

Corporate Parenting Panel

Monday 16 October 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Sue Markham (Chair)
Councillor Marian Humphreys
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Nigel Minns, Executive Director for People
Judith Newell-Rollins, Specialist Practitioner
Sharon Shaw, Service Manager - Corporate Parenting Service

Others Present

Valerie Corcoran, Designated Nurse Children in Care for NHS Coventry and Warwickshire Integrated Care Board

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell.

Apologies were also received from John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None

(3) Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes from the meeting held on the 18th September 2023 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

There were no other matters arising.

(4) Restricted Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes from the meeting held on the 18th September 2023 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

There were no other matters arising.

2. Performance Data

Sharon Shaw, Service Manager - Corporate Parenting presented the report to the Panel with the following highlights –

The number of children in care has decreased in the last month. The Panel noted that there had been a significant rise in previous months but most of the children entering care have been Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). It was confirmed that a significant number of USAC are coming into Warwickshire from Kent as part of the national transfer scheme. These children are part of planned moves that are prepared for and that places are prepared for. There are a number of USAC who arrive in Warwickshire (via lorry for example) and places for these children have to be found. It was noted by the Panel that this is a national issue.

There has been an increase in the number of Special Guardianship Orders and Adoptions.

There has been an increase in the use of agency foster care. The majority of these placements have been for larger sibling groups who, as a result of being kept together, have been placed out of county.

There has been a reduction of six children in residential care. These children have moved back in to foster care placements or have returned home.

Placement orders, that allow Warwickshire County Council to place children for adoption, have increased. It is likely that this is as a result of the previous delays in the process following the backlog created during the pandemic. Performance in this area is now back on track.

In relation to children in care being in unsuitable accommodation (for example, sofa surfing, staying with friends or in a B&B or a custodial sentence) it was noted that these situations arise for a range of reasons such as the breakdown of relationships; if a care leaver has moved in with a partner and the relationship has subsequently broken down. The Panel noted that leaving care at 18 to live independently is a young age to start living alone. The council's House Project supports care leavers. Nigel Minns, Executive Director People Directorate stated that some of the choices made by young carers are not what officers would deem suitable, but officers would class their choice as unsuitable accommodation. For example, UASC may choose to live with friends and that it what suits them, but not from an officer's point of view.

In relation to placement stability, the Panel was informed that work is continuing to improve this area. There has been an improvement in performance over the last month. The Panel noted that the figures for long term placement stability can be misleading; more children are returning home which is positive but will still be counted as a placement move.

The Chair requested confirmation in relation to the Initial Health Assessment (IHA) figures for June 2023 as the figure was different in the report presented today from the figure reported in last months' meeting.

3. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report

Judith Newell-Rollins, Specialist Practitioner presented the report to the Panel stating that overall, performance is good but there are some areas for improvement.

An overview of the report was given to the Panel confirming that Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) ensure that the responsibility of corporate parenting officers and the welfare of children in care is being met. It was confirmed that presently there are 14 IROs in Warwickshire.

It was confirmed that there are currently 188 children in care in Warwickshire who are the subject of protection plans. It was noted by the Panel that comparable data is currently unavailable as there is no data as up to date as the Independent Reviewing Service would like. The current figure is higher than IROs would like it to be but it is lower than it has been.

Moving forward IROs are looking to increase overall participation in the reviews, particularly from the children in care themselves. Former children in care are now helping to develop this process and there is support from apprentices across Warwickshire, many of whom have a background in care.

It was confirmed that the high number of children currently under protection plans means that it isn't always possible to engage purposefully with them all but options such as financial incentives are being used. A text message service is also being used as another option for getting young people involved.

It was confirmed that invitations to conferences may not always be suitable for young people.

Following a question from Councillor Marian Humphreys in relation to the national shortage of foster places, it was confirmed that there are not enough, good enough, places for children, especially those with significant needs (emotional and social). In cases where there are significant needs, IROs work closely with Warwickshire officers and receive regular updates.

IRO's are aware of the current recruitment process in Warwickshire for additional foster placements as well as the introduction of Warwickshire based children's homes.

The Panel was pleased to receive confirmation that the IRO's consider that Warwickshire County Council is doing all that it can at the moment and that officers are all working incredibly hard and always taking into account the impact on the children in care.

Valerie Corcoran, Designated Nurse for Children in Care, asked for clarification in relation to the number of un-regulated placements. It was confirmed that the majority of placements in Warwickshire are now regulated but due to the complex needs of some children, it isn't always possible. The Panel noted that this is a national issue. Unregulated placements are short term and heavily monitored and managed so that children can be moved to a regulated placement as quickly as possible. The key is to ensure that every child is in the right placement.

Moving forward, the Independent Review Service will continue to increase participation with young people alongside Family Group Conferences. This will include work to further develop close working partnerships on safeguarding and enabling families to be involved in creating the right formulas for change.

Judith Newell-Rollins finished by stating that IROs are doing a greater job than a few years ago and the children of Warwickshire are benefitting. The Chair thanked Judith for the report and added that the report had allowed officers and members to see that, as a local authority, Warwickshire is doing well and has the right things in place to continue improving.

4. Development of the Work Programme and Items on the Forward Plan

The updated work programme was agreed by the Panel.

5. Any Other Business

None

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday 13 November 2023 at 10.00 am.

The meeting will be held in Committee Room 2, Shire Hall.

The meeting rose at 10:55

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Chair