

CORPORATE PARENTING SPECIALIST ADVISORY GROUP

Thursday 23rd July 2020

PRESENT – Councillors: Whittle (In the Chair), Afzal, Batan, Bateson, Connor, Daley, Davies, Gee, Gunn, Akhtar Hussain, Jan-Virmani, Kay, Zamir Khan, Khonat, Liddle, Mahmood, McGurk, Oates, Patel, Jean Rigby, Smith and Taylor.

OFFICERS –

Alyson Hanson – Head of Permanence

Jaffer Hussain - Participation Officer

Charlotte Hesketh – LAC Virtual Head & Assessment Officer

Caroline Waldron – Deputy Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children and LAC

Janette Clarke – Strategic Head of Social Care

Paula Quinn – FCA Committee

Sam Briggs – FCA Secretary

RESOLUTIONS

1 **Welcome and Apologies**

The Chair Cllr Ron Whittle, welcomed all present to the virtual meeting. Apologies were received from the following Councillors: Damian Talbot, John Slater, Pat McFall, Lilian Salton, Mohammed Khan, Stephanie Brookfield and Julie Slater. Apologies were also received from Jayne Ivory, Claire Richardson, Angela Allen, Paul Lee and Aldo Staffa.

2 **Declaration of Interest in item on this Agenda**

There were no Declarations of Interest received.

3 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

RESOLVED – The Minutes of the previous meeting held on Thursday 23rd July 2020 were approved as a correct record.

4 **Vice Chair Update**

RESOLVED – That the item be deferred to a future meeting.

5 **Corporate Parenting Dashboard**

The Group was presented with an update on the latest monitoring report of Children in Our Care as of 29th June 2020 and heard that the number of children in care was 409. Of those, 45% were female and 55% were male. The Age profile had changed slightly since December 2019, in that there were fewer in the 0-2 age range. This had reduced from 86 to 71, which was a significant difference. There had been an increase in the 3-5 age range from 56 to 64, an increase in the 6-8 age range from 45-52 and an increase in 12-14 age range from 71 to 77.

The Group heard that the increase in older children entering care was mainly due to sibling groups shifting the spread of ages of children that had needed to

come into care. However the majority of children entering care were under 6 years old.

Looking at the Age of children entering care, the Group heard that there had been a reduction in the number of babies entering care. In December 2019 this had been 48% compared to 39% as of the end of June 2020. For the other age ranges, the Group noted that 3-6 year olds had stayed the same at 21%, 7-10 year olds were now at 15% compared to 11% in December, 11-15 year olds were now at 19% compared to 15% in December, and 16+ was now at 6% compared to 11% in December. The Group heard that the figures were subject to peaks and troughs.

In terms of where children had been placed, there had been some changes to note. In-house foster care had stayed very much the same, with a high proportion of children being in in-house foster care placements. The number of children Placed with Parents on care orders at home had risen quite significantly from December 2019, from 58 to 79 now. This was a concern and Alyson informed the Group that they would be carrying out some work around that.

Agency placements were down significantly which was good news for the commissioning budget as these were high cost placements. There were now 22 children in agency residential, and these were placements for children with the most complex needs. The number of children in Agency foster placements had also reduced from 62 to 50 which was also good news. There had also been a reduction in young people, mostly care leavers in residential accommodation that weren't subject to regulation, from 18 to 12. Overall, the reduction in those three categories of placements was very positive.

There had been an increase in number of children in adoptive placements from 13- 24, which was probably a result of the high number of babies coming in to care earlier this year.

Overall, the Group heard that in total 56 children had entered care and 41 children had left care, which was a net increase of 15 children so far this year.

It was highlighted that in terms of performance, we had 63% of children in foster care which was lower compared to regional and national averages. Of that we had 51% children in in-house foster care compared to a 46% national average which was very good. Only 12% of our children were in independent foster agency placements compared to the national average which was 26%.

It was also highlighted that we had more children in adoptive placements than the national and regional average, and fewer children in residential schools and secure provisions than national averages which was good. Members noted that children placed at home with parents was higher than the national average. It was identified that Placement stability was an area of improvement for us, and that work to understand this better would be carried out.

The number of Care Leavers still in touch with us was 100% which was fantastic.

Adoption performance was very good compared to national average with the number of days from entering into care to adoption placement being 433 days which was slightly better than the national average.

The Group then discussed the impact on children with the court system being shut down due to the pandemic. The delays meant children were sitting in foster placements much longer, which had creating a pressure in terms of placements. It was confirmed that it was being managed and risk assessment tools were being developed which would enable us to start moving children into their adoptive placements or rehabilitated home. It was confirmed that the Courts were now re-opening and prioritising in order of date.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

7 COVID-19 Update

Alyson provided the Group with an update on the impact that COVID-19 had had on services.

The Group heard that at the start of COVID-19, concerns were raised about placement stability being affected by COVID-19 as it was big ask for carers in terms of looking after children 24/7, home-schooling and all the pressures that came with that. During April and May placement stability was good with only one disruption. In June and July it became evident that a few more placements had become fragile as children had started to struggle. As a result of this, children were RAG rated in order to prioritise them for various levels of support. The reds were for children who were struggling the most and the number of reds had started to increase the longer this went on. The Group were informed that currently there were 6 placement searches ongoing, this was where foster placements had become so fragile that the children needed to move.

Another challenge was placement sufficiency, with the in-house fostering at capacity. In June there was an increase in demand, which proved very challenging to find anything. This was very much replicated across the North West and the Country, which meant agencies had been inundated with demand and were unfortunately unable to offer very little when a placement was needed. The Group were informed that it had been a struggle to meet demand, with in-house carers being stretched. It had been managed, with all children having been taken care of but it was starting to be strain. An initial concern was the ability to recruit new foster carers and adopters but the position of that was that we had received more registrations of interest in quarter 1 this year than the year before, so it hadn't been badly impacted as anticipated.

Care leavers had been remarkably resilient with only a small increase in the red RAG rating from June to July. Some care leavers had struggled not having family time with birth parents and as such a risk assessment for them had been developed. Some Care Leavers had struggled with mental health and received additional support from Child Action North West who offered some of their capacity to work with care leavers at no cost.

Children with Disabilities had been the most vulnerable in terms of their health. They were difficult to support as families didn't want people going into their homes as they were shielding, so there had been pressures on families to

cope with that. Again, children were RAG rated and ten children were prioritised for a short break at Appletrees.

In addition to RAG rating children, Alyson informed the Group of the additional support that had been provided, some of those highlighted were;

- Virtual contact with families, garden visits
- Virtual contact with professionals and agencies
- Pupil premium payments
- Financial support to some care leavers
- Extra payments to foster carers
- Laptops to help children who were digitally deprived

Janette updated the Group that at the onset of COVID-19 they reached out to the public via the shuttle, social media and billboards, that if they had any concerns about a child's welfare they knew exactly who to contact in the Borough. Janette informed the Group that they had seen an 11% increase in the number of referrals from the NSPCC and also a solid number of referrals from members of the public. There was some evidence to suggest that the campaign had worked quite well.

During the first month of lockdown contacts were low with only 120 contacts into children's social care, of those only 8 referrals were generated. This was about 50% lower in terms of numbers of contacts. This gradually increased to pre COVID-19 rates by early May with 200 contacts per week and around 25 referrals. Since then, contacts had remained at around 220, but the number of referrals had increased to 57, which was a significant increase. The complexity of the numbers of contacts meant there was a need to intervene, and this would continually be monitored going forward. Regionally similar patterns of referrals were being noted.

With regards to the Safeguarding Teams, the Group heard that all children referred were RAG rated as red until an initial assessment visit had been carried out. It was noted that a red RAG rating meant a face to face visit, amber rating was a mix of face to face and virtual visits, and a green rating was primarily virtual visits and monitoring.

Janette informed the Group that Child Protection conferences had been held virtually but were now progressing towards a blended approach to these meetings, looking towards a socially distanced face to face meeting which was more meaningful and the often the best approach.

Janette added that the team had worked extremely hard during this difficult period and expressed her thanks to staff.

Paula Quinn, on behalf of the Foster Carers Association, also added that it had been extremely difficult for foster carers, for many different reasons during this time. Issues around being able to contact social workers during COVID-19 and also the distribution of laptops were also raised and it was agreed that this would be followed up outside of the meeting. Charlotte Hesketh clarified that social workers were able to request laptops for any child with a social worker and could continue to do so if a laptop had not yet been received.

Councillor Gunn expressed her sincere thanks to the unstinting dedication that foster carers have showed.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

8 **Virtual School**

The Chair invited Charlotte Hesketh to provide an update to the Group on the attainment data figures for Children in Our Care. Members were provided with a presentation which gave an insight into the attainment data for Blackburn with Darwen Children in Our Care compared to the national averages.

Charlotte explained that the Virtual School were required to report on educational performance of Children in Our Care who were in care for 12 months or more on the 31st March in the year in which they would sit their exams. The results provided at the meeting were obtained in the academic year 2018/19.

The Group heard that the Early Years Foundation Stage was teacher assessed. Within the cohort, there were 6 children in total, 33% of which were boys. Of the 6 children 50% were Special Educational Needs (SEN) and 83% were educated in Blackburn with Darwen schools. Overall 50% achieved a good level of development which was slightly above the national figure of 48%.

Within the Year 1 phonics cohort, the Group heard that pupils undertook a screening test which sought to test whether children had learned to decode words using phonics to the required level. There were 9 children in cohort, 44% of which were boys. Despite high SEN figures of 33% and 22% for children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), the cohort had delivered good outcomes. 77.8% worked at the expected standard which was only marginally lower than the national average of 82.0%. This was a really good outcome for the cohort.

There were 10 children who formed Key Stage 1 with 70% being boys. Again this cohort had high percentages for SEN and EHCP. Members were informed that teachers used assessment judgements to report on the attainment, which took into account the pupil's performance in national curriculum tests in mathematics, English reading and grammar, punctuation and spelling. The data shown was slightly under the national figure for reading but with writing and maths the data was slightly above the national average. Again, given the high rate of SEN within this cohort, this was quite a positive outcome.

Within Key Stage 2 there were 15 children, 40% of which were SEN. Attainment was based on tests and teacher assessments. Referring to the combined measure (Reading, Writing, Maths), the group were informed that 40% achieved the expected standard in all of those areas which was slightly higher than the national average. It was highlighted that of the 9 that didn't achieve, 7 of those were boys.

Within Key Stage 4 there were 23 pupils in the cohort. 56.5% were boys, 26% had SEN, and 13% had an EHCP and just over half were educated within Blackburn with Darwen Schools. In recent years attainment measures had

changed. Charlotte explained that for Key Stage 4, the measures were now based on Attainment 8 which measured the average achievement of pupils in up to 8 qualifications, and Progress 8 which was a measure that aimed to capture the progress a pupil made from the end of KS2 to the end of KS4.

Charlotte informed the Group that GCSE's grades were now in the process of transitioning to being measured as 9-1, with 9 being the highest. Grade 4 would be considered as a 'standard' pass.

Lastly, the Group heard that last year was a really impressive year for the Year 11's. Grades were significantly higher than the national average in all the measures, with girls having out-performed the boys. There was also a first Grade 9 which was celebrated.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

9 Participation Report

The Chair invited Jaffer Hussain to update the Group on Participation.

Jaffer gave a verbal update to the Group about work that he had been concentrating on since the last meeting. COVID-19 had had a knock on effect on VOICE and had to be moved online. Young people felt that meeting on a weekly basis was too often and it was agreed to meet monthly instead. It was hoped that VOICE would begin to meet more regularly as soon as it was safe to do so. In the 4 sessions that have been held virtually, post cards had been developed and sent out to all young people in the Borough (via schools, social workers) highlighting key positive messages about staying safe and looking out for each other during the pandemic. It also included key contact numbers for them to contact.

In conjunction with Charlotte, Jaffer had carried out a piece of work which explored the educational impact of COVID-19 on children and young people. This brought about some interesting findings in relation to children missing being in school alongside their friends and being a structured space for learning.

Jaffer also highlighted that he had delivered a session for practice week with children and young people where views were obtained in relation to experiences with social workers and other key professionals and how communication could be improved going forward.

The Group learnt that Junior Voice unfortunately hadn't taken off due to the current circumstances but it was still a priority with work still ongoing. Jaffer had been working with the care leaver team to develop a mechanism where care leavers could be a part of shaping the direction of the services that they receive. Interviews, recruitment and selection of key personnel had continued, with young people having a pivotal role in making sure the right people be appointed. Young People had thoroughly enjoyed being part of that process.

Jaffer informed the Group that he had been tasked to do some research around digital engagement tools which would mean the continuation of engagement with children and young people going forward. Jaffer had been liaising with colleagues across the Country, and was in the process of

developing an internal mechanism through Microsoft Teams that would allow us to engage with as many young people as possible.

The Group heard that Jaffer had also been linking in with regional and national initiatives to see how best practice could be brought to Blackburn with Darwen, and in particular how Blackburn with Darwen could shape and influence programmes being delivered in other parts of the Country. One of the elements around that was a Young Inspectors Model which was in the initial stages of being developed. This would enable children, young people and key professionals to evaluate services.

Jaffer informed the Group that the champions had been continuing to do great work during the pandemic. Jaffer was in process of developing an annual report of what activities had been successfully delivered during the last year and what the plans were for the coming year.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted and that the annual report be delivered to a future meeting.

Signed:

Date:

Chair of the meeting
at which the minutes were confirmed