

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

Children, Young People and Family Support Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 9 March 2015

PRESENT: Councillors Gill Furniss (Chair), John Booker, Mike Drabble, Talib Hussain, Karen McGowan, Pat Midgley, Colin Ross, Ian Saunders, Jack Scott (Substitute Member), Diana Stimely, Stuart Wattam and Cliff Woodcraft (Deputy Chair)

Non-Council Members in attendance:-

Jules Jones, Education Non-Council Voting Member
Gillian Foster, Education Non Council Voting Member
Alison Warner, Education Non-Council Member

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Nasima Akther, and Councillor Jack Scott attended as her duly appointed substitute, and from Joan Stratford (Education Non-Council Voting Member).

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 Councillor Talib Hussain declared a personal interest in item 7 (Adoption and Fostering Annual Report) as his wife works for the Fostering Service.

3.2 Councillor Ian Saunders declared a Disclosable Percuniary Interest in item 7 (Adoption and Fostering Annual Report) as he is a foster carer, and he left the room during the consideration of the Fostering Annual Report.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 26th January, 2015 were approved as a correct record, with the exception of item 1 – Apologies for Absence, which was amended by the addition of Gillian Foster (Education Non-Council Voting Member) to the list.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 There were no questions raised or petitions submitted by members of the public.

6. ADOPTION AND FOSTERING ANNUAL REPORTS

6.1 Adoption Service

6.1.1 The Executive Director, Children, Young People and Families, submitted the Adoption Service's Annual Report, in line with adoption services statutory regulations and guidance.

6.1.2 The report was supported by a presentation by Suzanne Whiteley, Adoption and Fostering Service Manager, and also in attendance for this item were Dorne Collinson, Director, Children and Families Service and Jon Banwell, Assistant Director – Provider Services.

6.1.3 Suzanne Whiteley reported on the national adoption agenda, referring to the various Government initiatives during the last few years to accelerate whole adoption process improvements to the process for assessing prospective adopters and attempts to help adoptive families to help their children settle into their new homes. Ms. Whiteley also referred to Sheffield's response to the Government initiatives and to statistics relating to the various different aspects of the adoptions process.

6.1.4 Members of the Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- Whilst it was accepted that the Indicators A1 and A2 in the adoption scorecard were still outside the threshold set by the Department for Education, considerable work was being undertaken, including the recruitment of additional staff in the Adoption Service, to look at why this was the case and to look at the data collected to analyse where the delays in the process were occurring. The figures published were based on a three-year average, therefore any real signs of improvement in terms of the figures would only be realised after a three-year period. It was stressed that the Indicator A2 (average time between a local authority receiving Court Authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family) had now come down from 300 days to 267 days. There were a number of delays throughout all the various different stages of the process, but following the implementation of a number of planned measures, it was envisaged that there would be improvements in terms of the indicators.
- As well as the measures already put in place, there were further planned improvements to the adoption process, which included the introduction of an electronic system for all social workers, which would make it easier for them to monitor precisely how long each stage of the process took. It would also enable them to identify any issues, and provide an opportunity for them to plan ahead more effectively. The

Children and Families Service's Senior Management Team would continually monitor the information on the new electronic system, to give them an overseeing role. Other improvements included the provision of additional capacity in the Service in order free up time for social workers.

- The three main causes of the delays in terms of the Indicator A2 included a lack of capacity in terms of social workers' caseloads and issues regarding their ability to prioritise their work, slippage with regard to Family Finders and the need for more robust performance management tools. In terms of addressing these issues, respectively, additional resources and capacity had been provided in terms of the social workers, and adoption work was now deemed as a priority for them, two people had recently been recruited to posts of Family Finders, and were working hard to make up the backlog in this area, and procedures and processes in the Children and Families Service were being updated and there was now accessible guidance/procedures in place, including an on-line guidance in terms of procedures both locally and nationally.
- The statistics in terms of improvements made during the present year would be available in 2016 and as the figures will include the statistics from the first two years, it was very difficult to predict whether any significant improvements will have been made at this stage. Further analysis could be undertaken in connection with this issue and provided to Members.
- The Council had a very close relationship with Voluntary Adoption Agencies. The process involved a range of measures, most of which were now on-line, and which were used by many other local authorities. Other initiatives which have helped to increase activity with regard to family finding include the "Help Be My Parent" scheme and close links with the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium.
- Whilst funding had been provided from the Government, through the Adoption Support Fund, to help adoptive families to help their children settle into their new homes, it was unclear as to whether this funding would continue. This, therefore, made it very difficult to predict what it meant for the Council long-term, in terms of financial implications. Officers had been involved in an audit session with a representative from the Department for Education, and meetings were planned with colleagues in the South Yorkshire Region to discuss how resources could be pooled in terms of assisting adoptive families.
- Additional capacity in terms of post adoption support in the Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) was currently being

proposed.

- Social workers' caseloads were currently in line with those of other local authorities, but there would still be a requirement on them to prioritise their work accordingly. It was hoped that the benefits of additional investment and capacity would be seen, and that the work of Early Prevention Services would help to keep down social workers' workload to a reasonable level.
- Dealing with the delays in the adoptions process was deemed as high priority by the Director, Children and Families Service, and the Director offered, as a commitment, to provide Members with a report detailing the work being undertaken, and work planned, to address this issue.
- The time period set out in the adoption scorecard (Indicator A2) started from the point when the decision was made in terms of the Placement Order.
- The reason why there were 165 children made subject to a "Should be Placed for Adoption" (SHOBPA) decision was due to a change in the recording method, which now included children who were placed for adoption.
- Through working with the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium, as well as the development of sub-regional working, there were a range of processes in terms of family finding, including identifying where there were risks associated with a child staying in Sheffield.
- Some children had achieved permanency Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs). These Orders were used in such circumstances where a child would remain within their birth family or with their foster carer. There has been year on year increases of SGOs in Sheffield.
- A number of temporary posts had recently been recruited to, specifically to identify where the delays were occurring in the process. These posts had been funded for a period of three months through Government funding in connection with adoption reform. Staffing levels in the Adoption Service had been relatively stable over the last few years and it was only recently when there had been a number of staffing changes.

6.1.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the information reported as part of the presentation and the responses to the questions raised; and

- (b) expresses its concerns at the delays in the adoption process, as detailed in the adoption scorecard, set out in the report now submitted, and, in the light of this, requests the Director of Children and Families to submit a report to the Committee on the steps and measures being taken to address this issue.

6.2 Fostering Service

6.2.1 The Executive Director, Children, Young People and Families, submitted the Fostering Service's Annual Report.

6.2.2 The report was supported by a presentation by Suzanne Whiteley, Adoption and Fostering Service Manager, and also in attendance for this item were Dorne Collinson, Director, Children and Families Service and Jon Banwell, Assistant Director – Provider Services.

6.2.3 In support of the report, Suzanne Whiteley gave a presentation providing an outline of the Fostering Service, reporting on details of foster carer training and fostering panels, statistics regarding the number of newly approved foster carers, the number of placements and the total number of approved foster carers. Ms. Whiteley also referred to details of foster carers who had either withdrawn from fostering or de-registered as foster carers during 2013/14, together with the reasons for such withdrawals or resignations, and concluded by referring to the planned work of the Fostering Service in 2015.

6.2.4 Members of the Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- The statistics in terms of the percentage of approved foster carers who subsequently either didn't make the standard or did not wish to continue, were not available at the meeting, but would be sent to Councillor John Booker.
- The Council worked very closely with the Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in connection with providing training for foster carers with regard to children and young people with mental health problems. All foster carers were provided with access to training opportunities provided by CAMHS, and the Council was in close liaison with that Service and Multi-Agency Psychological Support (MAPS) in terms of looking at what improvements could be made in this area.
- The Council was required to complete an annual assessment for the Government with regard to looked after children with mental health problems, and was working with MAPs to look at what provision could be provided in terms of those children and young people with more serious mental health problems. This model would be used to develop mental health services further. Details of this would be included in future annual reports.

- As at 30th September, 2014, the service had 33 vacancies in terms of foster carers. There were a number of reasons as to why people did not wish to continue as foster carers, including relationship breakdowns, illness and financial or employment issues. The Council had an excellent record in terms of the recruitment of foster carers over the last few years and if any people who had registered were not deemed active, officers would contact them and discuss the issue of deregistration.
- When a child reached the age of 18, the Council, through its Staying Put policy, encouraged such children to stay in their placement. The support provided would usually take the form of financial support, and the time limit in terms of how long they stayed in a placement depended on the individual circumstances of each child.
- The number of prospective foster carers was always going to reduce after each stage of the application/assessment process. In 2013/14, 157 initial enquiries were received, 83 social worker visits were made, 61 people attended the training, 45 were subject to an assessment, with 31 being approved.
- If any foster carers who had been through the full assessment process, decide to leave the service, only to then decide to return at a later date, the Fostering Panel would look at the individual circumstances of each case, but would be likely to fast-track their application.
- The Service would collect as much information as possible in terms of the experiences of children placed with foster carers, at the start of the process, then follow this up after a year in their placements. Both the children and the foster carers, through the Independent Reviewing Process, would be encouraged to provide details in terms of their respective experiences. All children in placements were encouraged to comment on their carers and the Service maintained an ongoing dialogue with all foster carers, through the Voices Forum.
- Foster carers often had a view in terms of the age of children they would like to look after. Placements were made in respect of teenagers, as with regard to children of all other ages, and a recruitment campaign was held in 2014, through the Youth Justice System, to look at placements specifically for teenagers. The Service was looking at what support could be provided to foster carers who looked after older children.
- The duties of the Training and Development Officer had recently changed, and the Officer had been on sickness leave

for some time. Whilst every attempt had been made to maintain the training sessions to support foster carers, some of the sessions had been forced to be cancelled.

- 6.2.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the report now submitted, the information reported as part of the presentation, and the responses provided to the questions now raised.

7. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN ANNUAL REPORT

- 7.1 The Executive Director, Children, Young People and Families, submitted the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Annual Report, which contained details on the progress of the Council's Looked After Children and Care Leavers, the progress of the Looked After Adopted Children and Care Leaver Strategy 2014 and made reference to a revised and updated Looked After Adopted Children and Care Leaver Strategy in 2015.
- 7.2 The report set out information on the key objectives and actions in the Looked After, Adopted Children and Care Leaver Strategy 2014, together with proposed actions in 2015, in respect of the seven key priorities – Engagement and Influence of Looked After Children and Young People, Educational Achievement and Attainment, Health and Wellbeing, Permanence, Integrated Placement Strategy, Safeguarding and Vulnerability and Care Leavers. The report was supported by presentations on each of the seven strategic priorities, from Jon Banwell (Priorities 1, 2, 3 and 5), Suzanne Whiteley (Priority 4), Joel Hannah (Priority 6) and Becky Towle (Priority 7).
- 7.3 Members of the Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-
- It was accepted that the Council was not meeting the target in terms of percentage of children in care with up to date health assessments, although the trend was improving. There has been a considerable level of communication with, and training for, social workers on this issue, which had resulted in the improving trend. A new post of Designated Nurse had been recruited to in the Clinical Commissioning Group. The percentage of children in care with up to date dental assessments was also below the national target, but was also showing an improving trend. Arrangements were now being made for dentists to visit children's homes, as opposed to relying on children visiting surgeries, and this had helped in terms of the improving trend.
 - The issue of the accommodation for care leavers was very high on the Service's agenda, and regular meetings were being held with colleagues in the Housing Service to discuss this issue. Where possible, every effort was made to encourage older children to remain with their foster carers, under the Staying Put policy. Also, the Service was looking at benchmarking and accommodation provided, as well as reviewing the personal circumstances of each care leaver, in detail, to gain a better understanding of their needs.

- The biggest priorities in terms of the Children and Families Service were safeguarding, early years and emotional health and wellbeing. In terms of emotional health and wellbeing, there was a need for the Service to look at its processes with regard to looked after children on the basis that they generally had the most needs. The Director, Children and Families, had arranged to meet with commissioning leads within the Clinical Commissioning Group and Public Health to look at how the Service's resources could be prioritised in respect of this area of work. It was accepted that the 0-25 year old agenda was a major area of work for the Council, and the Committee was assured that there would be major improvements in this area of work in the forthcoming years.
- It was important that, in terms of the educational achievement of looked after children, there was the aspiration that all such children would attend a "good" school (as categorised by Ofsted) and achieve to the best of their ability. It was also important to ensure that the school they attended, and their education package as a whole, was suited to their individual needs.
- The Scrutiny Committee could impact on the lives of looked after children by maintaining the high profile of such children, and by Members, as Elected Champions, maintaining their links with the children's homes. Jon Banwell would circulate information to Members, containing information on how they could be involved in some specific work taking place around care leavers, and any comments from Members on the new Looked After Children and Care Leavers Strategy would be welcomed. It would also be appreciated if Members could support looked after children in terms of their education, specifically, and where possible, ensuring that no such children were excluded from schools.

7.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes contents of the report now submitted, the information reported as part of the presentations now made and the responses to the questions raised.

8. WORK PROGRAMME AND ANNUAL REPORT

8.1 RESOLVED: That, due to time constraints, it was agreed that the Policy Improvement Officer, Diane Owens, would email the Committee regarding the remainder of the Work Programme 2014/15 (the annual meeting with young carers) and also to request input into the annual report for scrutiny.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

9.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on a date to be arranged.