

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 11 September 2013

Present:

Members of the Panel

Councillors:

Yousef Dahmash

Bob Hicks

Jenny St John

John Whitehouse

Chris Williams (Chair)

Officers

Shinderpaul Bhangal, Practice Leader, Participation and Service Development

Mary Eccleston, Children's Reviewing Manager

Ann Mawdsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Sharon Shaw, Operations Manager - Adoption

Brenda Vincent, Service Manager - South

Children in Care Council (CiCC) Members

Laura Dodds

Daniel Kalcutt-Smith

Chris Ward

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Peter Fowler.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Chris Williams declared a non-pecuniary interest as a member of the Adoption Panel.

(3) Minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2013

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2013 were agreed as a correct record with the following correction:

Minute 1.3 - Charter for Care Leavers and related issues

Bullet point 5 – It was confirmed that the Corporate Parenting Panel awareness training for new members had been scheduled for 4 December 2013.

Matters Arising from Previous Meeting(s)

1. Corporate Parenting Panel leaflet

Brenda Vincent tabled the first mock-up of the leaflet, which had been prepared by Mike Jackson (Communications). Members were asked to provide any general comments on the leaflet as well as a photograph and a short biography to Brenda Vincent by 26 September. Brenda noted that the leaflet would be given to children in care to inform them about the work of the Panel, and would be accessible on the Council's website. An updated version of the leaflet would be discussed at the workshop in October.

2. CiCC and Corporate Parenting Workshop - October

The Panel agreed that the workshop needed to be as interactive as possible and Shinderpaul Bhangal agreed to discuss this with the CiCC to agree how this could be done. It was agreed that the workshop would take place in Warwick (venue to be confirmed) with a light lunch at 1:30, and the workshop starting at 2:00.

3. Three and more placement moves

Brenda Vincent made the following points:

- The information provided was collated nationally and covered the period up to 31 March 2013.
- The average for England was about 11% and Warwickshire's averaged between 12 and 12.5%.
- There were a number of differences between local authorities which influenced these figures including children's homes, the LAC population, demographics and individual circumstances.
- The planning and recording of placements also impacted on statistics.
- It was recognised that it was more difficult to find the right placement for teenagers.
- Warwickshire was looking at developing a 'solo placement scheme' as some children did better with a single placement, and it was thought this would lead to more fostering stability.
- The data on independent living differed across the county due to the differences in the range of suitable places for young people to move to from foster care. Laura Dodds referred to the the Foyer option in Coventry, which is a charitable supported housing project providing 63 bedsits for 16 to 24-year-olds who face homelessness where they can live for up to two years. Members of the Panel asked officers to make arrangements for a site visit to the Foyer

and to Newbold Lodge in Warwickshire, to give them an idea of what was available.

- The Panel agreed that the number of foster places needed to increase to meet demand, and there needed to be better choices for young people.

The Panel requested the following reports:

- Six-monthly updates on the 'Three and more placement moves' data, with the first report in February 2014.
- A report to the February meeting on housing-related issues and the work being done with housing authorities on options for independent housing and the support given to young people moving into independent housing.
- A report from CiCC inspectors on the Foyer and Newbold housing options.

4. Legal status of looked after children

Brenda Vincent outlined the legal status of looked after children, including the different types of court orders and the increase in legal action year-on-year that had taken place since the Baby Peter's death in Haringey in 2007 and the subsequent reforms that had taken place. In response to a query on outcomes, Brenda Vincent noted that outcomes were measured through the experiences of individual young people and through Ofsted inspections of services. Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services in Warwickshire had last been inspected by Ofsted in 2011 and were rated as good. Although it was acknowledged that there may be areas within these services that needed to improve on outcomes, Warwickshire was the only authority in the West Midlands to receive a good rating.

Brenda Vincent reported that from 1 November 2013 the Ofsted inspection regime was changing from individual inspections of different services (adoption, fostering, looked after children etc.) to one combined inspection and that the inspections would focus on meeting children and young people and tracking their experiences, so would focus on outcomes rather than data. The new framework had been piloted in Solihull and feedback on this would be sought for the Inspection Preparation Group

The next inspection was due in 2014, but it was anticipated that there may be an inspection of the adoption services carried out before the changes on 1 November 2013.

Members requested a report to a future meeting on the Framework for future Ofsted Inspections.

5. Playing Cards

Members all received a pack of the playing cards which were specifically devised for and would be issued to all looked after children aged 13 and over. Brenda Vincent reported that there had already been a lot of activity with the highest number of hits on '10 ways to look after mental health' (2063 to date) and 'Finding out about benefits' (395). The next highest were 'Child abuse', 'ChildLine' and 'Apprenticeships'.

The cards enabled young people to access relevant and up-to-date information on related national and Warwickshire websites and also gave the service a steer on what young people were looking for. Brenda Vincent added that these cards had been suggested by young people themselves, and that they were still working on improving the links etc.

Shinderpaul Bhangal noted that he had met with the 'Who Cares Trust' who had expressed an interest in the playing cards. He added that the Who Cares Trust had helped set up the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (APPG) in 1998 and has acted as Secretariat for the group since then.

Members discussed whether the information on the playing cards would not be valuable to young people more generally and asked for this suggestion to be made to Hugh Disley, Head of Service for Early Intervention to consider how this could be done through Targeted Youth Support.

6. Member Induction

It was confirmed that the member induction for new members on Looked After Children was scheduled for 4 December 2013. There was a broad discussion around how what form this should take and how young people could be involved and there was general agreement that the training needed to deliver a clear understanding of the responsibilities of elected members, how these were discharged in Warwickshire and an opportunity for elected members and CiCC members to interact. Brenda Vincent agreed to take this forward.

2. Young People's Questionnaire

Shinderpaul Bhangal set out the background to the Young People's Questionnaire, which had been carried out in February 2013, and would be used to capture a measure of what people (both staff and young people aged 16+) perceived.

During the discussion that followed these points were noted:

1. The two main messages to come from the questionnaire from a young people point of view were around listening and consistent contact. Both of these areas impacted directly on the ability to get to know young people and their needs.
2. It was agreed that it would be useful to repeat the exercise in order to be able to identify trends, but that this would be more useful over a longer time period than 12 months, with a shorter, more focussed set of questions around key messages and that should be done to improve services.
3. Brenda Vincent noted that the questionnaire results would be considered by both the 'Leaving Care Strategy Group' and the CiCC, focussing mainly on the results with the biggest differentials between staff and young people and agreeing three main priorities for moving forward. The outcomes of these discussions would be brought back to the Corporate Parenting Panel. Laura Dodd added that when considering the outcomes, key themes needed to be identified and the CiCC needed to be asked what could be done to make improvements.

The Corporate Parenting Panel agreed to receive a further report to their meeting on 10 February 2014 including how the three main priorities had been identified and the Action Plan for taking this forward.

3. Data Set

Brenda Vincent introduced the report which presented data up to the end of July 2013. She made the following points:

- i. The increase in LAC was mainly, but not exclusively, in the north of the county. This had always been the case historically, but the rate of increase was also higher in the north,
- ii. Nuneaton and Bedworth had previously been managed by separate teams, which were now combined, based at the Hilary Road Centre.

During the ensuing discussion the following points were raised:

1. Members agreed that the data as it was presented was difficult to analyse and did not show a clear picture for Members to understand. It was agreed that the figures needed to reflect a longer period (i.e. quarterly rather than monthly) to show progress and trends over a longer period of time.
2. The requested data (quarterly over a two-year period) should only reflect the Warwickshire total with the more detailed breakdowns included in an appendix.

The Panel agreed to receive a further report on data at their meeting in February 2014.

4. Adoption Services – Annual Report

Sharon Shaw introduced the Annual Report, and made the following points:

- i. Adoption services had seen huge growth over the last 12 months in every area.

- ii. There had been an increase in the approval of adopters to 48, which was up from 38 for the previous year.
- iii. Assessments had been reduced to six months in line with Government guidance.
- iv. There had been an increase in the number of adoption orders to 33, including two sibling groups of three children and six sibling groups of two children, which was good news. Sharon Shaw added that the adoptions included a range of ages, with the eldest child 11 years old.
- v. The service continued to work well in a number of areas including surrogacy, birth records, counselling and supporting families, despite being a small team.
- vi. The service had had two additional staff members for a 12 month period through the Government grant, which had been ring-fenced for adoption and which had been used for staff to introduce and process new ways of working in areas such as family finding, life story books and services to birth parents. This had helped to cope with increased pressures, but there was an issue around recruitment in Warwickshire and the budget position from 1 April 2014 onwards was unknown.
- vii. The Adoption Service had 11 returned adopters from the previous year as well as a number of applications from adopters living in other authorities.
- viii. The statistics in the Annual Report were up to 31 March 2013. Sharon Shaw reported that there had been 22 Adoption Orders since that date, which represented a 50% increase over a two-year period. There had also been 24 adopters approved this year already.
- ix. There was an increased in the number of LAC with approved adoption plans

A discussion was held and the following was noted:

- 1. In response to a comment that Warwickshire was not good at publicising its successes, Sharon Shaw noted that there is a national Adoption Scorecard, which was signposted to through the National Gateway for Adoption, and the information was available on this site. She added that Warwickshire was good at self-promotion and informing people, and that she was very proud of the service
- 2. Members were reminded that although the Warwickshire Adoption Services were rated the best in the West Midlands, that any reduction in resources would impact on the service particularly in periods of higher numbers of children with adoption plans
- 3. In response to a question asking who would have sight of the Annual Report, it was noted that the Annual Report would be given to the Portfolio Holder (Councillor Heather Timms) and would be included in the staff core brief.
- 4. There had only been one adoption that had failed after a three-year period, and while this would legally be considered the same as a LAC, there may be additional issues around behaviour and sense of identity that would require extra support and training. It was noted that there were a number of recognised key points where support was needed for an adopting family, this was significant in the beginning, and usually again at around the age of eight or nine and again during the teenage

- years. The ability to continue this level of support would become more and more pressured and the numbers increased.
5. From May 2013, all adopters are entitled to the new 'Adoption passport', which enables them to see exactly what support is available for them and their child from the Local Authority. The Local Authority is legally required to continue the support process for a period of three years and it was noted that there were some inter-area boundary issues in terms of support.
 6. It was noted that the areas of fostering and adoption were highly regulated activities and the service was having to respond to a continuous stream of changes coming from Government.
 7. The Government had put in place performance timescales to try to speed up the process of adoption. This had had the opposite effect in some areas, where new applications were not being considered. Warwickshire had not done this, but it was thought there would need to be a risk assessment carried out by the end of the year to review the service in light of future funding and whether the ring fenced Adoption Support grant is to be continued.
 8. There was a lot of work to be done around the age groups that were considered 'hard to adopt'.
 9. Since April 2013 there had been an increase in the number of fostered children that had been adopted. This was encouraged by Government and in Warwickshire, the Council needed to be clear about how this was going to be managed. Work on this had already begun. Members were reminded that the Fostering and Adoption Services in Warwickshire were distinctly different and separate services, with a few cross-overs. It was important that people did not see fostering as a 'backdoor to adoption' and that the focus remained on meeting children's needs for life.
 10. Sharon Shaw outlined Warwickshire's comprehensive adoption process.

Members requested a report on the Risk Analysis for Adoption Services to their February 2014 meeting.

5 Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service

Mary Eccleston introduced the report setting out the Annual Report and responsibilities of the service, noting that all Looked After Children were required to have statutory reviews looking at how plans were progressed for those children, independent from the case management. She added that the new IRO Handbook, which was a requirement for the Annual Report, detailed all the requirements of the IROs and the Local Authority in terms of setting up and supporting the IRO Service.

It was noted that the Annual Report was produced for the lead Member (Councillor Heather Timms), in line with statutory guidance.

The Panel made the following observations:

1. The Annual Report had too much detail and future versions did not need to include all the background information.
2. Members were concerned that the caseload of the Service was double that set out in statutory guidance, which implied this guidance was not being met.
3. There was a 'sunset' clause in the current Act that stated that if there wasn't evidence the Independent Review Service could operate effectively, that the service could be placed outside of the Local Authority.
4. There was currently no benchmarking information available, but Warwickshire was part of a regional group that would feed its performance information into a national group.
5. Members were concerned at the number of references to the Service not meeting nationally recommended levels.

The Panel agreed to ask the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ask the Portfolio Holder to investigate the difficulties experienced by the Service around recruitment, which could be related to comparative pay scales for IRO officers.

6 Report of the Complaints Service

The Panel agreed to defer this report to the next meeting.

7 Any Other Business

- (1) The final version of the CiCC leaflet was tabled. It was agreed that a copy of this would be circulated to all Members as well as a copy being put on the Warwickshire Direct website.
- (2) The following meeting dates were agreed:
 - 30 October 2013 – 2:00 pm meeting with CiCC following a light lunch (at 1:30 pm)
 - 9 December 2013 – 1:30 pm
 - 10 February 2014 – 10:00 am
 - 14 April 2014 – 10:00 am.
- (3) Brenda Vincent noted that the National Children's Bureau had put forward funding for CiCC and elected Members to attend training workshops. These places would be taken up by Cllr Heather Timms, 2 CiCC representatives and an officer. The date was not yet known.

.....

Chair

The meeting closed at 12:35 am