

Minutes of the meeting of Children and young people scrutiny committee held at The Council Chamber - The Shire Hall, St. Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Wednesday 5 July 2017 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor CA Gandy (Chairman)
Councillor FM Norman (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: JA Hyde, JF Johnson, MD Lloyd-Hayes and D Summers

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Seldon, Councillor McEvelly, Mrs Fisher, Mr Sell and Mr Burbidge.

2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor Summers attended the meeting as a substitute for Councillor Seldon.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following members of the committee declared non-pecuniary interests in agenda item no. 4, corporate parenting strategy 2017-2020:

- Councillor Hyde as the support team member (looked after children), the chairman of the corporate parenting panel and a member of the fostering panel.
- Councillor Norman as a member of the corporate parenting panel.

4. CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY 2017 - 2020

The committee considered a report by the head of looked after children which provided the draft corporate parenting strategy 2017 – 2020. The report was introduced by the cabinet member young people and children's wellbeing, the assistant director safeguarding and early help and the head of looked after children.

The cabinet member outlined the significant responsibility that members of the council and all officers had as corporate parents to looked after children (LAC) in Herefordshire. The assistant director safeguarding and early help explained that the strategy had been considered by the corporate parenting panel and would be presented to the cabinet for formal approval. The annual reports for the adoption and fostering services were listed as background papers to the report which provided valuable detail concerning the allocation of resources for LAC. The head of looked after children explained that

individuals who were LAC tended to face disadvantage in life which the strategy sought to address. Through the children in care council priorities had been developed by LAC to which the strategy responded.

The committee heard from two young people regarding their experiences of care and support provided. Comments included: the importance of expediting processes through the care system; the need for greater contact between LAC and social workers; rules governing the activities of children in care tended to be too strict and the reasons for the rules were not adequately communicated; the importance of communicating face-to-face with LAC but an acknowledgement of the value of other forms of interaction such as texting; the turnover of social workers had been high previously but there had been consistency over the last two years; the importance of being clear and honest whilst communicating with LAC; and the elements required to support care leavers which included a personal adviser, a good network of friends and continued contact with groups such as the foster forum.

The committee made the following queries and comments in regard of the strategy:

- The annual reports relating to the fostering and adoption services should be received by the committee as separate agenda items in future years. An important role of the committee was to understand and consider the annual reviews of these services to provide assurance that the structures in place and resources allocated were sufficient to meet the needs of LAC;
- The strategy referred to the virtual school and it was requested that a briefing note be prepared for circulation to members of the committee on the subject.
- The current situation regarding number 4 in Blackfriars Street was raised and when a permanent new location would be identified. The temporary measure was not felt to offer good accommodation and a better longer term solution was required. *The head of looked after children confirmed that an alternative location was being sought and in the interim the venue in Bath Street would be opened shortly as a drop-in centre. It was anticipated that this arrangement would operate for one year.*
- The number of LAC in Herefordshire was higher than the national average, this was queried and an explanation requested. *The assistant director safeguarding and early help commented that the level of LAC was a consequence of the period of intervention, leading to a culture of risk aversion and the lowering of thresholds to take children into care. Recent initiatives such as changes to the methods for admitting children to care and clarifying decision-making around admissions had resulted in a reduction in the number of LAC which should decrease over time to a level comparable with statistical neighbours.*
- Detail regarding the primary reasons for the admission of children into care were sought by the committee. *The majority of children taken into care was due to emotional abuse and neglect; a small number due to physical and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse was often as a result of factors including domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health; in such cases support was prioritised but where there was a significant impact upon the child, admission to care was necessary. This was similar to national trends which were adjusting following a judicial ruling critical of the voluntary arrangements for admitting children to care.*
- The committee queried how businesses could be engaged in corporate parenting priorities particularly concerning work experience and employment. The work that had been undertaken to date to explore employment and training opportunities within the council and partner organisations was also queried. *Local businesses could be engaged but there was significant scope to work within the council and with partner organisations to explore opportunities for LAC. Following the approval of the strategy by the cabinet and the CCG board apprenticeships for LAC would be identified.*

- Early intervention and how the council could work with the local community to address issues, such as mental health, affecting children admitted to care. How issues could be anticipated prior to the application of formal care processes. The impact of rurality and social isolation on children and young people and remote children centres. *The Children and Young People Plan would have a focus on early help and through the Early Help Strategy would embed the principles of early intervention and prevention in local communities.*
- The engagement of councillors and the role that could be undertaken in support of the strategy; councillors would be willing to contribute to the implementation of the strategy and fulfil the role of being a corporate parent but an understanding of how this could be achieved was required. *Training for members would be undertaken and tangible roles for members had been included in the action plan.*
- Mentoring young people and how councillors could undertake this role in accordance with safeguarding principles. *Members would be supported to mentor LAC and talk to them about potential opportunities. Safeguarding issues would be clarified before any mentoring occurred.*
- The proposed training for teachers to identify mental health issues and the potential for further detail on the proposal in due course. *The scheme would be rolled out by public health and form part of child health and wellbeing programme. The item could be added to the work programme of the committee.*
- It was reported that some local schools were funding referrals to child psychologists which had been identified through the work of the children's mental health task and finish group. *This issue would be investigated.*
- The number of unaccompanied asylum seeker children present in Herefordshire was projected to increase and the ability of the council to provide for the children was queried. *The county had accepted seven children under the scheme, recruitment for foster carers had been undertaken and the provision of shared housing for older children investigated. The issue would be considered at the next meeting of the corporate parenting panel with young people talking about their experiences and the panel assessing whether their needs had been met.*
- More information was sought regarding the extension of leaving care services and the additional resources that would be required. *The Keep On Caring strategy was due for implementation but had been suspended due to the recent general election. Once introduced the strategy would extend the responsibilities of local authorities to care leavers up to the age of 25. This was likely to require the provision of a personal adviser to care leavers up to this age and the introduction of a care leavers offer. More detail regarding the strategy was awaited but it was understood that greater resource would be required.*
- The availability and quality of data in the strategy and needs assessment was queried. *The strategy sought to develop and strengthen the quality of data of relevance to LAC. The current needs analysis shows the broad range of information available and has also highlighted areas where additional information is required, for instance the potential CSE risks for our LAC placed out of county should they go missing. Within Herefordshire this risk is well understood.*
- A potential role for the committee under the action plan of the strategy could be to provide a forum for young people to hold their corporate parents to account.
- The committee requested that annual performance reports relating to the strategy be submitted to future meetings. Such reports should include definitive baselines to assist the committee to assess performance in relation to the introduction of the strategy. *It was confirmed that the action plan was an emerging document which would incorporate appropriate baselines and tangible measures over the course of the forthcoming year.*

Councillor JF Johnson proposed and Councillor MD Lloyd-Hayes seconded the following recommendations:

- The committee welcomes the strategy, supports the priorities identified and agrees to provide a summary of comments and recommendations to the cabinet member;
- The committee requests annual performance reports relating to the action plan in the strategy;
- The committee provides a forum, where appropriate, for children and young people in care and care leavers to hold their Corporate Parents to account;
- The members of the committee facilitate training, with officers, on corporate parenting to all members of Herefordshire Council;
- The committee recommends that the cabinet member reviews the measures for success and outcomes sought in the action plan on a regular basis to see whether any measures need to be strengthened;
- The committee recommends that procedures are introduced to ensure that significant decisions of the council take account formally of likely implications for looked after children;
- The committee recommends that members undertake a mentoring role, where appropriate, for looked after children to share skills and experience to help enhance personal development and there is consideration of how this is best facilitated and publicised; and
- The committee recommends that methods and strategies are investigated to engage partners and businesses in corporate parenting.

The committee agreed the recommendations unanimously.

Resolved – that the committee provides comments and recommendations (as listed above) to the cabinet member for consideration in the finalisation of the corporate parenting strategy.

The committee considered the annual reports for the fostering and adoption services. The following comments and queries were raised in relation to the reports:

- Does the fostering service share best practice? *The service was engaged in a network of regional fostering services through which best practice was shared.*
- Was the fostering service seeking to work with Taurus healthcare? *The service was in communication with Taurus.*
- Was the reduction in the level of regulation 24 carers viewed as a positive trend? *Yes. Regulation 24 arrangements were temporary and arose when a placement was required at very short notice. The service goal was to reduce short notice accommodations by highlighting potential kinship carers earlier in the intervention and completing their assessment as potential carers before the need for accommodation was confirmed.*
- How were complaints, including informal complaints, taken account of? *Young people were informed of their right to complain and their Independent Reviewing Officer ensures that this is understood at each review. The local authority also commissions an advocacy service whose details are given to every LAC. The directorate recently implemented MOMO, an app to enable young people to share their views using modern media.*
- The committee was concerned by a trend reported in the adoption report where children were subject to safeguarding processes but remained at home and at risk of significant harm. *The Assistant Director explained that courts were more reluctant to grant interim care orders during care proceedings, preferring to wait until the conclusion of the hearing before deciding whether a child is removed*

from parental care. This was a matter subject to discussion with the Local Family Justice Board.

- The 'lifestory books' provided to LAC and the lateness of providing these books was raised by the committee. *It was acknowledged that there had been a high turnover of staff in certain teams causing some delays. Additional resource had been made available to ensure outstanding work was completed and the importance of lifestory work would be discussed with the recently appointed managers of the teams.*
- The Panel referred to the regional adoption agency and requested more detail in the form of a briefing note. *It was confirmed that the local authority had applied to join the Adoption Central England RAA however the recent general election had delayed the formal response. It was hoped that an indication as to whether the application was acceptable in principle would be forthcoming shortly. This would be followed by detail regarding the terms of membership which would need to be accepted by the local authority. Provisionally, the process would be concluded in the spring of 2018.*

Resolved – that:

- a) the committee notes the annual reports from the adoption and fostering services and agrees to feedback comments to the cabinet member; and
- b) the adoption and fostering reports are considered as separate agenda items in future years.

5. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions were received from members of the public.

6. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions were received from members of the council.

7. WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The committee noted the work programme for items of business for meetings in the current municipal year and noted that a briefing note on the virtual school and the regional adoption agency would be provided. It was commented that timings for the key decision to tender for new health visiting and school nursing services meant that the committee would be unable to scrutinise the draft decision in advance of publication. A briefing note would be provided on the decision and the committee could determine if a future agenda item on the subject was required.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The committee considered a proposal to hold pre-meetings ahead of formal meetings. It was agreed that the practice would be trialled and that a pre-meeting start at 9.30 a.m. with the start-time of the committee meeting scheduled for 10.15 a.m.

The next meeting would be on 2 October 2017.

The meeting ended at 12.25 pm

Chairman