

Corporate Parenting Panel

Monday 13 November 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Sue Markham (Chair)
Councillor Marian Humphreys
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell (virtual)
Councillor Breet Beetham (virtual)
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse (virtual)

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Shinderpaul Bhangal, Delivery Lead
John Coleman, Director - Children and Families
Nicole Conway, Democratic Services Officer
Sharon Shaw, Head of Corporate Parenting
Johnny Kyriacou, Director of Education
Deena Moorey, Virtual School Head
Brenda Vincent, Head of ACE
Jo Smith, Operational Lead - Children & Families, Fostering and Alternative Carers Support
Leah Adams, Head of Early Years and School Effectiveness

Others Present

Valerie Corcoran, Designated Nurse Children in Care

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Nigel Minns, Executive Director for People and Dr Vaishali Desai, Designated Doctor for Looked After Children Warwickshire, South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Marian Humphreys confirmed that she is an independent member of the Adoption Panel.

Councillor Caroline Phillips confirmed that she is the Chair of Governors at Stockingford Maintained Primary School.

(3) Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes from the meeting held on the 16th October 2023 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

There were no matters arising.

2. Voice, Influence & Change Team - Updates

Shinderpaul Bhangal, Delivery Lead, presented information to the Panel in relation to the Lead Participation Network which includes 14 local authorities across the West Midlands, including Warwickshire. It was confirmed that one area of focus for the network is corporate parenting and participation. A survey has been sent out to establish how corporate parenting works across the network and to identify good practice.

It was agreed that the survey would be sent out to all members of the panel, including officers who work within corporate parenting. It was noted that once the results are compiled, officers will be able to view Warwickshire specific information as well as information relating to the whole network.

The Panel noted that there had been several activities taking place for Care Experienced Week. These included a Halloween event, a movie night and lunch for Vietnamese children in care – this is a new area for Warwickshire County Council and a positive development.

It was confirmed that there would be a full update of all activities in January 2024.

The Chair thanked Shinderpaul for the report and information relating to the survey and took the opportunity to reiterate the importance of everyone completing the survey.

3. Report from the Virtual School Head

Deena Moorey, Virtual School Head, confirmed that today's presentation would provide the Panel with the opportunity to understand in more detail the children behind the data that is part of the regular reports. The presentation would concentrate on early years data.

It was confirmed that the virtual school has two key roles –

- Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children.
- Promoting the education of children with a social worker.

The Panel received additional information in relation to the role of the virtual school including –

- The high level of children
 - 1) with additional needs, including EHCPs.
 - 2) who experience of adversity and trauma.
 - 3) who experience frequent transitions.
 - 4) whose experiences affect attendance, learning, behaviour and wellbeing.

The Panel learnt that good and positive experiences and strong relationships can help to repair the damage done to the development of the brain as a result of traumas etc. The Panel was asked to take into consideration that it isn't always a fair measure to compare children in care with other children as they will not all have had the same experiences. There will be some children, not in care, who have also had negative experiences.

The following data was shared with the Panel –

For Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (cohort of 23 children) it was noted that -

- 19 children in the cohort experienced at least one placement move.
- 16 children in the cohort attended more than one school.
- All the children who achieved a good level of development (GLD) had stayed in the same school and had attendance over 90%

For Key Stage 2 (KS2) (cohort of 28 children) it was noted that –

- 16 children in the cohort remained in one placement over the school year.
- 13 achieved age-related expectations in reading, writing and maths.

For Year 11 (cohort of 46) outcomes it was noted that children in care performed below the national average.

- 6 children in the cohort were expected to achieve a strong pass (Grade 5 or above)
- 8 children in the cohort had poor or no attendance.
- 6.5% of the children in the cohort spoke little or no English.

Following a question from Councillor Marian Humphreys, it was confirmed that early intervention with children is very dependant on each situation. There is always a review when a child enters care to what, if any, early intervention there has been. Sharon Shaw, Head of Corporate Parenting, confirmed that the service may not be aware of a child until they enter care which may not be until they start school, or later.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse noted that the challenges faced by the virtual schools will continue to increase as the challenges faced by the children increase. It was confirmed that this is reflected in the information collected by the virtual school as the number of children they see increases. It was noted that the impact of Covid is still being felt.

Leah Adams, Head of Early Years and School Effectiveness confirmed that the solution is to look at how the council can work in a collaborative way. The Panel noted that there is much closer working in place between the council's family service and children's service. There are monthly partnership boards where not only departments within the council meet up, but also external partners. John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service added that the virtual school provides a lot of support to schools in Warwickshire and will challenge the schools if needed.

Following an earlier comment in relation to the possible repair to developing brains, Councillor Penny-Anny O'Donnell asked if there was any more data around the impact on neurodevelopment. It was confirmed that there are two speech and language therapists in place who are working with the children that need support, and their families.

The Chair requested that where a % was used in a performance table or to reflect data, that the number the % represented was also included in order for the Panel members to get a clearer understanding.

The Panel thanked Deena and Leah for a very helpful report and useful presentation. It was agreed that the slides from the presentation would be shared with the Panel.

4. Annual Adoption Reports

Sharon Shaw, Head of Corporate Parenting presented the annual adoption reports to the Panel and confirmed that Warwickshire is part of Adoption Central England (ACE) along with four other authorities - Coventry, Herefordshire, Solihull, and Worcestershire. The annual report from ACE informed the Panel of the work undertaken over the last twelve months and the future work plans for ACE. It was noted that the Warwickshire Annual Adoption Report included much more specific information relating to the children in Warwickshire.

It was confirmed that there has been a significant decline in the number of children adopted and that there are more children waiting for adoption but who had not completed the required process. It was confirmed that many of the delays are still because of Covid and the backlog of cases. It was also noted that there has been an increase in Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) and that this is likely to continue. SGO is where a child is placed with a family member or connected person and is always preferable to adoption. Since April 2023, seventeen young people have been adopted with is already an increase from the total adoptions in the previous year. 73.3% of children adopted were part of sibling group.

Confirmation was given in respect to the Foster to Adopt scheme which often involves very young children who are often relinquished at birth or where previous children have been removed from a parent. This scheme offers placement stability – children are placed with a family who will adopt them but who foster them at the start of the process.

The following points from the report were highlighted –

- There have been three adoption disruptions in the last 12 months – one female child and two male children. All have now been moved to permanent adoptions.
- Moving forward, the focuses for the future for the Warwickshire adoption service will include more promotion of family time which especially important for siblings who aren't placed together.
- The adoption service will be promoting Life story books for children and young people.
- The service will also be promoting the fostering for adoption scheme.
- The service will look to reduce the time between an adoption order being granted and the child/ren going to the matching panel. It was noted that this can be challenging, especially if the child has special needs or is part of a sibling group.

Brenda Vincent, Head of ACE, confirmed that COVID and the cost of living crisis has had an impact on the number of potential adopters coming forward. But there are signs of this changing and there are more people coming forward. Currently there are 59 families going through the assessment process which is a sign that things are improving after the pandemic. It was confirmed that consideration is given to how much support potential adoption families will need and that currently, there are 500 families across the region currently receiving support.

Councillor Marian Humphreys added that the ACE adoption panel also offer a lot of support for families, from the start of the process. Councillor Humphreys added that members of the adoption panel also get a lot of training. It was noted that support is also offered to birth parents, where appropriate and that courts look to maintain relationships with birth parents where possible. This will include more than just postal communication.

Councillor Caroline Phillips stated that she was pleased to hear that family time is a key area of focus. Brenda Vincent added that family contact is not always static; it evolves and is different with each child, and will change as the child gets older. Contact has to be ok with everybody involved and officers are always careful in how they respond in each case.

It was noted that Councillor Marian Humphreys is one of only two elected members in the region to be on adoption panels. Warwickshire is leading the way and hoping to encourage more elected members to join.

The Chair thanked all the officers for the reports stating that it has been easy to read and very understandable.

5. Fostering Reports

Jo Smith, Operational Lead - Children & Families, Fostering and Alternative Carers Support Team introduced the reports to the Panel confirming that the service had a new name in recognition of a restructure and the fact that officers work with a range of carers, not just fosterers.

The Panel learnt that the team works with anyone who comes forward wanting to be a foster carer. The process can take up to five months and involves a lot of training and support. Foster carer applications are reducing but connected carers are increasing which is reflective of a cultural team. It was confirmed that the council currently has five family support workers in place. Within the Connected Persons Team there is a current 11 week wait from assessment to court date.

It was confirmed that there is a national shortage of foster carers at this point; in addition, initial enquiries about fostering have also decreased. Sharon Shaw, Head of Corporate Parenting confirmed that although the number of initial enquires is dramatically lower, the approval rate is increasing. This could suggest that people are better informed about what fostering involves and that the council is putting the right information out there. It was confirmed that after a contract with an external marketing company ended, all communication in relation to fostering and caring is now done internally with the Warwickshire County Council comms team and there is a much more effective marketing approach.

It was noted that a regional approach to fostering, like Adoption Central England (ACE) is being considered as a way to potentially move forward.

John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service confirmed that the West Midlands are in the second round of applications to set up regional care cooperative with support from the Government. With regards to a Regional Fostering Agency there are concerns in relation to people who enquire looking to foster Warwickshire children, to help Warwickshire children and not those outside of the county. Jo Smith added that, as mentioned, there is such a shortage of foster carers within the county and the service wouldn't want to lose them to other areas. It was noted that other authorities feel the same. IT was agreed that it was important to support local children and keep them in the local area.

The Panel noted that work was underway on The Warwickshire Offer – a comparison/benchmarking exercise in relation to the cost-of-living crisis. As a result, the council has increased fees by 5% (maintenance costs). In addition, the equipment list was reviewed for the first time in five years and updated.

The Panel learnt that the Treehouse scheme opened two years ago and offers respite and support for foster carers. Sharon Shaw added that foster parenting can be different to general parenting so the support from close friends isn't always there. Families may face challenges that only other foster carers will understand. The council is looking to increase the treehouse support.

John Coleman confirmed that in relation to fostering, Warwickshire County Council is making progress and has a good fostering and private fostering service.

The Panel agreed that they would like to see another annual update in twelve months' time in relation to fostering and caring in Warwickshire. It was noted that this would be added to the work programme.

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

The updated work programme was agreed by the Panel.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 15th January 2024.

Meetings are not webcast and are not open to the public.

The meeting rose at 11:55

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Chair