

Corporate Parenting Panel

Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on Wednesday, 16 January 2019 at 5.00 pm in
F10 - Town Hall

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming (Chair);

Councillors Janet Campbell, Jerry Fitzpatrick, Maria Gatland, Maddie Henson and Helen Redfern

Also Councillor Robert Ward

Present: Sarah Bailey, Head of the Virtual School
Shelley Davies, Head of Education Standards, Safeguarding & Inclusion
Spencer Duvwiama, Service Manager, Fostering. Alison Farmer, Head of Special Educational Needs 0 - 25
Robert Henderson, Executive Director, Children, Families and Schools
Nick Pendry, Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care
Fiona Simmons – Designated Nurse for Looked After Children
Vanessa Strang, Commissioning Placements Project Manager
Wendy Tomlinson, Head of Corporate Parenting
Amanda Tuke, Head of Children and Maternity Integrated Commissioning
Dr Simon Wilkinson, CAMHS Psychiatrist

Apologies: Councillor Shafi Khan (Vice-Chair)

PART A

1/19 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The meeting was quorate at 5:15pm and started at 5:22pm (the start of the meeting was postponed in order that the young people attending the meeting could arrive).

Before the formal business began, Councillor Alisha Flemming informed the Panel that she was unable to stay for the entirety of the meeting. She proposed that Councillor Fitzpatrick takeover the Chair for the remainder of the meeting. This was seconded by Councillor Henson and agreed by the remainder of the Panel.

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record.

2/19 **Disclosures of interest**

There were no disclosures of interest.

3/19 Urgent Business (if any)

There was no urgent business.

4/19 Update on actions agreed at previous meeting(s)

There was no update on actions agreed at the previous meeting.

5/19 Children in Care Performance Scorecard

The Chair noted that the agenda would be reordered to accommodate the availability of the young people attending the meeting.

The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting provided an introduction to the item. She highlighted that the number of Looked After Children (LAC) was continuing to rise. It was hoped that numbers would have started to fall with the transfer to other Councils of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) through the National Transfer Scheme. However, this had reached a plateau and the National Transfer Scheme was not working as intended. This presented significant challenges for Croydon.

It was explained that Corporate Parenting performance was measured through two key indicators; the stability of placements (as few moves as possible) and the proximity of those to home.

Ensuring that every Looked After Child had a Personal Education Plan (PEP) was a key focus. A review had been conducted and it had been recognised that achieving this target was still an issue. This was being addressed by ensuring that all members of the service were working towards the target. A new Interim Head of the Virtual School, Sarah Bailey had recently started and had already met with the team; the objective was to make the PEP target high profile. The need to work in partnership and to target PEPs to meet the needs of children was being stressed.

Steady progress was being achieved in providing initial health assessments but it was acknowledged that there needed to be greater improvement. A LEAN review of the initial health assessment process had been undertaken and its suggestions put to the LAC Health Subgroup. The focus was on a simplification of the processes involved with some reassurance being taken that this was more of a process issue. It was emphasised that whilst not all Looked After Children were having their initial health assessments within the timescale required there were not large numbers of children having their initial health assessments fulfilled outside of this timeframe.

A Panel Member noted the Council's poor Corporate Parenting performance and the need for challenge to be provided. It was asked how it would be possible for the Panel to gain reassurance that the service was working well. It was agreed that this question would be answered in the substantive item.

Another Panel Member asked why there had been a rise in the number of Looked After Children during May and September 2018. Additionally, it was asked why there had been a decrease in the number of Looked After Children remaining in the same placement for more than two years (KPI20).

In response, the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting explained that it was not uncommon to have an increase in care proceedings during Ofsted intervention. This was being driven by an increase in the numbers of local children coming into care and not Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. It was stressed that there was no evidence of the judiciary saying the authority was initiating care proceedings for children unnecessarily. This was indicative that the service was acting correctly. It was noted that with the availability of different services it might be possible to reduce numbers of Looked After Children; the right services would need to be in place to support children to return home. Reviews were being conducted with children that had been through the care proceedings process to provide reassurance that the right action had been taken.

The Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care added that a piece of work had been commissioned to look at recent care proceedings to see if it would be possible to streamline the process.

A Panel Member summarised that they were unsure of the implications that could be drawn from this; whether numbers were likely to continue to rise or gradually decline. The Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care noted that it was possible to look at the resources available through the Early Care team to prevent care proceeding being necessary. This was described as working with families more effectively early on. The Panel Member was encouraged that this continued to be a focus and stressed their keenness to see the number of Looked After Children reduced.

With regard to the decrease in the number of Looked After Children remaining in the same placement for more than two years (KPI 20), the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting noted that this measure could be influenced by many factors including that some children don't remain in the Council's care for very long. The correlation between the length of care and other measures of success (for example educational outcomes) was stressed.

A Panel Member voiced their concern regarding the length of placements decreasing. The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting noted that with the number of children in care going up this would have a statistical impact on the measure of stability of placements lasting over two years.

The Head of Education Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion introduced the item by explaining it was a statutory requirement that the Council tracked the participation of all 16 and 17 year olds up until their 18th birthdays. It was required that those figures be reported monthly. For care leavers or those who remain in care, this tracking continues until their 21st birthdays. The objective was to identify those not participating and to offer appropriate support.

Young people in both the LAC and care leaver cohorts were more likely statistically to be in the *Not in Education, Employment or Training* (NEET) category. The overall rate of NEET in the borough was 2.5% compared to a NEET rate of 15% for LAC and care leavers. It was stressed that it was hard to understand this figure given no comparative data was available for 18 – 21 year olds. It was explained that if you were a local care leaver you were statistically more likely to be NEET than if you were UASC. Similarly you were more likely to progress to University if you were UASC. Typically those who were LAC or care leavers were more likely to attend colleges than school 6th forms. Whilst it was known that those in these cohorts were more likely to take vocational courses due to GCSE attainment, what was being studied wasn't tracked at this age.

A Panel Member highlighted the need for PEPs of local Looked After Children to be focused on attainment and aspiration. The Interim Head of the Virtual School stressed that this was being looked at with the switch to a more outcomes focused approach going forward. It was acknowledged that there was a need to focus on completing as well as starting plans well.

The Panel welcomed two young people who were members of EMPIRE (the new title for the Children in Care Council), and invited them to ask questions.

It was asked how it was possible to get good careers advice at school? The Interim Head of the Virtual School explained that every school was responsible for giving every student impartial careers advice from the age of 12. They could therefore ask any teacher who was a careers adviser; they were encouraged to go to them and speak to them about their aspirations so they could help them plan. Additionally, it was highlighted that LAC could talk to others to receive careers advice; their foster carer, social worker and virtual teacher. Every school had a Designated Teacher who was responsible for linking with and supporting the work of the Virtual School. Also, every Year 11 student must be provided with a post 16 prospectus which would provide advice and guidance on where go for more help.

A foster carer on the Panel highlighted the difficulty of Looked After Children being put in a position of having to go and ask for this support; it was hard for any Looked After Child to go and ask for this support. The PEP contains information on a child's aspirations. The Designated Teacher should be informed by this and use it as the basis for proactively offering support. It was noted that the Interim Head of the Virtual School would visit the Croydon Foster Carers Association to discuss this with them.

The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting explained to the young people that it was the role of their social workers to understand and support their wishes and feelings. As Head of Service she wanted to know what young people thought about the support being offered through the service. She asked the young people present to encourage and support other Looked After Children to come to the Panel to tell the influential people in the room what they wanted.

Another foster carer member of the Panel asked why it was not possible for the foster carer to get a copy of the PEP. The Executive Director of Children, Families and Education stated it was unacceptable that foster carers were not already receiving a copy of the PEP, that they should receive a copy and he would ensure that this would happen.

It was established that the careers offer in individual schools varied and was subject to review. The need for careers advice to be offered before GCSE selection was highlighted by the foster carers on the Panel. Whilst overall the quality of careers advice offered by schools was assessed as part of the Ofsted inspection framework, it was confirmed that careers advice for Looked After Children was part of the Virtual School offer. Work was happening to increase capacity. Also dedicated roles were being established in the Virtual School to offer targeted post 16 support. A Panel member highlighted the importance of consistency; offering a single point or place of access for this support to ensure it was happening.

7/19

Annual Report of the Virtual School

The Head of Education Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion introduced the item explaining that whilst improvements were being made, the service was not complacent. At Key Stage 2 there had been a 19% improvement in those achieving the expected standard. Similarly there had been improvements in the phonics assessment and in Key Stage 4.

It was acknowledged that the Virtual School had not previously been set-up to reflect the structure of a school. As a result, a restructure had been undertaken which was focused on outcomes. This aimed to provide support over and above that provided by school to our Looked After Children. It was noted that there was still work to do on standards. Two quality assurance interim posts had been established. The focus on quality standards was impacting on the time being taken to put PEPs in place. However, it was important to make sure that PEPs had the right targets and impact was being monitored through schools.

It was described how the service was on an improvement journey and in its early stages. This was why there was an improvement plan in place. It was highlighted that the service was holding itself to account and that it was important to raise the profile of the Virtual School. The need for the rapid pace of the improvement journey was acknowledged.

Invited to again question the Panel, the young people asked why so few Looked After Children and care leavers are engaged with further or higher education.

The Interim Head of the Virtual School explained that this was the result of a lot of factors. It was acknowledged that officers were not as good at communicating with children as they needed to be. This meant that Looked After Children and care leavers were not aware of the support available. Looked After Children and care leavers needed to know who the people were who would help them. The Virtual School hadn't operated in the way it would if it were an actual school.

Through the following discussion, it was identified that:

1. It was important to work with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to provide therapeutic solutions to overcome the traumatic start in life experienced by LAC and care leavers. How challenges in early childhood put Looked After Children and care leavers on the back foot in terms of life chances was described;
2. The lack of communication and information being provided to Looked After Children and care leavers was an issue and that it was the role of the Designated Teacher to overcome this;
3. Care leavers often don't progress to University simply because they have nowhere to stay during University holidays. This was in part being addressed by the holiday provision provided by the Council but this wasn't known about by foster carers and wasn't included in the *Moving On Course*;
4. It was important to celebrate the success of Looked After Children and care leavers. This might be judged in different ways and not using traditional measures. LAC and care leavers might not be following traditional pathways. It was suggested there needed to be more ways to celebrate success. The example of a letter home highlighting and celebrating success was provided;
5. It should be possible to provide PEPs in a range of languages to better support those who speak English as an additional language;
6. Any learning needs should be identified as early as possible to ensure support was accessed to help achieve potential. It was noted that diagnosis was increasingly happening in Key Stages 3 and 4. It was emphasised that this should be addressed through PEPs and that the Deputy Head of the Virtual School was undertaking SENCO training;
7. There are more boys than girls in the cohort of Looked After Children and care leavers but there are very few differences in terms of ethnicity from the wider population of young people who are NEET. Those who were lower achieving were typically boys and came into care at a later age. It was explained that those coming into care at the age of 13+ would have experienced chaotic lives, with the service having to repair this at the same time as achieving education success. This put the emphasis on earlier work to prevent breakdown or the need to act decisively earlier; and

8. Colleges were looking at putting on more suitable provision for LAC/care leavers. Officers were hopeful as the traditional offer had not typically been suitable.

RESOLVED: the Corporate Parenting Panel resolved to recommend:

1. The Health and Wellbeing Board look at the link between the Virtual School and CAMHS to ensure adequate access to therapeutic therapies for Looked After Children and care leavers following traumatic early years experiences; and
2. For all Looked After Children to receive the support of a mentor.

8/19

Health of Looked After Children

The Head of Children and Maternity Integrated Commissioning introduced the item highlighting the timeliness of health assessments was a statutory requirement. This had been subject to review with processes and pathways examined leading to improved communications across teams.

Additional resource had also been provided (two nurses) meaning that the completion of annual health assessments was moving towards the required level. However, it was emphasised that the service was not complacent. The role of social care colleagues to provide notification within the first three working days of a child becoming Looked After was emphasised as crucial in achieving an initial health assessment in the first 20 days as required.

Dr Simon Wilkinson described how there was a low threshold for referrals with a no decline policy. It was explained that LAC were at high risk of mental health issues and therefore referrals were prioritised. The identification of need was key and linked with the training and awareness of all professionals involved in caring for Looked After Children.

Through the following discussion, it was identified that:

1. Anything identified at the initial health assessment for follow-up should be progressed. The assessment should identify who would provide this follow-up. Any referral in the initial health assessment should be sufficient to ensure this happens. Specific issues experienced by a foster carer member of the Panel would be picked-up by officers outside of the meeting;
2. There had been an improvement in the speed of initial health assessments but foster carers were still experiencing incidents where nurses were not being informed that a child is in care. Communication needed to improve. Assessments were happening on Saturdays and after school which was the preference;
3. It was established that where there was any difference in opinion between professionals on the approach being taken to addressing a child's health, a network meeting could be requested for this to be discussed. This could explicitly be requested by a foster carer. It was also highlighted that foster carers could request a drop in meeting with a CAMHS professional if they

are unsure what to do. CAHMS practitioners would always see if the foster carer had attended with the child whether or not the social worker was in attendance;

4. The myth about there being a nine month CAMHS referral time was untrue. This was something the service was trying to dispel;
5. The ongoing need for clear protocols and steps in order to escalate concerns were once again identified. The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting shared that there had been work done across Children's Social Care to develop a policy on escalation where there was a disagreement. A version suitable for foster carers would be devised.
6. Foster carers were concerned about making a complaint. It was agreed that it was unacceptable that making complaint should be noted in the foster carer's annual review. It was agreed that the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care would be in touch with the foster carer network to better understand concerns and provide reassurance.

RESOLVED: the Corporate Parenting Panel resolved to recommend that it receive the escalation policy paper for sign-off. Prior to this, the policy should go to the Foster Carer Association to ensure it meets needs.

9/19

Placement, Stability, Sufficiency; Performance and Population

Before the start of this item, Councillor Alisa Flemming left and Councillor Fitzpatrick assumed the Chair. Councillors Gatland and Henson left the meeting.

The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting explained it was a statutory requirement under the Children Act that the Council have a sufficient number of placements. This means that there had to be enough of the right kind of placements. The Council published a plan that sets out that the authority knows its children, their needs and could meet those through the right placements. The report included the updated plan which had been subject to consultation, scrutiny and sign-off.

The Commissioning Placements Project Manager described how this was a three year strategy with an annual update based on numbers as of 31 March 2018. There was a positive story to tell on sufficiency. The majority of Croydon's foster carers were approved by the Council's fostering service. There was a framework in place for the selection and approval of independent foster carer agencies. To support the management of foster carer recruitment a new contract had been put in place with Coram. Whilst the 232 Croydon registered foster carer households represented a healthy position the aim was to achieve an ongoing increase so that more Looked After Children could be placed locally. The target was an additional 30 households a year. This target was also to address the number of foster carers reaching retirement age. The relationship with the external market was also described as good with 37 placements in children's homes. This was a low percentage compared to other authorities.

Through the following discussion, it was identified that:

1. It was hard to determine the precise number of new foster carers required given this was influenced by the number of Looked After Children which could not be predicted;
2. The conversion rate on enquiries to become foster carers in Croydon was 5%;
3. Foster carer recruitment had been benchmarked against that of other authorities with 15 new foster carers the annual average;
4. Croydon was hosting the South London Commissioning Programme. This was being set-up to jointly commission residential placements for all 10 of the boroughs involved. The Department for Education had provided £1m of innovation funding for the development. This aimed to support commissioning on a larger scale to get higher quality provision. However, placements would continue to be as local as possible dependent on needs. It was hoped this would decrease the use of independent agencies. The joint commissioning programme would provide the opportunity to be clearer with the market about placements need across South London;
5. Croydon was fortunate to have a large, committed group of foster carers. Those were the reason why stability was such a feature of the Looked After Children offer;
6. The target for foster carer recruitment also had to accommodate Looked After Children with complex needs;
7. The way in which Coram was following-up initial expressions of interest would be checked to ensure that those were being dealt with adequately. It was noted that the contract includes mentoring and training for new foster carers and that the focus was on growing the skills of the service rather than simply replacing those that had retired. Given issues with the previous provider, there was a real focus on the quality of the service being provided by Coram;
8. After two years, recruitment of foster carers would return in house. Part of the contract with Coram was therefore to support the development of the in-house service;
9. Approximately 19% of Looked After Children were placed outside of the borough and potentially up to 20 miles away. However, in practice they could be significantly closer than this. Unfortunately, the statutory measure is crude. Placement outside of the borough had to be with the approval of the Director. Those placed in adjacent boroughs could be with the approval of the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting or the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care;
10. The 37 Looked After Children currently in residential care were being reviewed. The service was considering what provision for them would look like if they were placed in Croydon; was it possible for them to be in Croydon or at least a lot closer? It was emphasised that sometimes placements needed to be away from the borough for safety; and
11. Highlighted the importance of identifying the right placements for Looked After Children with complex issues. The difficulty of this was stressed. It was explained that the initial presentation may change and develop over

time and that sufficiency of provision was about quality and not just numbers.

Having previously vacated the Chair, Councillor Alisa Flemming left the meeting towards the end of this item.

RESOLVED: the Corporate Parenting Panel resolved to:

1. Agree the report and note the recommendations;
2. Recommend the report on the 37 children placed in residential care be shared with the Corporate Parenting Panel; and
3. Recommend further information on the work of the South London Commissioning Programme be shared with the Corporate Parenting Panel.

10/19 **Review of the Fostering Allowances**

The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting introduced the item. It was explained that getting and keeping good foster carers was a key element of the improvement plan. As a result, work had started to review the weekly foster carer allowance. The report to the Panel was to seek its permission to progress this work.

It had been established that most authorities would apply an annual uplift to the allowance at least in line with the rate of inflation. Typically, authorities would review the allowance in more detail at regular intervals. The allowance had not been reviewed in Croydon for four years. Therefore it had been judged appropriate to undertake a more in-depth review. This was focused on whether or not the allowance would help achieve the sufficiency plan by attracting foster carers. The allowance needed to be competitive but the current rate was at the bottom end of London average.

The proposal being made was to link the level of allowance paid to the skills of the foster carer. Whilst most would continue to receive a basic payment, it was thought that a smaller group of around 10% of foster carers would receive a higher payment based on their skill at caring for the most challenging/vulnerable.

A foster carer member of the Panel highlighted that the proposed structure of allowances may place foster carers in a difficult position. Where a child with special needs requires lots of support it was often better for them not to be placed with another child with the same level of need. However, this structure of payments may mitigate against the way that those decisions were made. The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting thanked the foster carer for this very valuable contribution and reinforced that the intention was to develop a structure of allowances that worked in the best interests of Looked After Children.

RESOLVED: the Corporate Parenting Panel resolved to agree the recommendations in the report. The Panel noted it looked forward to receiving further information about the allowance structure at a future meeting.

11/19 **How has the Panel helped Children in Care today?**

Those present were invited by the Chair to comment on how their attendance at the Panel had helped Children in Care:

- A lot had been learnt by observing the meeting that would be applied at scrutiny. Poor communications with children themselves was noted. This needed to be improved along with delivering careers guidance. There was a need to concentrate on the support being offered because of the speed at which children go through the system;
- Valued the contribution of Looked After Children at the panel. The questions they had raised needed to be answered and their concerns addressed;
- The Panel had highlighted the need to strengthened the role of the Designated Teacher;
- The Panel had demonstrated its continued support for foster carers. This was illustrated by it being agreed foster carers should have a copy of the PEP. The meeting had also demonstrate the importance of developing aspirations in Looked After Children. This was especially the case for those aged under 10. Doing this would really improve their life chances;
- The Panel was advocating for foster carers and making sure they have a voice. That foster carers could escalate issues was important; it was right that they were advocating for their children;
- The Panel brought together a beneficial range of professionals and organisations to be jointly consulted. It was providing challenge and questions on a whole range of topics. This drew on the collective responsibility for Looked After Children. The voice of foster carers was especially important. They provided the closest thing to the lived experience of the child in the room. All care processes need to be informed by that experience. Disappointed by the treatment experienced by some foster carers. Highlighted the clarity of response given to this by the new Directors who had attended the meeting. Stressed the need to improve the quality of communications;
- The gap between what should happen and the lived reality had been exposed. Hoping that those that could change this would do so. Disappointed that the Panel keeps exposing this gap;
- The value of mentoring had been highlighted; and
- It was very positive that the new directors were at the meeting. Value in exposing issues early in their careers at Croydon.

12/19 **Work Programme**

RESOLVED: the Corporate Parenting Panel resolved to receive reports on the South London Commissioning Programme, the escalation policy, mentoring and careers guidance for Looked After Children/care leavers, the 37 children in residential care, and the review of foster carer allowances. These items were to be added to the Panel's work programme.

13/19 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This item was not required.

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm

Signed:

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Date:

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