any awkwardness to the child when undertaking a health review. The Officer confirmed that all reviews varied from IRO to IRO but the views of the young person would be taken into account and feedback appropriately.

Jackie Howell commented that not all parents were present at the health plan but were provided with feedback separately to ensure that the child's needs were being met.

Christina Day seconded Jackie's comment and stated that some elements of the health plan were confidential and awkward to discuss in front of your parents.

Patricia Perolls agreed to take back the comment made about the confidentiality of health plans to the Looked After Children's Nurse and suggested that prior to a meeting agree what information should be shared when parents were present.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer be a statutory responsibility and therefore it is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Committee continues to monitor the activity of the IROs and request any further information it requires in its scrutiny role.**
- 2. That the members consider and adopt "Areas for Development" which were contained within Section 4 of the report for continued improvement of this service.**

16. Work Programme

Since the publication of the agenda a number of amendments to the work programme had been proposed, which along with the amendments agreed earlier in the meeting, included:

- That the item on Health of Looked After Children be moved from the March 2016 to the December 2015 work programme.
- That an item on Care Leavers in Employment be included in the 3 December 2015 work programme (to be confirmed by AC/CL)
- That an item on Independent Review Officer to highlight the breakdown of complaints and report on the escalated report be included in the 3 March 2016 work programme (to be confirmed by AC/CL)

Members were in agreement with the proposed changes to the work programme, following which the Chair requested that an updated work programme be circulated to the Committee and Officers following the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted, subject to the amendments detailed above.

The meeting finished at 8.20 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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