

CORPORATE PARENTING SPECIALIST ADVISORY GROUP

Monday 11th January 2021

PRESENT – Councillors: Whittle (In the Chair), Afzal, Bateson, Brookfield, Casey, Connor, Gee, Gunn, Kay, Khonat, McGurk, Patel, Rawat, Oates, Smith and Taylor.

OFFICERS –

Alyson Hanson – Head of Permanence

Jaffer Hussain - Participation Officer

Caroline Waldron – Deputy Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children and LAC

Jayne Ivory – Director Children’s Services

Joanne Siddle – Head of Education

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: Jackie Floyd, Jean Rigby, Sylvia Liddle and John Slater. Apologies were also received from Charlotte Hesketh, Claire Richardson, Angela Allen, Alison Hartley, Susan Clarke and Martin Eden.

2. **Declaration of Interest in items on this Agenda**

There were no Declarations of Interest received.

3. **Minutes of the previous Meeting held on 7th October 2020**

RESOLVED – The Minutes of the previous meeting held on Wednesday 7th October 2020 were approved as a correct record.

4. **Corporate Parenting Dashboard**

The Chair invited Alyson to update the Group on the Corporate Parenting Dashboard figures as of 6th January 2021.

Alyson informed the Group that the update would be a comparison between the data on the dashboard presented to this meeting and the dashboards from December 2019 and April 2020.

The Group heard that the number of Looked After Children had reduced significantly compared to 402 in December 2019, 410 in April 2020, and now down to 376.

It was highlighted that compared to 12 months ago there had also been a significant reduction in the number of babies and young children entering care from 48% down to 37% at present. Other age groups had seen a small increase, with a 6% increase in the 11-15 year olds. It was noted that this was largely due to an influx of 15 year olds coming in with mental health difficulties.

There had been a reduction in the number of children placed in in-house foster placements, from 138 in December 2019 to 128 currently, however the numbers had slightly increased for children placed in family and friend foster placements and also in care orders at home, compared to December 2019.

The Group heard that agency placement numbers had reduced from 92 in December 2019 to 71 placements as of today. This was positive in terms of the impact on the budget however it was noted that we were now receiving a contribution to those placements.

Alyson informed the Group that in terms of destinations of children and young people leaving care, there had been a significant reduction in the numbers returning to parents. In April 2020 it was 23% but as of today it was 18%. It was also noted that children leaving care to be adopted had increased from 14% in December 2019 to 18% at present, and there had also been an increase in children leaving on special guardianship orders from 19% in December 2019 to 23% currently, which was positive.

Looking at the performance table Alyson highlighted that we were now in line with regional comparators in terms of children in care, with 97 per 10,000 in care, although we were somewhat higher than the national average.

The Group heard that the percentage of children in foster care was now the same as the regional average, and that the percentage of adoptive placements was higher than both regional and national averages. For Placement Stability, this was now sitting at 8% which was a significant improvement from December 2019 when it was 14.7%, and 13% in April 2020. Alyson informed the Group that this was now better than regional and national averages and was largely down to good support, good placement matching and carer resilience.

Placement stability with children in care for 2 years or more was also an improving picture with an increase from 62% to 66% compared to 12 months ago.

Finally, Alyson highlighted that in terms of adoption performance overall we had placed a high number of harder to place children that take longer to find placements for, in particular older children and children with additional needs.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

5. Participation Update

Jaffer Hussain was invited to update the Group on Participation activity since the last meeting.

The Group received a brief update and heard that Corporate Parenting Month in November 2020 had been really successful, with a number of officers and Members meeting with a range of young people ageing from 8-25 years. Jaffer expressed his thanks to all that took part.

Jaffer informed the Group that Jenny and Declan were now in post and would be representing the voices of young people both at this Group and any other groups in relation to Corporate Parenting. They will be engaging with as many children in care and children leaving care as possible, so that they can convey their views.

The Group heard that programs were continuing to run as usual online with VOICE Group meeting weekly, Junior VOICE meeting fortnightly and Care Leavers Forum meeting monthly. They were working towards rebranding the groups and continuing to raise awareness about being in care.

The Group noted that 7 colleagues had now been successfully trained up to become Investors in Children Local Evaluators which meant that we could now carry out our own evaluations. This would save on cost but more importantly it would allow us to share best practice across the Borough and allow us to continue to having an accredited national framework.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

6. Foster Carer's Update

Paula informed the Group that Foster Carers were concerned about the lockdown this time even more so than the last lockdown especially when it came to contact time with families. Paula was working with Heads of Services to try and minimise face to face contact as Foster Carers wanted to safeguard themselves and their families.

The Group heard that those Foster Carers that were educating from home were incurring additional costs as the majority of work was now being done online which for many, was a drain on their internet. This also brought about additional work and stress. For those children who were attending school, concerns had also been raised that some school buses were not running. Joanne Siddle agreed to liaise with Paula and look into this matter.

Paula had been liaising with Charlotte Hesketh (LAC Virtual Head) on behalf of carers regarding the recent lockdown and school closures. Charlotte had been providing excellent advice and support to carers educating from home.

Paula informed the Group that the recent pay increase had been very much welcomed however questions had been asked about having it back dated to April 2020. Jayne Ivory confirmed this would be looked into.

Finally, Paula informed the Group that it had been quite unfortunate that they had not been able to do anything for the children at the end of last year but it was hoped this would be rectified in the not too distant future and that a big celebration event would be welcomed when possible.

Sam raised concerns about the impact the lockdown would have on children's mental health as they were unable to go out and see their friends. Joanne Siddle thanked Paula and Sam for their update and agreed that the mental health and wellbeing of children was a concern. They were advised by Joanne that each secondary school had an allocated member of staff to deal with mental health issues and that Foster Carers were able to request support. The Group were informed that it was hoped this would also be rolled out to primary schools in due course. Joanne agreed to contact Mark Swindell from the Trail Blazer programme and ask that he introduce himself to Foster Carers and provide an overview of what support was available. Alyson Hanson also informed the Group that the REVIVE service was also available, and that social workers can make referrals for an assessment.

Jayne Ivory thanked Paula and Sam for their feedback and also Foster Carers for the contributions made towards the outcomes of our young people. Jayne also reminded the Group of the Celebration Event for Children in Our Care that took place last year and how it had such a great uptake and was a great opportunity to do something, albeit virtually.

Cllr Julie Gunn informed the Group that concerns of data charges for educating at home was a national issue and it was hoped that education sites would be exempt from data charges. Cllr Gunn would follow this up and feed back any findings in due course.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

7. Children in Care Ofsted Inspection

The findings from the Ofsted Children in Our Care Focus Visit which took place in February 2020, were presented to the Group.

Jayne informed the Group that the Inspectors looked at children who had just become Looked After Children. They wanted to focus on the quality of our Child in Need and Child Protection Service because children who became Looked After were often already known to the services, as were their families.

Jayne highlighted the findings from the focus visit and informed the Group of the areas of social work practice that needed improvement, as per the presentation.

The Group heard of the work that had been done so far and despite some of the challenges faced during the pandemic, significant changes had already taken place. Jayne highlighted areas of Practice Improvement contained within the presentation and informed the Group of the 7 Department Strategic Priorities in the updated Service Development Plan, which was communicated with partners and through partnerships with schools, colleagues in health and the police. The Group looked at the framework for implementing the Service Development Plan and heard about the next steps, noting that the Regional Peer Challenge would be taking place in February 2021, leading onto the Ofsted Annual Conversation scheduled to take place on 24th February 2021.

Cllr Bateson informed the Group that the Inspectors had picked up on the neglect issue and the issue of it not always being recognised. Cllr Bateson suggested that all Members should undertake training on this particular issue.

Discussions also took place around staff health and wellbeing and what support was in place for staff dealing with challenging workloads. Paula added that Foster Carers would also benefit from any additional support that was available, especially as they were also feeling the pressure more during this third lockdown.

RESOLVED – That the Group note the update and that Jayne Ivory liaise with David Fairclough with regards to arranging mandatory training for Members on neglect.

8. **COVID-19 Update**

Alyson Hanson provided a verbal update on the impact that covid has had on the service.

Alyson acknowledged that Looked After Children have also been impacted by covid, and that they were missing their friends, normal routines and activities just like everyone else. The Group heard that the influx of adolescents coming in to care with mental health problems could not be blamed entirely on covid however as a result of covid, placement sufficiency had been impacted. Those young people were challenging to place and it had been difficult finding placements for new children coming into care. This was partly due to court proceedings being delayed which resulted in children staying with foster carers for much longer periods. This created additional pressure on placements. It was noted that this was replicated nationally as well as the North West. The Group heard that care proceedings would normally take 26 weeks but due to covid, were now running at 60 weeks.

There had also been an impact on placement sufficiency in terms of the difficulty recruiting new foster carers. Normally recruitment events are held annually but this hasn't been possible during the pandemic. The Group heard that we were on target to approve around 10-12 new sets of foster carers this year and it was hoped this would come to fruition by the end of the year.

Alyson highlighted that in terms of the red RAG rated children, this hadn't changed much over the pandemic and that it had remained fairly static.

As part of Corporate Parenting month which took place in November there was a strong focus on covid and the impact it has had on Looked After Children. As part of that a collaborative audit took place. Twenty cases of children and young people who were RAG rated red were looked at, as well as interviewing key professionals who were involved in supporting Looked After Children. The audit focussed on the lived experience of the child and their relationships with key professionals and found the following:
good evidence of statutory reviews and visits, timescales being met, good evidence that social workers and other professionals were in tune with the

needs of children in care and being able to meet their needs, good evidence of relationship based practice, good evidence of the child's voice coming through (wishes and feelings were evidenced), good evidence of options pre care proceedings being exhausted, health education and wellbeing needs being met.

Alyson informed the Group that ten Out of Borough placements were also audited and the following was found: good evidence that needs had been met, children were accessing education, leisure and health, maintaining good relationships with key people, good placement stability, family time was well managed and maintained.

Some of the issues that arose from the findings were as follows: young people who had been allocated a new social worker had found it hard to form a relationship particularly especially with virtual contact only, hard to maintain direct work such as life story work which was more fruitful when done face to face, delay in the action of court directives, concerns around lack of placement choice, matching and potential for future disruption. Alyson also informed the Group that complex needs and care packages had been harder to manage, and there had been an impact on short breaks for children during the pandemic.

Alyson informed the Group that overall, practice week gave assurances that there were some good practices going on but highlighted some issues that had risen as a result of covid.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

9. Feedback on Corporate Parenting Month

Alyson and Jayne provided a brief update on what happened during Corporate Parenting Month highlighting that there was a very strong focus on the impact of covid generally.

In total there were 52 different activities, and of those were five Learning Circles. The Group heard that a Learning Circle was the process of pulling together a number of professionals that had been part of the team around the child and the each circle had a specific focus:-

- role and responsibility of Corporate Parent
- placement stability
- achieving early permanence
- effectiveness of PEPS
- education outcomes for Looked After Children

Other activities included the collaborative audit and consultation with children and young people, both of which had been mentioned in earlier in the meeting, four practice observations, feedback from parents and carers, workshops etc and all of these culminated in the Celebration of Achievement event which took place on the 1st December.

The overall outcome of Corporate Parenting Month was that there was lots of evidence of good practice.

Jayne added that Corporate Parenting month allowed us to focus on the experiences of children and young people in care, particularly with Care Leavers who did very well to progress on to higher education. This allowed us to learn from those experiences and look to share and model that as our standard practice.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

Signed:

Date:

Chair of the meeting
at which the minutes were confirmed