

## **CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD**

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday 1 February 2016 in Committee Room 2,  
Civic Centre, Sunderland at 5.30pm**

### **Part I**

#### **Present:**

#### **Members of the Board**

Councillor Stewart (in the Chair)	Redhill Ward
Councillor Farthing	Washington South Ward
Councillor MacKnight	Castle Ward
Councillor Marshall	Doxford Ward

#### **Young People**

Kieran Boyce  
Saul Cranson  
Billy Hardy  
Geraldine Dellett

#### **Also in Attendance**

Councillor Ball	Ryhope Ward
Councillor Davison	Redhill Ward
Councillor Lawson	Shiney Row Ward
Councillor D E Snowdon	Washington Central Ward
Councillor Waters	St Anne's Ward
Councillor Williams	Washington Central Ward
Councillor A Wilson	Pallion Ward
Councillor Wood	St Michael's Ward

#### **All Supporting Officers**

Ann Goldsmith	Interim Associate Director, Safeguarding
Martin Birch	Head of Looked After Children
Simone Common	Head of Community and Family Wellbeing
Dawn Shearsmith	Sunderland Virtual School
Jane Wheeler	Participation and Engagement Lead, People Services
Sheila Lough	Strategic Service Manager
Damon Blaney	Monument View
Gillian Kelly	Governance Services

## **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors P Smith, D Dixon and Howe.

## **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **Minutes**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2015 be agreed as a correct record.

## **Development of Accommodation Options for Care Leavers**

This item was to be deferred to the next meeting.

## **Early Intervention Services**

The Acting Head of Community and Family Wellbeing submitted a report outlining the work of Early Intervention Services, including the Liaison and Diversion project which was being undertaken by the Youth Offending Service.

Simone Common, Acting Head of Community and Family Wellbeing advised that Early Intervention Services had been established in its current form in September 2011 to work on locality services. In April 2014, Sunderland was chosen as one of ten sites to test the proposed national model of Liaison and Diversion which was aimed at identifying children and young people who came into contact with the police whose criminal behaviour was a consequence of unmet or undiagnosed health need.

Access to more targeted services in early intervention was achieved through the Strengthening Families Framework and as part of the Safeguarding Improvement Plan there was a target for increasing referrals to the service. The target for 2015/2016 was 2,000 referrals and to date, 1674 referrals had been made.

Children's Centres provided opportunities for intervention at an early stage and the report outlined the current performance in this area. The Children's Local Area Boards had recognised that services needed to get better at sustaining contact and there was a need to target children on a protection plan, providing access to additional support and looking at reducing the number of children that become looked after.

Bumps 2 Babies also offered support teenage mums and mums to be and there were currently 17 young women attending the project. Members' attention was drawn to the figures from the Connexions service showing the numbers of young

people not in education, training or employment in the city and it was noted that the rates for the target groups (young parents/pregnant teenagers, looked after children/children leaving care, SEND, YOS and young carers) were higher than the city average.

Youth provision was delivered by the voluntary sector through two commissioned contracts, one for 8-10 year olds and one for 11-19 year olds. There was no requirement to measure the number of looked after children accessing the provision however recent research had identified that 12 looked after young people had accessed youth provision since 2010.

Turning to the Child and Family Support Service, the Board were advised that this was a targeted outreach support service to vulnerable families and children with a focus on preventative practice. The team was currently working with 193 families, offering dedicated support to reduce the need for social care intervention.

The Youth Drug and Alcohol Project had workers who visited each of the residential units within the city and of the 120 young people currently engaged with the treatment service, 9% were looked after. This percentage was the same as the national average. The project targeted young people who present at Accident and Emergency with substance misuse issues and this had been noted as good practice by Ofsted.

Members were advised that alongside the Liaison and Diversion Service, 'Wear Kids' was a scheme aimed at reducing the number of first time entrants to the Youth Justice System. Year on year, the numbers of referrals were being maintained, however there was no current measure of looked after children within the cohort. The Liaison and Diversion Service screened young people coming into contact with the police for unmet and undiagnosed health needs and over the past six years, the service had identified wider unmet health needs beyond established assessment tools and had developed referral pathways for those needs. The information was then fed back to commissioners and the model being used in Sunderland was recognised nationally as being very effective.

Moving forward, the Early Intervention Service was working to ensure that there was a more coordinated and clearer strategy and that services were being targeted to the right families.

Councillor MacKnight commended the Bumps 2 Babies service and she noted that schools were also keen that young women should keep attending their normal classes where possible and queried if there were any figures for how many young mothers continued to attend educational establishments. Councillor Williams commented that mums and mums to be who lived in Washington did not always want to travel to access the Bumps 2 Babies service.

Simone Common advised that support was provided for young women to attend Bumps 2 Babies and acknowledged that the percentage of young women who were eligible and who actually attended the service was not large but there was a real push for children's centres to offer this service. She undertook to obtain more detail

about the alternative ways in which young mothers were accessing training and education and would feed back to the Board.

Councillor Williams also asked if there was confidence that data from the children's centres was reflective of the actual position and Simone stated that officers were satisfied that the information required for Ofsted was as accurate as it could be. Discussions were currently taking place about the development of a new database for children's centres in the city.

In relation to the number of referrals to Strengthening Families, Councillor Farthing queried if this would include returning families and also asked how the children's centre data compared to other North East metropolitan councils and metropolitan authorities across the country.

Simone clarified that the figures were for the total number of referrals so would include repeat initiations but would be a good reflection of the numbers coming through the system. She stated that there were regional patterns identified through Ofsted reports and Sunderland had been rated as 'good' regionally. Simone advised that she could look at comparative data from other areas of the country and report back to Members.

Councillor Davison raised the issue of apprenticeships for looked after young people and Simone highlighted that the Head of Connexions was particularly interested in this and was doing some work around getting young people 'apprenticeship ready'. Martin Birch advised that there was a dedicated worker within the Virtual School who offered support for care leavers with apprenticeships and further training.

The Chair indicated that this issue had been raised on previous occasions and Ann Goldsmith suggested that this could be the subject of future agenda item for the Board.

Councillor Lawson commented that, as Chair of Sunderland Care and Support Limited, she had raised this with the company and suggested that they might like to look towards care leavers for apprenticeships. She also felt that the local authority should be offering every opportunity it could to care leavers. Dawn Shearsmith added that apprenticeships were being highlighted in the virtual school and they had recently appointed a care leaver as a trainee.

With regard to the number of children who had social care involvement and had been screened through the Liaison and Diversion Service, it was confirmed that the total figure was 179 young people over the past six years. This number was then broken down further into the main presenting need at the time of their arrest.

Having noted that further information had been requested in relation to Bumps 2 Babies, Strengthening Families, children's centres and apprenticeships, it was: -

2. RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted.

## **Sunderland Children's Services Progress Report**

The Associate Director, Children's Safeguarding submitted a report summarising the key messages on the progress of the Learning and Improvement Plan and the current Board performance report.

Ann Goldsmith advised that the report had been considered at the last Improvement Board meeting and it was noted that services needed to move to a point where risk to children was consistently recognised and the response was proportionate and timely. It had been a significant challenge to reduce the risk to children in the community and to ensure that decisions relating to children involved with social care were made in a timely fashion.

The report set out the progress on the priorities of the Learning and Improvement Plan and although a number of further tasks had been completed, it was too early to see the impact of these for children and there was no significant change in any of the 'RAG' ratings.

The senior management structure of the new Children's Services directorate had been agreed and four Associate Director posts had been advertised with interviews taking place during this week. This would help to strengthen the new structure with permanent staff and additional permanent social workers and team managers would continue to be recruited. An outline recruitment plan was in place and targets had been set for social care practitioner recruitment with the aim of bringing down the spend on agency staff over time.

The process of establishing the arm's length delivery vehicle for Children's Services was ongoing and the shadow structure was due to be populated by July 2016.

Ann reported that, having introduced additional workers, decisions were being made more quickly at the front end in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and children were given an allocated worker. The pressure of work in the assessment team was still a concern with assessment timeliness remaining poor and contributing to growing workloads for workers. However, it was felt that there was now a much better grip on children who were subject to child protection plans, planning was tighter and decisions were made more quickly.

Improvements in quality of practice were being driven throughout the system and over the coming months other key areas of concern would be addressed. The number of contacts which were being made to Sunderland MASH were high in comparison to other authorities. For example, for the four months between July and October 2015, Sunderland dealt with 8,392 contacts compared with Leeds which received 6,916. In contrast, the contact to referral rate for Sunderland was 18% but for Leeds it was 54%.

It was clear that there was an issue with the appropriateness of contacts and the development of the early help process was designed to help with this. In the MASH, health representatives and the Police were being brought forward to sit with the triage team and it was hoped that the dialogue in this setting would inform the parent organisation.

Processes were now in place to support more timely decision making in relation to permanence care for all children and to ensure that cases were tracked so that drift was avoided and children subject to proceedings did not suffer unreasonable delay. Post-adoption support was being developed and an agreement had been reached with health colleagues to identify improved availability of mental health support for looked after children.

The overall picture showed a reduction in the number of looked after children to 538 from a peak of 598 in July 2015. Ann Goldsmith highlighted that there was already evidence that making decisions in a timely fashion had meant that children were moving through the care system more quickly.

In relation to the priority to put the child's voice at the centre of practice, a 'Talking to Children' workshop had been held and had been very well received. It was intended to make visits to children 'in need' more regularly and these contacts would be monitored by audit.

Ann advised that it would take some time for the authority to be where it wanted to be with regard to supporting care leavers in the transition to adulthood. The current focus was on making sure that the expectation would be for contact to take place once every eight weeks as a minimum. Training was being provided to improve awareness, standards of practice and engagement with young people and efforts were being made to bring more suitable accommodation for care leavers on line.

Martin Birch added that the number of care leavers who were in contact with the service currently stood at between 80% and 85%. Not all of the young people wished to have contact and he stated that one young person was in the army, sadly a small number of individuals were in prison and the Council did not know the whereabouts of a very small minority of care leavers.

Ann highlighted that the levels of contact with care leavers was now double what it had been in comparison with the time of the Ofsted inspection, with the level of care leavers who were not in education, employment or training standing at 65% which was similar to many other local authorities.

It was noted that Ofsted had looked for systems which would enable the Council to know how well it was doing and the Management Information Team had a good level of performance information to be used going forward. The first target for the Quality Assurance process had been the social work teams and file audits against practice standards had been introduced in November 2015. This would build up evidence over time and the audit would be used to challenge and offer guidance and support. A work programme was being developed for the new Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee so that elected Members would have the right information to challenge practice.

Councillor Lawson referred to the recruitment of additional social workers and asked if this was proving to be challenging. Ann stated that the advertisements for social worker posts had been revised and there was currently quite good retention of staff in Sunderland and this was something to build on. Existing social workers were appreciative of the focus on practice and there were reasons to be optimistic about

recruitment. A microsite was being set up to provide a wealth of information for prospective social workers and agency workers were being encouraged to convert to permanent staff, however it was estimated that it would take two years to fill all of the necessary posts.

Councillor Lawson went on to ask about the level of qualifications for the new staff and Ann said that the majority of the recruitment would be for qualified staff but there were some positions available for people with other sorts of experience. The service had some trainee schemes in operation and would continue to invest in those.

Councillor Farthing noted that the MASH seemed to be the source of some difficulty and that she understood that the highest number of referrals came through the Police, then from education and queried how robust triage mechanisms could be developed.

Ann stated that it was hoped to address this by bringing partners forward to work with the triage team. The Police had an automatic system to make a referral when a child had even been remotely involved in an incident and this explained why they had the highest number of contacts. The second highest number was from health services and the rate of conversion to referrals was lower than might be expected and discussions were taking place with health colleagues about when it was appropriate to make a referral using CAF. Contacts from schools had a conversion rate of approximately 40% which was reasonable.

Councillor Williams commented that there were a lot of unknowns and 'ifs and buts' which Members had heard before and she questioned what would be different on this occasion and when might the service be fully functional. Ann acknowledged that just bringing in more social workers would not solve problems, but bringing this together with quality of practice and performance of systems would, and this was how Members would be able to see improvements happening. The service was a lot better than it had been at the time of the Ofsted report, planning for looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan had improved but there was some way to go in the quality of day to day practice. Ann stated that the quality and timeliness of assessment was not yet good enough, the care leavers' service was improving and the position with young people not in education, employment or training would be radically different in six months' time.

At the present time, social work caseloads were monitored every month and there was a target for each worker to have approximately 20 children in their caseload including children 'in need', looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan. Through practice improvements it was expected to reduce the number of children deemed to be 'in need' and workloads would subsequently be reduced.

Councillor MacKnight requested that further information be provided about caseloads, how many children were at high risk for example, and also noted that there were many acronyms being used in the report which did not assist elected Members' understanding of the issues.

In response to a question from Councillor Davison about the process for addressing complaints if cases were not dealt with in a timely fashion, Ann advised that the Council's complaints team helped to manage and track these. A weekly management meeting looked at the responses to stage one complaints but it was noted that timescales were tight and the issues raised were complex. There was a procedure to be followed so that complainants received timely answers to the issues raised and that these were not escalated further.

Councillor Wilson queried whether once children had an identified worker, would this be a permanent situation, as she was concerned that workers could be changed frequently. Ann stated that the turnover in permanent staff was not excessive but to achieve continuity for children, increasing the number of permanent staff was crucial. The area which was the most problematic were teams working on at the front end of assessment where there tended to be a churn of workers. The service was committed to creating an environment where workers wanted to stay with the authority.

In relation to mental health issues, Councillor Wilson noted that waiting lists for CAMHS were very long and asked if there was any quicker route through for looked after children.

Ann indicated that she was talking to health partners, not just in relation to looked after children, about strategies to help all children develop confidence and have access to support through secondary schools so that young people could talk to someone quickly if they needed to. Work was beginning to map out what was available and where the gaps might be.

Dawn Shearsmith commented that the Virtual School had an emotional health worker and this support had been welcomed by schools with headteachers asking for more counsellors for looked after children to be funded. There were sessions taking place about Children and Young People's Services, behaviours and how this could be managed in schools.

Councillor Lawson highlighted the issue of young people leaving care and the support which they received, noting that the Corporate Parenting Board had often expressed concern about this issue. She asked if there was any way of talking to the army and the prison service to ensure that care leavers in those institutions were able to receive the appropriate support.

Ann advised that it would be necessary first to establish regular contact with care leavers in order to build relationships and so that they could make an informed decision about the contact they wanted to have. Councillor Ball expressed concern that the whereabouts of some care leavers was unknown, however it was emphasised that there had been attempts to make contact with all care leavers and the young people concerned had chosen not to respond.

Having thanked Ann for her detailed report, it was: -

3. RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted.



## **Recruitment of Foster Carers**

The Head of Looked After Children submitted a report outlining the work undertaken to recruit additional Foster Carers to ensure that the Council had sufficient in-house provision.

Martin Birch, Head of Looked After Children, advised that the current time there were currently 544 looked after children in Sunderland and 188 registered foster carers. 366 children were placed with foster carers with 10 vacancies existing in the service due to carers resting or children who required solo placements.

There were also 71 children placed within Independent Fostering Agency Placements which was at a considerable cost to the Council with weekly costs ranging from £730 to £1450 per placement. Over the last nine months, 13 foster carers had been recruited, however only three of these had come forward as the result of a campaign, two from a radio advert and one from a newspaper advert.

A new recruitment campaign had begun in November 2015 using the tagline 'Foster for Sunderland'. It had been recognised that other local authorities were advertising in the Sunderland area and the authority needed to get its name back into public awareness.

There had not been a large number of enquiries as a result of the short campaign, however the level of interest had still been a huge improvement from previous months and it was expected that enquiries would increase further. Martin highlighted that the average rate of conversion from enquiry to approval of Foster Carers was 11% nationally and 7% in Sunderland. In order to recruit the number of Foster Carers required in the city based on current numbers (30-35 carers), then an average of 500 enquiries a year would be needed to achieve this.

The next steps for the process would involve a continuous recruitment campaign and a process of rebranding and developing improved and clearer advertising. The option of having a Marketing Co-ordinator based within the Looked After Children service was also being explored and the financial package would be reviewed in order to compete with other local authorities and independent fostering agencies.

Councillor Farthing commented that in terms of raising awareness, she had noticed that one local authority was advertising on a petrol pump and suggested that the bridge over Durham Road would be a good place to advertise. She also noted that the conversion rate for enquiries to approvals was disappointing.

The Board suggested that there could be publicity in the Gentoo newsletter, in local church communications and through other large employers.

Councillor Williams noted that this sort of campaign would require funding and asked if the service would have the budget and personnel available to manage this. Martin stated that there would be ongoing conversations with managers and finance about the communications needs of the service.

Ann Goldsmith emphasised that it was necessary to have a proactive recruitment campaign and to speak to the Communications team about what this would look like. Half of the external foster care placements for the authority were due to the lack of in-house capacity and the costs for in-house foster care were around 50% less than those for external placements. It was important to have a fully developed and costed plan for foster care recruitment.

Upon consideration of the report, the Board: -

4. RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted.

### **Corporate Parent Training Update**

Jane Wheeler, Participation and Engagement Lead, advised that she and the Head of Looked After Children had been looking at putting a training schedule together for members as corporate parents.

'In Your Shoes' training was offered through the Council's Organisational Development service and there was also a need to offer training on legislation. A number of Members had taken part in Regulation 44 training and it was hoped that the first Regulation 44 visit with Members would take place during this month.

Councillor Farthing referred to reference materials from the Centre for Public Scrutiny, noting that these were very useful and could provide the basis for some training. Jane Wheeler suggested that this could be followed up through the Learning Hub and the Board would be updated on the available training in due course.

5. RESOLVED that the information be noted.

### **Looked After Children Pledge Update**

The Board had been due to receive an update on Pledge 6 "I don't want to leave care until I feel ready", however as Kieran had not been able to stay for the entirety of the Board meeting, this item was deferred to the next meeting.

Councillor Marshall suggested that for future meetings, items where the young people were reporting to the Board should be placed earlier on the agenda. The Board agreed that this was a preferable arrangement.

### **Change Council Update**

Jane Wheeler, Participation and Engagement Lead, presented the update from the Change Council.

The Change Council were currently working to develop their new logo and identity and were hoping to recruit new members as a result of this revamp. All young people

matched to a pledge had either met with their buddies or had a meeting scheduled in the near future.

The group had agreed to take part in the £3 Challenge which was for senior managers to prepare a recipe for under £3. The Chair requested that the detail of the challenge be circulated to Members and Jane advised that Communications were dealing with this on behalf of the service. Recipes which were deemed to be successful would form part of a regional cookbook.

The Change Council had taken part in a project which was aimed at connecting children in care with their MP. Letters had been sent to Sharon Hodgson MP and it was hoped to arrange a meeting with her in the future.

The Board were made aware of the recent activity from the Change Council and it was highlighted that the group had decided to run a campaign aimed at challenging the stigma of children and young people in care. Members of the Change Council had also recently carried out inspections of some of the leaving care accommodation in the city and this would be reported as part of the Head of Looked After Children's report at the next meeting.

6. RESOLVED that Change Council update be noted.

### **Sunderland Guide to Corporate Parenting**

The Associate Director, Children's Safeguarding, submitted a report presenting the Sunderland Guide to Corporate Parenting for endorsement by the Corporate Parenting Board.

The role of Corporate Parent was a statutory requirement and was commonly understood to mean that officers and elected Members of a local authority had the responsibility to take the same interest in the progress, attainments and wellbeing of looked after children and young people as any reasonable parent would be expected to. The guide had been drafted to provide Members with the information they need which would allow them to carry out their responsibilities as corporate parents.

7. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) Sunderland's Guide to Corporate Parenting for Elected Members be endorsed; and
- (ii) the guide be circulated to all elected Members.

(Signed) P STEWART  
In the Chair

