

Corporate Parenting Board

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday, 3 February, 2014 in
Committee Room No. 6, Civic Centre, Sunderland at 5.30p.m.**

Present

Councillor P. Smith
Councillor Stewart
Councillor Shattock
Councillor Emerson
Councillor Macknight
Councillor Williams

Members of the Board

Silksworth Ward
Redhill Ward
Southwick Ward
Ryhope Ward
Castle Ward
Washington Central Ward

Young People

Daniel Bensley
Kieran Boyce

Change Council
Change Council

Also in Attendance

Councillor Davison
Councillor B. McClennan
Councillor Thompson
Councillor Tye
Councillor Price
Councillor Francis

All Supporting Officers

Meg Boustead
Dawn Shearsmith

Natasha Haumeer
Julie Ann Kelly
Debra Dorward
Dot McGough

Head of Safeguarding
Headteacher, Sunderland
Virtual Schools
Senior Leaving Care Worker
Leaving Care Worker
Governance Services Officer
Quality Assurance Officer

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

Members were requested to note that apologies would only be formally recorded from those appointed to the Corporate Parenting Board. Non appointed Members were advised they need not submit apologies.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes of the last meeting

8. RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings held on 9 July, 2013 and 14 October 2013 be agreed and signed as a correct record, subject to the following: -

Minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2013

An amendment was required to reflect Dawn Shearsmith's attendance.

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2013

Councillor Macknight's attendance was to be moved into the 'appointed members' section of the minutes.

Draft Work Plan for the Corporate Parenting Board

The Head of Safeguarding submitted a draft work plan for the Corporate Board. Members were advised that the purpose of the work plan was to identify which topics would come before the Board and when.

Members referred to the work plan. During which, they were advised that the Care Evaluation Survey did not feature on the agenda for the February meeting, as information was awaited from the Leaving Care Service.

The Head of Safeguarding advised that the following topics would be the focus at meetings in April and July 2014:

- Perceptions of young people (April 2014)
- Promotion of contact between siblings (April 2014)
- Annual performance report/adoption performance (July 2014)

The Board confirmed that they were happy for the work plan to be presented in its current format.

Councillor McClennan suggested that it would be useful for the work plan to include a progress column in order that Members could easily identify items that slip.

Upon consideration, it was: -

13. RESOLVED to note the Draft Work Plan.

Performance Update including Adoption Scorecard

The Executive Director of People Services submitted a report updating Members on Sunderland City Council's Adoption Performance Scorecard.

Members were advised that Sunderland had a long term commitment to promoting adoption for children who could not grow up within their own birth families, including children with a wide range of needs, older children, larger sibling groups, disabled children and children with significant health needs.

The Head of Safeguarding advised that the scorecard looked at the timescales that Sunderland moved young people through the care system. This included children with a wide range of needs, including older children, larger sibling groups, disabled children and children with significant health needs.

Members referred to the 2013 Adoption Scorecard. In doing so, the Head of Safeguarding advised that Sunderland's overall performance in relation to adoption remained strong, with 35 children adopted from care between April 2012 and March 2013. This was below the total number of children adopted in 2011/2012 when 48, a record number of children were adopted from care. The most recent figures were however still above the number of children adopted in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011.

Members were informed that the national average for the proportion of children aged over 5 years who leave care through adoption was 4%. In Sunderland this figure was 11% over the 3 years 2010-2013. Across the North East Region Sunderland had the highest percentage of children age 5 and over leaving care through adoption.

The Head of Safeguarding advised Members that it took a considerable amount of time for young people to be adopted in Sunderland, and that an Adoption Improvement Plan was in place to monitor timescales.

Members were informed that data included within the Corporate Parenting Annual Report that was presented to Scrutiny Committee in September 2013 showed that the length of Family Finding in 2012-2013 was longer than in previous years, which would lead to the 3 years average moving further from the national threshold.

In terms of the national picture, the Head of Safeguarding stated that adoption scorecards published in January 2014 demonstrated that nationally there had been no overall improvement in timeliness since the 2009-2012 scorecards which were published in May 2012.

Thresholds had been updated this year and it was confirmed that only 36 out of 65 Councils had met the revised thresholds.

Councillor Williams enquired where in the figures would a family who adopted a relative sit. The Head of Safeguarding responded advising that if a family took on a child from within their family under a private arrangement, then that would not be reported as part of the adoption scorecard figures. Instead, it would be categorised as a 'non-agency' adoption, therefore Sunderland would only be involved at assessment stage.

The Head of Safeguarding stated that delays could be caused by children being returned home and it not working out. In those circumstances the child would then be placed back into care and the process is started from the beginning again.

Councillor Williams enquired as to what the benefits were of family fostering. In response, the Head of Safeguarding advised that every case was looked at independently, although the Council did recommend that grandparents foster rather than adopt.

Councillor Macknight enquired if the Council carried out twin tracking, a process to determine the feasibility of a child returning to their family, whilst still looking for permanent care options. The Head of Safeguarding confirmed that the Council did indeed twin track, continuing to pursue rehabilitation home but also explore options for permanence outside the family.

Councillor McClennan commented that the statistics relating to performance should not be underestimated because the success rate for adoption was very good in Sunderland. Also, the statistic relating to the adoption of older children was excellent.

Councillor McClennan stated that she would be interested to learn more about disruptions and adoption breakdowns. In response, the Head of Safeguarding explained that the difficulty with adoption breakdowns was that the Authority did not always capture the information. It was confirmed that most breakdowns occurred outside of Sunderland, and although the Authority offer to keep in touch with adopters, it did not always get to know of a breakdown. A lot of work was going on to try to obtain this detail, including the causes of breakdowns.

The Head of Safeguarding advised Members that an Adoption Panel Advisor position had been created using the Adoption Grant. This would be a fixed term appointment given that funding was time limited, however it would help towards driving issues forward.

Councillor McClennan commented that despite budget cuts and reducing staffing levels, she was confident that the Authority would meet its targets.

In response to an enquiry regarding whether more adoptions were coming forward as a result of the recession, the Head of Safeguarding advised that this was not the case.

Councillor Francis enquired what percentage of children looked after returned to their own parents. The Head of Safeguarding responded advising that approximately 10% of children looked after returned to their parents. Statistics showed that the longer a young person resided in care, then the less likely it was that they would return to their parents.

It was reported to Members that Lynne Goldsmith, Senior Safeguarding Manager was leading on a piece of work to look at why some young people only stayed in care for a short time. Once complete, this would be submitted to the Board.

Upon consideration, it was: -

14. RESOLVED to note the report.

Pathway Plans

The Head of Safeguarding stated that Pathway Plans must be completed on behalf of young people aged 16-25. Pathway Plans were about young people's next steps, to guide and support them up to age 18 and beyond, until 21 if they go on to higher education.

The Corporate Parenting Board welcomed Natasha Haumeer, Senior Leaving Care Officer and Julie-Ann Kelly, Leaving Care Worker, to provide an update to Members in relation to Pathway Plans.

Members were advised that the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 significantly featured in their work where Pathway Assessments were undertaken to determine what advice, assistance and support a young person required, both whilst they were being looked after and once they ceased to be looked after.

Natasha advised that herself and Julie-Ann worked with young people aged between sixteen and twenty-five, including young people that go onto higher education.

Members were advised that every 16 or 17 year old who had been looked after by the Local authority for a period of 13 weeks or more since the age of 14 was eligible to have leaving care provision.

It was explained that in the past, the Pathway Plan and assessment used to be a disjointed system and the plan was difficult to read. As such, young people were reluctant to engage because they did not understand.

Since then, the process had evolved and improved. Pathway Plans had become an extension of the Care Plan that looked at all the issues contained within the assessment, including budget, accommodation and independent living skills. Social workers found the new Plans much easier to work with and there was clear guidance for social workers to follow.

Members were informed that the Change Council had been involved in a consultation process to improve the assessment process. Daniel Bensley and Kieran Boyce, both from the Change Council commented that they had been invited to comment on whether the consultation relating to the Pathway Plan asked the right questions.

Councillor T. Martin commented that he was once involved in the Sunderland YMCA Foyer project which provided supported accommodation for 16-24 year olds who were homeless, vulnerable and in need of support in the form of 24 self-contained flats. Councillor T. Martin stated that the project was very impressive and enquired if Gentoo operated something similar.

In response, Councillor T. Martin was advised that trainer flats were available in the City, including Holmewood House which had twelve flats, all with their own bedroom. Burlington Close was another supported accommodated seven bedded unit. The Council was also currently at the point of opening a four bedded accommodated unit on Chester Road in Sunderland, for young people leaving residential children's homes. This facility was being rented initially for one year to see how it worked. It was confirmed that all units were staffed.

Dawn Shearsmith, Headteacher, Sunderland Virtual Schools enquired if those that go on to further education would continue to require a post 16 PEP. In response, Julie-Ann Kelly advised that some young people did want a Personal Education Plan, whilst others did not.

Councillor McClennan stated that benefit reforms and eligibility were a concern and enquired how much emphasis should the Authority place on ensuring that young people's benefits were in place, and how could this go on to be managed.

Julie-Ann Kelly advised that once a young person reached 18 they were allocated an assistant social worker who stays with them until they become 21 years of age. It was confirmed that the assistant social worker would be aware of any benefit entitlement and would be able help the young person manage these.

Councillor Tye enquired which external agencies were involved in Pathway Plans. In response, he was informed that it was the decision of the young person. Popular choices tended to be the inclusion of the Youth Offending Service, a care worker, or the young person's birth family. However, it was confirmed that the social worker did have the option to include an agency if it was deemed necessary to include it for the benefit of the young person. For example, if it was evident that the young person had a specific 'need', then the social worker could add in the name of an agency that could deal with the problem/issue that the particular young person was facing in order to assist them.

Councillor MacKnight enquired if young people found that the Pathway Plans provided them with scope for the future. In response Daniel Bensley from the Change Council stated that it did provide useful scope for the future.

Councillor Francis enquired what would be the consequences for a young person at 16 who did not want to leave foster care and their carer did not wish for them to leave either. In response, the Head of Safeguarding stated government had introduced a policy called 'Staying Put' in December 2013, which allowed children in care to stay with their foster families after they turn 18 years of age, until their 21st birthday.

The Head of Safeguarding added that it was hoped that the Council would be able to secure some financial assistance from government to allow it to do this.

Members were also advised that at the moment, the Authority paid foster carers beyond 18 if a young person was doing A-levels. This was currently being done informally, but it was confirmed it would become part of the Staying Put scheme in the future.

In response to an enquiry regarding continuity of care, Members were advised that the Authority did try to ensure that young people were kept with the same social worker. It was confirmed that fewer changes were happening now and things were improving in this regard.

Members thanked Natasha Haumeer and Julie-Ann Kelly for their attendance at the meeting.

It was then: -

15. RESOLVED to note the update in relation to Pathway Plans.

Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006

At the instance of the Chairman, it was: -

16. RESOLVED that in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 the public be excluded during consideration of the remaining business as it was considered to involve a likely disclosure of information relating to an individual, or information which was likely to reveal the identity of an individual (including the Authority holding that information) (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraphs 1 and 2).

(Signed) P. SMITH
Chairman

Note:-

The above minutes relate only to items considered during the time which the meeting was open to the public.

Additional minutes in respect of other items are included in Part II.