

**CORPORATE PARENTING SPECIALIST
ADVISORY GROUP
Tuesday 15th September 2015**

PRESENT – *Cllrs McFall (Chair), Ali, Bateson, Brookfield, Connor, Daley, Entwistle, Harling, Humphreys, Kay, Liddle, Lee, O’Keeffe, Smith and Whittle.*

Also Present –

Linda Clegg	Director of Children’s Services
Robert Arrowsmith	Head of Service - Policy, Planning & Performance
Karen Barrick	Head of Service – Permanence
Susan Clarke	Head of Safeguarding, Clinical Commissioning Group
Christie Walsh	Resource Development Manager, Child Action North West
Shelia Morris	Designated Nurse, Looked After Children
Ben Aspinall	Democratic Services Manager
Rebekah Mottershead	Dedicated Group Support Officer

RESOLUTIONS

5. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Specialist Advisory Group. Apologies were received from Cllrs Gunn, Mahmood, Jean Rigby, Colin Rigby, Roberts, Sidat, Taylor and Wright. Apologies were also received from Fred Kershaw, Charlotte Hesketh- LAC Virtual Head and Assessment Officer and Aldo Staffa – Looked After Children’s Education Manager.

RESOLVED –

That the apologies be noted.

6. Minutes of the Meeting held on the 22nd June 2015

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Specialist Advisory Group held on the 22nd June 2015 be agreed as a correct record.

7. Adoption; An Overview of the Adoption Process

The Chair welcomed Karen Barrick, the Head of Service, Permanence, to the meeting and invited her to present the Group with an overview of the adoption process within the Borough.

Karen took the group through a presentation on the adoption service in relation to recent Government reforms.

The Group was informed that as the final decision to remove a child was one of the most radical decisions made by the Council, a lengthy process must be followed before committing to place a child for adoption.

It was reported that the Government had implemented a number of changes to the service, with recent reforms ensuring that adoption was to be a last resort. Karen advised that should it be deemed that a parent could not appropriately care for their child through to adulthood, the department must be able to demonstrate that it had made every possible endeavour to place the child with a family member before making the decision to remove them for adoption.

Karen advised that as soon as a child entered the care system, assessments on parents and family members would begin. It was noted that a permanence plan would be produced for the child that must be in place by the time of their four month care review.

Members were informed that as the result of numerous successful recruitment campaigns the current climate was adopter rich, therefore there was now a greater likelihood of finding the right match for a child in a shorter time period than there had been before.

The Group heard that children were generally placed to the age of 8, and sibling groups would be kept together wherever it was in their best interest. Members questioned what would happen should a suitable adopter not be found for a sibling group. They were informed that if the department deemed that siblings should remain together, it would do everything in their power to ensure that this happened.

It was reported that once an adopter had been identified for a child, their case would be put before a panel constituted of between 5 and 10 people, which would include an independent chair, social workers, adult adoptees and experts in the field. This panel would make a recommendation which would be taken to the Authority Decision Maker to make a final judgement.

The Group heard that the department had been very successful in matching children to adopters. Karen indicated that for younger children there was often an intensive introduction to their perspective adopter whilst older children would be introduced more slowly. She advised that the team held 'life appreciation days' where everyone involved would meet to share positive experiences and discuss soft, more personal, information. It was noted that these days had worked very well.

To assist in matching children with families, the department held activity days at which approved adopters and the children would meet. Karen advised that this route was particularly successful for those who were more difficult to place, with up to 50% of children attending these days finding a suitable adopter.

Members heard that the intention of recent adoption reform was to speed up the adoption process. It was reported that the Council now had 6 months in which to approve or reject prospective adopters. Karen advised that this was a 2 stage process; Stage 1 was to allow for the statutory DBS and reference checks to take place and must be completed within a 2 month period and Stage 2 was to finalise decisions and this must take place within a 4 month period.

Karen indicated that in response to adoption reform, in the bid to shorten the length of time a child was in care, the department had;

- Initiated a recruitment campaign
- Enhanced case tracking
- Commissioned a worker from VAA to support with family finding
- Implemented the stage 1 and 2 process for assessing families
- Greater flexibility with adoption panels / agency decisions
- Analysed delays in family finding and matching process to produce better outcomes based on lessons learned

The Group was informed that utilising new routes to permanence, such as using approved adopters as foster carers, and a reduction in avoidable family finding delays teamed with an increase in the number of approved adopters had led to the department more than doubling the number of children being adopted from care. It was reported that Blackburn with Darwen was ranked 2nd in the country for its placement of children.

It was reported that as part of Government's adoption reforms, there was now a Scorecard, which measured Council's nationally on 2 key areas;

- A1: 2014/15 average days from child entering care to starting their adoptive placement (for adopted children)
- A1: 2012/15 average days from child entering care to starting their adoptive placement (for adopted children)
- A2: 2014/15 average number of days from Placement Order to matching
- A2: 2012/15 average number of days from Placement Order to matching

The Group noted that the Department for Education National Threshold for A1 was 639 and the Threshold for A2 was 213. It was reported that it was a challenge to meet new, statutory, timescales, but that the department was reviewing its delivery to reduce the time a child was in care as far as possible.

In noting the current Scorecard statistics, Members queried that Blackburn with Darwen seemed to perform below the national average. The Group was informed that the borough focussed on the needs of the child and continued to place children in adoptive families to a much older age than many other Authorities.

Members questioned as to how the department could reduce the length of time a child was in care should there be a delay outside their control in the court system. It was reported that this was a concern and that such delays would impact the results on the Council's scorecard but this was something that authorities struggled with nationally.

It was agreed that the statistics did not truly reflect the department's performance as they did not take into account the reasons for delay which were for the ultimate benefit of the child. Karen advised that OFSTED inspectors would take the Scorecard into consideration and therefore the department must be able to demonstrate why their scores were below target. It was further agreed that the Council should put the interest of the child first.

The Group was informed that within the next 2 years, the Authority would be required to collaborate with neighbouring Councils to formulate a regional agency. It was reported that the department was liaising with comparable neighbouring authorities such as Bolton, Bury, Oldham and Thameside to discuss working together.

It was further noted that as many children were placed out of the borough for safety reasons, working with other authorities was a distinct advantage. Members heard that the Authority would receive £27,000 for each child placed within the borough.

Members held a detailed discussion around the benefits and potential risks of a multi-agency adoption service. It was noted that although the borough would not have overall control, working collaboratively with authorities of a similar size it could be possible for up to 200 children per year to find a permanent home.

The Group heard that the department had frequently collaborated with adoption agencies in the voluntary sector and that inviting such companies to be part of the regional agency.

Members questioned how the combined agency was to be funded. It was advised that grants were available to set up regional adoption agencies. Karen indicated that a funding bid had recently been submitted and that the outcome of this could be brought to the Group when available.

The Group was informed that adoption was highly prioritised by the Government and grant funding for the service was often available to assist Councils in their goals to achieve permanence.

It was reported that since the beginning of adoption reform there had been a distinct culture shift around the adoption journey as a whole. There had been numerous marketing campaigns to express that anyone could adopt and everything was geared up to ensure that support and information on adoption was easily accessible, including a new website 'letsadopt.co.uk'.

The Group heard that the department would support a family through the lifetime of the adoption, which could range from a one off visit to counselling, or assistance in contacting birth families. It was noted that every child would receive a life story book which denoted their personal adoptive journey and a later life letter which explained their story.

It was agreed that despite many challenges faced in light of adoption reform, the department had continued to put the needs of the child first and had implemented mechanisms and stringent assessments to ensure that a child and their adopter were well matched, fully prepared and supported through their journey to permanence.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Head of Service – Permanence be thanked for their attendance
2. That the presentation on Adoption be noted
3. That the multi-authority adoption agency be forwarded to the 2016-17 Group as a proposed legacy item

Signed.....

Chair of the meeting at which the Minutes were signed

Date.....