

Corporate Parenting Panel

Monday 14 February 2022

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell (Chair)
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse

Officers

Shinderpaul Bhangal, Corporate Parenting (Team Leader - Participation)
John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children and Families
Ian Donnachie, Apprentice - Children in Care 14 - 18
Alisha Howe, Apprentice - Fostering Team
Deena Moorey, Virtual School Head
Umar Teerab, Family Support Worker

Others Present

Jackie Channell Head of safeguarding - Warwickshire,
Jemma Fordham, Operations Manager ACE Adoption

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillor Jeff Morgan
Councillor Marian Humphreys
Chris Baird, Assistant Director (Education) (Contractor)
Matthew Biggs Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Education & Early Years)
Melissa (Liss) Phillips, Family Support Worker
Sharon Shaw, Service Manager – Corporate Parenting Service

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were approved as a true and correct record.

2. Children in Care Council - Update

Umar Teerab (Family Support Worker) informed the partnership that the council met with the Homeless Advice and Support Team from Ministry of the Housing on the 5th October 2021 so young people could highlight issues to them like higher rent for supported accommodation. This accommodation enables young people to move forward with their lives so the council suggested a rent reduction. The council noted the difference in policies between the district and boroughs which made the policy confusing for young people to understand. Other issues they highlighted were the lack of trained staff so young people were not getting the proper advice and loneliness in young people due to the restriction with visitors. This loneliness could lead to drug use which affects young people mentally and physically and this could make other young people feel unsafe in their supported accommodation. The council suggested a guarantor scheme to be implemented until the young person was 21.

Ian Donnachie (Children in Care 14-18 years Apprentice) informed the panel that on the 19th October the council had Mark Riddell from the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers (DfE) visit them to discuss things like more supported housing for care leavers. Mark Riddell suggested several things like a partnership be set up between the agencies and care leavers so the care leavers know what was on offer, and a multi-agency approach for care leavers so they had a 'one stop approach' when looking for support, and to review young people's tax offers in line with a letter sent from the MHCLG (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government) that asks local authorities to consider a tax exemption offer for care leavers up to 25 years old. Umar Teerab added that Mark Riddell was a national advisor who travelled around other local authorities and he was really impressed with the work that Warwickshire had done for care leavers.

Shinderpaul Bhagal (C&F Social Work Operational Team Leader) stated that Ofsted inspected the county council's children's services and the inspectors met with young people on two separate occasions. They also met with the Children in Care Council Care Leavers Forum and care leaver apprentices. The feedback was very positive, and the inspectors identified several strengths. An additional corporate parenting panel meeting was held on the 18th October to enable districts and boroughs to understand how children and young people could influence council services; young people supported this presentation.

Alisha Howe (Fostering Team Apprentice) informed the panel that she and Ian Donnachie made videos as part of an entitlement booklet for care leavers. These videos were sent out between October 2021-January 2022 to personal advisors, care leavers and on social media so that everyone could see these videos. Future videos were planned around housing. The videos received very positive feedback from care leavers.

Shinderpaul Bhagal informed the panel that in October's 2021 council meeting, there was a focus on young people accessing their files and the process that is involved in this. November's meeting focused on a 'dictionary of care' i.e. using words that more suitable and acceptable to young people as opposed to using words from professionals. December's meeting focused celebrating Christmas with activities and January's meeting focused on looking at the priorities for the children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum for 2022. This list of priorities will be shared at a future meeting.

Ian Donnachie continued that the Myton allotment project was progressing with three beds being built over the summer of 2021 with young people coming down to plant their plants. Three beds still need to be built and a similar allotment project was planned for the new Children's home in Stratford. The allotment project gave young people experience in building as well as teaching them to understanding about different vegetables and how they grow. This project was enjoyed by the young people taking part in it.

Umar Teerab stated that Asylum seeker children played football together every Sunday since 2018. They play across Warwickshire as well as Coventry and Birmingham. Attendance can be as high as 38-39 young people and on the 13th February 2022, 20 young people played football in the rain.

Shinderpaul Bhagal concluded that over Halloween, escape rooms were run for young people and for the care leaver celebration week, there were several trips and activities for young people e.g. Alton Towers, Drayton Manor and Western Super Mare. There were 38 Christmas presents and meals sent out to young people on the 21st December. These meals were provided by a local charity and the gifts were obtained by Liss Philipps. There was a Christmas meal prepared for young people at Myton Park offices on the 27th December. At the national Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, Liss Philipps won two awards, one was for best public speaker 2021 and the other one was Champion of Champions 2021. These show the contributions made by young people towards the work of the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum and the Youth Benchmarking Forum. Umar Teerab won these awards for 2020 so this meant that Warwickshire won these two awards two years in a row, and he presented Liss Philipps awards to her.

The Chair praised all the work done in the report.

In response to the Chair, Ian Donnachie stated that his highlight was making connections with other young people doing projects and it was good that young people were relating with each other as they had been through similar situations. He added that it was good that these young people were experiencing new things together.

Umar Teerab stated that his highlight was the apprenticeship with the corporate parent as they engage with the lead officers who make decisions for care leavers. He praised these officers working with them to see what care leavers want/need.

Alisha Howe stated that her highlight was working with the SLT (senior leadership team) to improve things for care leavers as well as everything that she learnt from her apprenticeship.

Resolved

That the Panel note the work of the Children in Care Council (CiCC), Care Leavers Forum (CLF) and the Participation Team.

That the Panel acknowledge the work that continues to take place with young people during the public health crisis

3. Performance Data

John Coleman (Assistant Director – Children & Families) informed the partnership that was slightly outdated but children in care in Warwickshire had decreased to 831 from 855 since November 2021.

The council aims to get more children leave care then be taken into it, between October 2021 to February 2022, more children were leaving care. In November 2021, the council took in 23 asylum seeking young people into care after the Home Office opened a hotel in Warwickshire, but 53 children left care that month through adoption or SGOs (special guardianship orders). For the 2021/22 financial year, more children left care then entered it in Warwickshire. In the 2020/21 financial year, there was an increase of 106 children entering care.

There was a record number of children entering care in Warwickshire who were asylum seeking children (108) children who are asylum seekers, this was partly because of the Home Office hotel. In December 2021, 12 children in foster care had been placed for adoption and this had now increased to 20. 84 children were in residential care, but this had decreased 74 by the time of the meeting as they either moved into foster care or moved back home. 19% of children in foster care were placed at least 20 miles away from their family home so most children in care were placed in Warwickshire.

Children going missing regularly increased to 26 with them having 77 missing episodes between them. When a child goes missing, they get a home interview to see why they went missing; most children go missing because of issues around exploitation and county lines. 10 out of the 26 children were being carefully monitored as they had exploitation/county lines warnings around them. Warwickshire was aiming to improve its stability figures; a child having three or more placements in 12 months was above the national average and children having a long-term placement was below the national average. These issues were caused by a shortage of placements.

There were some good news stories in the stability data because some children move from a foster placement to a family member which is often more permanent but this impacts the stability statistics. Work around identifying family members who could take children in before they get moved multiple times was being investigated.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse expressed concerns with the missing children numbers. In response to Councillor Roodhouse and the Chair, John Coleman stated that the exploitation team were working with these children in detail to try and understand what was happening to them the team works with the police to put distraction/disruption techniques in place. John Coleman suggested asking some children who had been at risk of exploitation/county lines talking to the panel of their experiences.

Numbers of children in care had decreased because the courts were frozen due to Covid-19 and they were not moving anything effectively but things had started up again since October-November 2021 this had started up again. Children who were waiting to be adopted or an SGO, or children who were going home after placement finally had their orders revoked. It was believed that the spike for children in care had come and gone and this number should continue to reduce.

In November 2021 the council made an agreement with CAFCASS (children and family court advisory and support service) and the local court system at court for there to be a new protocol: when a child is going to leave care and go back to a parent who has their order revoked, there was a whole court hearing this which takes a long time to do; the new protocol is that if there are no objections to a child leaving care then there would be no hearing and a judge would end the court order in a day. This reduced children in care cases by 20 so work was being done to keep the protocol implemented. The other reason was the investments in children services which all went live on the 1st July 2021 to keep children out of care. These investments were working on reducing the number of children coming into care and helping them stay with their families or with extended families. At the time of the meeting there were 831 children in care and the council was aiming to get this to 830 or less by the 31st March 2021 and below 800 in the next six months.

It was agreed that looking deeply into county lines would go on the work programme for a future meeting.

The Chair praised the work done with CAFCASS and getting children to live with families before going into foster care.

John Coleman added that nationally Warwickshire had the highest number of children placed with family members instead of being in foster care (140 at the time of the meeting).

4. Warwickshire Adoption Report

Jemma Fordham (Operations Manager, ACE Hub) informed the panel that ACE (adoption central England) celebrated its fourth birthday at the beginning of February, and it was built on the strong adoption performance in Warwickshire and existing stable management structure.

One ACE's biggest achievements was becoming the 4th organisation globally to become a DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy) certified organisation. DDP is the kind of therapeutic approach that all ACE staff are trained in, including business support. Recently ACE recruited psychologists as part of a two-year pilot help support ACE's families; roughly half of ACE's resources go to supporting families and understanding the kind of therapeutic needs ACE children have. This is used to support the families to through the adoption.

The council's legal team engaged with ACE on a regular basis to provide a high level of robust scrutiny for any ACE plans coming through. This included, care planning, contact planning, maintaining family relationships and issues to do with sibling relationships within adoption. There was a strong link within Warwickshire amongst the children's teams and ACE so they could get advice on adoption plans. Despite the pandemic, more children had been placed for adoption due to work with the children's teams to get the necessary risk assessments done to manage these placements safely. Adopter approval timescales had been delayed because of the pandemic and this affecting getting medical reports through from prospective adopters, this was now being addressed. 80% of children adopted were adopted within Warwickshire which was easier to offer adoption support. ACE's foster-adoption record was very good with only four placements not moving to adoption out of 86 as of February 2021.

The foster-adoption process was being reviewed to see if the take up of early permanents amongst our prospective adopters could be improved and whether they could use early permanents for children who may have a placement move. For example, older children and not

just new-borns who might have to move foster placement so ACE could try and minimise the number of placement moves they have before they are adopted. The website was revamped, and this received positive feedback.

New areas of practice development were being worked on which was called the 'enhanced support care scheme' which was daytime respite for ACE families who were struggling later on in their adoption journey because earlier support networks 'dropped off'. Sometimes the children's behaviour becomes more challenging, and their needs become greater as they get older. This scheme was to make sure there was a support system in place to maintain these families when it was difficult.

The trends from the previous financial year were like the current financial year. Ofsted were very positive in terms of adoption and the relationship between teams in Warwickshire. The adoption panel advisors noted the improvement in the quality of the reports going to panel.

John Coleman added that the tracking of children in care was important to make sure that permanency is achieved in a timely way. The new officer was doing a phenomenal job with chasing what was happening with these children and making sure that they had a clear plan. This work was recognised by Ofsted in the latest inspection report. Placement orders (the ability for the local authority to place a child with adopters) had reduced since 2017 but was roughly around 30 since 2018. It was expected for this number to be higher at the end of the 2021/22, roughly 31-32. Warwickshire struggled to place sibling groups so to resolve this, Warwickshire was looking at paying an additional fee to adopters if they have a sibling group because adopting siblings was a financial impact.

Warwickshire was performing better in all areas than the England average apart from children entering care by court authority placement, but this was a courts issue and impacted by Covid-19. Only two children experienced a disruption in 2020/21 which was when children were placed with adopters, and they did not get on. These children experienced permanency since then, but a lot of work was done to learn from these disruptions. Work was also done on 'family time' which focused on when birth families located their adopted relatives. Historically, adoptions were closed with possible 'letterbox contact' where adopters would write to the birth family on how their children were settling and getting on. 'Family time' looked at the appropriateness of children having direct contact with some extended family members; a culture change around children contacting their birth family needed to be investigated as this could provide stability for children. An assessment would be needed to look into this.

The Chair praised the children's team for obtaining the 'good' result from Ofsted.

Councillor Caroline Philips praised the work being done by ACE as children being separated from their birth families could be a traumatic experience.

In response to Councillor Philipps, John Coleman stated that adopting parents were told to be open and honest with their adopted children about them being adopted and some families were really good with keeping birth families informed of their children's progress and making sure that their children did not lose connections with their birth family. Jemma Fordham added that ACE were aware that contact meetings were not always 'organic' so work around this and supporting adoptive families and children was done around contact with birth families e.g. with family group conferencing.

John Coleman concluded that Coventry were planning on basing their adoption service around ACE's practices.

5. ACE Annual Report

Included as part of the minutes for Item 4

6. The Vanguard Project (verbal update)

It was agreed that the Vanguard Project would be delayed to the next meeting due to the relevant officers not being available for the meeting. John Coleman said that the CCG (clinical commissioning group) will receive some money around trauma informed practice and they will work with Warwickshire on this.

7. Development of the Work Programme for 2020/2021

The panel noted the work programme, the following items were added to it:

- County lines, someone from the police will be asked to talk on this item
- Exploitation, this could be a one item meeting.
- The Vanguard Project (delayed to March 2022)

Warwickshire's district and borough councils as corporate parents - John Coleman informed the panel that the districts and boroughs were met with in November 2021 which led to them and the county making 'corporate parenting promise/charter' which will be shared objectives for all the councils to meet e.g. for things like housing and money for leisure passes. This would be taken to the TFG and presented to the panel after April 2022. The panel praised the work done so far.

8. Good News Stories

John Coleman informed the panel that the Ofsted inspectors spoke to Councillor Jeff Morgan as Chair of this panel, reviewed the panel's minutes for the last two years and interview him on how he thought the panel was working. Ofsted themselves praised the work done by the panel. Councillor Morgan wrote to a young person who was a Warwickshire child in care who won a place/scholarship at the National Ballet School after he was in the final for Britain's Got Talent. Another child in care got a 1st in their Business degree from the University of Reading.

Jackie Channel informed the panel that they successfully appointed a new designated nurse for looked after children/children in care. This post was a CCG one that will go across Coventry and Warwickshire to create equity across all areas. The new nurse worked with children within the South Warwickshire Foundation Trust, and she was due to start at the end of April, beginning of May. She will attend panel meetings after she has started her job role.

The panel praised the speeches and positive attitudes from the children in care council.

9. Any Other Business

None.

10. Date of Next Meeting

21st March 2022