

NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN CARE & CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE INFORMATION

There has been a general rise in demand across Children's Services as a whole from Early Help (there are now over 400 CAFs), right through to the numbers of children in care. This is having a significant impact on the caseloads held by social workers, which are currently too high, particularly in the Assessment and Safeguarding Teams. We have also seen a rise in the number of teenagers open to the department. This group tends to have more complex issues and while we have our outstanding and nationally recognised Adolescent Support Unit, children entering care from this group are much more likely to go into more expensive agency placements and this is putting a pressure on commissioned placement budgets.

As at 13th January there are 366 children in care, 307 children subject to Child Protection Plans and 645 children with Child in Need plans. The total number of open children's social care cases has risen to 1840, up from 1778 in October & 1686 in July.

27 children have been adopted since April 2016, and 19 children are placed in adoptive placements.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION PEER REVIEW

The Local Government Association (LGA) have completed a peer review of Children's Services (5th – 8th December 2016). The peer review was in the form of a Care Practice Diagnostic (CPD), designed to assist councils in further strengthening their work with and support to children and young people in care and providing an independent view about the quality of care practice on the ground.

The review team noted strengths in our commitment to children at all levels and across partners, our can-do culture, visible leadership and good engagement with children and young people. They also made a number of suggestions of areas for us to consider for improvement, most of which focused around the increased demand and our ability to meet that demand with the current resources. There are also some issues for the partnership to consider, such as more joint commissioning around health, and a reconsideration of the work taken by the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to ensure that single agency work is not inadvertently being handed over to the MASH.

FESTIVE FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

In December, foster carers and staff in the Let's Foster team set up a gift wrapping production line in the Mall to aid busy shoppers. Their efforts raised a total of £291 towards a Christmas party at Blackburn Rugby Club for children in foster care. Gift tags designed by three children in foster care were on sale and the children, aged 3, 8 and 13 all received Mall vouchers for their winning designs.

There was further support for children in the borough with many donations of gifts and toys for children in need, which were kindly donated by local businesses, church and community groups, staff and residents. These presents provided a boost for families who otherwise would struggle to provide gifts.

Children's Services staff were on hand throughout the festive period to support children and families.

REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY (RAA) DEVELOPMENTS

It is proposed that the Adoption Service for the Council becomes part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) from Autumn 2017 alongside five other Local Authorities and two Voluntary Adoption Agencies. Department for Education grant funding has been in place since Autumn 2015 to support the scoping out of this venture, however, funding has not been at the level needed to sustain progress between April and October 2016 to keep within the initial timeframe.

Going forward, the plan is to continue with the development of the RAA with full implementation in Autumn 2017. The proposal is a hub and spoke model with the hub based in Bolton. The proposed legal model is a local authority hosted model with Bolton Council as host authority. This plan received the backing of the Council's Executive Board in December 2016.

YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE UPDATES

The Youth Justice Service has worked closely with the Court Service and a group of young people to develop a unique "Problem Solving Court". The project has won the National Children and Young People Annual Award for Youth Justice and is recognised as innovative practice by the Youth Justice Board and some criminal research agencies. A number of partner agencies are now involved and all have recorded more positive outcomes.

Earlier this year, a consultation took place to determine the future of Youth Court provision for the Pan Lancashire area. There was tremendous support for retaining the Blackburn Youth Court and a strong submission was made. In mid-December a decision was made that the Youth Court in Blackburn will continue to operate.

OFSTED INSPECTIONS UPDATE

Little Harwood Children's Centre has maintained an overall 'good' Ofsted inspection judgement with an 'outstanding' rating for personal development, behaviour and welfare. The Inspector commented on the commitment of staff to the continuous improvement of the quality of learning experiences for children and remarked that the views of parents and children are embedded in evaluations.

Apple Trees short breaks residential home is delighted to retain an 'outstanding' judgement. The Inspector concluded that enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff provide 'exceptional day to day experiences' for children and young people with disabilities and complex needs. Feedback from parents highlighted what Apple Trees means to them. One parent said '*Staff are part of the extended family. They treat my child like their own. I can't describe the difference that this service has made to my child and the family as a whole. This place is just amazing; a brilliant service.*'

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS - GETTING TO GOOD SEMINAR

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service was invited by Ofsted to host a Getting to Good seminar on 'effective IRO service provision'. The event was jointly delivered with Bolton Council and allowed the service to showcase developments to peers on improving the quality of participation by children and young people in their Looked After Reviews.

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION WEEK

Leading up to Child Sexual Exploitation week at the beginning of November, the Engage team was involved in a range of activities highlighting child sexual exploitation across the borough. The theme this year was 'hard to reach' young people, including those with complex needs and from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. With that in mind a document specifically about the exploitation of Asian girls and young women was produced.