

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

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

Meeting held 14 October 2019

PRESENT: Councillors Mick Rooney (Chair), Mike Chaplin, Francyne Johnson, Joe Otten, Kevin Oxley, Jim Steinke, Alison Teal, Cliff Woodcraft and Richard Shaw (Substitute Member)

Non-Council Members in attendance:-

Sam Evans, (Diocese Representative - Non-Council Voting Member)
Peter Naldrett, (Parent Governor Representative - Non-Council Voting Member)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- 1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Olivia Blake, Julie Grocutt, Mike Levery, Colin Ross (with Councillor Richard Shaw attending as his substitute) and Sophie Wilson.
- 1.2 Apologies for absence were also received from Alice Riddell (HealthWatch Sheffield) and Alison Warner (School Governor Representative – Non-Council Non-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 There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

- 4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16th September 2019, were approved as a correct record and, arising therefrom:-
 - (a) further to queries raised by the Chair as to whether the information referred to in (i) Item 4 – Minutes of Previous Meetings (paragraphs 4.11 and 4.21), (ii) Item 6 – Ofsted Report of Inspection of Sheffield’s Social Care Services – July 2019 (paragraph 6.7(b)(i), (ii), (iii) and (v)) and (iii) Item 7 – Elective Home Education (paragraph 7.5(a)(i), (ii) and (iii)), had been sent to Members of the Committee, the Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) stated that she would chase this up, and ensure that all the information requested would be circulated to Members as soon as possible;

and

- (b) the Policy and Improvement Officer reported that the membership for the Task and Finish Group – ‘Voice and Involvement of Children and Young People’, had now been agreed, and the Group had met for the first time last week.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

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

6. ADOPTION SERVICE - ANNUAL REPORT 2018/19

- 6.1 The Committee received a report of the Executive Director, People Services, attaching the Adoption Service – Annual Report 2018/19. The report contained information on the activity and performance of the Adoption Service in 2018/19.

- 6.2 In attendance for this item were Councillor Jackie Drayton (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families), Carly Speechley (Director of Children and Families) and Paul Dempsey (Assistant Director – Provider Services).

- 6.3 Paul Dempsey referred to the report, which contained information on activity, regarding both children and adopters, throughout 2018/19, timeliness, support, the Adoption Panel, the Regional Adoption Agency, various developments throughout the year and development and improvement actions for 2019/20.

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

- Whilst it was important to keep the average time in days between a child entering care and being placed for adoption as low as possible, the primary aim was to ensure that there was a correct plan for the child. The time taken to develop an Adoption Plan varied, with the time being longer for those children with more complex needs. The Local Authority would always try and do whatever it could for the benefit of the child, and in some instances, this took longer.
- Whilst it was accepted that, with the fact that the adoption process for babies or very young children was often much quicker, this could highlight the fact that some cases regarding older children were taking much longer, very few cases would take years to complete, with such children being moved on to different Permanency Plans. Whilst a detailed breakdown of the timings could not be produced at the meeting, this information could be provided to Members.
- The figures provided related only to those children who had been placed for adoption, and not those given alternative Permanency Plans, in line with Government requirements. The Service continued to strive to improve the timings in respect of all children and, as part of this work, officers would meet

on a monthly basis to monitor and review cases.

- The Service would never change a child's plan for the sole purpose of improving average timescales.
- As part of the recruitment process, the Service made every attempt to recruit adopters with similar backgrounds, cultures or ethnicity to the child. Whilst the primary objective was to find a suitable home for a child, every effort was made, where possible, to place children with adopters with a similar background, culture or ethnicity.
- A breakdown of the age, gender and ethnicity of the children, and the ethnicity of adopters, together with the timescales in respect of the adoption process, would be included in the next Annual Report.
- Approximately 60% of the City's looked after children were white British, with the remaining 40% being of mixed heritage, Asian and Black/African. The Service struggled to recruit diverse adopter families, with, again, 60% being white British and the remaining 40% comprising mixed heritage, Black/African and Asian.
- The reference in the report to the need for the Service to proactively and thoroughly explore all paternal family members as potential carers for children was simply alluding to the fact that, whilst the Service would explore both maternal and paternal family members, it was generally harder to find paternal family members as potential carers.
- Whilst it was accepted that there had been delays in the appointment to the post of Recruitment Team Manager, following the departure of the previous manager in December 2018, there had been no connection between these delays and the high sickness levels and performance issues within the Business Support Team, which had impacted upon business continuity. Every effort was made to ensure that staff in the Business Support Team continued to work as efficiently as possible and, as part of this work, managers continually monitored levels of sickness within the Team, in accordance with Council policy, whilst being supportive of staff needs. A number of staff members who had been on long-term sickness leave had returned to work on a phased return basis, and had support plans in place.
- The Service arranged a number of meetings to enable adopters and children to voice any concerns they had, and had recently set up a group specifically for teenage children. There was now a statutory requirement for all children going in to adoption placements to have life storybooks, which provided information about the birth family, foster placements and why the children had to be adopted. The storybooks helped the child understand adoption, and stored memories of their past.
- Meetings, chaired by an independent professional person, were held when adoptions broke down, in order to look into the reasons for the breakdown, as

well as hopefully learning lessons in terms of how the breakdown occurred. National research indicated that most adoption breakdowns occurred when the child was in their teenage years. It was believed that this was due to them reaching an age where they started to ask questions about their identity and, in some cases, the child would become violent, resulting in a breakdown of the arrangement. The Service held regular monitoring meetings in order to assess the relationships between adopters and children, with the regularity of such meetings recently being increased to four times a year.

- The cost of placing a child for adoption outside the City was the same as allocating a child with an adopter within the City. There were currently six children who had been placed with voluntary adoption agencies, and five of the Local Authority adopter families had adopted children from other local authorities. The primary aim was to ensure that a suitable placement was made, and that the child was comfortable and happy.
- One potential advantage of regional adoption agencies was that, by pooling its resources, local authorities in a particular region would be able to recruit more adopters.
- As part of the quality assurance measures during the matching process, where children were looking to be placed with adopters outside the City, the local authority did not see the report of the adopter initially, but would do at the point of matching.
- It had been determined that, as part of the plans for regionalisation, it was more important that it resulted in improved outcomes for children and adoptive families, rather than simply being a cost-saving measure for the Authority.
- The four Directors of Children's Services in South Yorkshire, together with the Local Authorities' respective Directors of Finance, were currently looking at the establishment of a Regional Adoption Agency. However, at present, no proof of any financial or performance advantages had been identified, so work on this was continuing.
- In terms of the 16 children who had been placed with adopters approved by external agencies (10 with other local authorities' adopters and six with voluntary adoption agencies), whilst such external agencies had their own assessment procedures with regard to the recruitment of adopters, Sheffield's Adoption Panel would always make the final decision in terms of the placement. A higher number of siblings or children with special needs and/or disabilities were placed with adopters approved by external agencies.
- The Authority could do more in terms of working with charitable organisations in terms of a joint approach, and work was being undertaken to explore this, both locally and nationally. The Authority was always trying to do practical things to reach out to different communities and work in terms of attracting adopters for children with additional needs or sibling groups. It was important

to ensure that adopters felt supported.

- In terms of regional adoption agencies, any Sheffield children placed with such an agency would still be the responsibility of the Local Authority, and City Council staff would be part of the agency.
- The Authority always tried to work closely with external partners, in order to obtain the best outcome for the child and, as part of this work, the Authority had developed a very good relationship with the Courts. The Service also worked closely with colleagues in Education and Health to ensure that appropriate guidance and support were provided for both the child and the adopter.
- Whilst reports of external agencies were scrutinised, the agencies were not performance-managed in the same way as reports produced by the Authority's Adoption Service. If such reports were deemed not to be sufficient, the agency in question would be asked to review it and send it back.

6.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the Adoption Service – Annual Report 2018/19 now submitted, the information now reported and the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Councillor Jackie Drayton, Carly Speechley and Paul Dempsey for attending the meeting and responding to the questions raised;
- (c) welcomes the improvements made with regard to the Adoption Service during 2018/19; and
- (d) requests that:
 - (i) a briefing note on the staffing issues being faced by the Business Support Team, namely the high levels of sickness and performance issues, be circulated to Members of the Committee;
 - (ii) future Annual Reports include quality assurance figures for non-Sheffield City Council agency adoption matching reports; and
 - (iii) the findings of the work of the four South Yorkshire Local Authority Directors of Children's Services, and respective Directors of Finance, in connection with the draft business case on establishing a South Yorkshire Regional Adoption Agency be considered by the Committee, prior to any proposals being submitted to the Cabinet.

7. FOSTERING SERVICE - ANNUAL REPORT 2018/19

7.1 The Committee received a report of the Executive Director, People Services,

attaching the Fostering Service – Annual Report 2018/19. The report contained information on the activity and performance of the Fostering Service in 2018/19.

- 7.2 In attendance for this item were Councillor Jackie Drayton (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families), Carly Speechley (Director of Children and Families) and Paul Dempsey (Assistant Director – Provider Services).
- 7.3 Paul Dempsey referred to the report, which contained looked after children placement data and information on the voice of the child in care; placement stability; recruitment and retention activity and outcomes; recruitment plans for 2018/19; support and supervision for carers; permanency planning; temporary approved and connected carers; developments in 2018/19; and developments and improvement for 2019/20.
- 7.4 Councillor Jackie Drayton made reference to the recent Ofsted inspection of Children's Social Care Services, specifically that part which highlighted the fact that young people's views were affecting Council policy, and praised the excellent work of the Children in Care Council and the Care Leavers' Union, as well as the staff in the Children's Involvement Team.
- 7.5 Members of the Committee raised questions, and the following responses were provided:-
- 101 responses were received from children as part of the 'Bright Spots' survey, which represented a 26% response rate.
 - Every effort was made to try and find the best match for a child with a foster carer, with a high level of support being provided for the child, including information on where they would be going, introductions to the foster carer and a 'wrap around' support package. Additional training would be identified for the foster carer if it was deemed necessary. Also if it was deemed there could be issues regarding the placement, a 'Team Around a Placement' meeting would be held. A considerable amount of work was undertaken by the Service in terms of matching teenagers with foster carers. In addition, work was also undertaken with other partners, such as Education and Health, particularly the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). For those children at home, every effort was made to try to prevent them coming into Council care, and various measures were put in place in order to minimise this.
 - There were, inevitably, foster carers who would leave the Service, with four such carers being deregistered due to safeguarding concerns, two where Special Guardianship Orders had been secured in respect of the children and 12 where carers had experienced a change in circumstances, such as moving out of the area, returning to paid employment, their own children requiring more support, becoming grandparents or having to deal with the care needs of elderly family members. The comments received in terms of the experiences of those foster carers who had left the Service were generally positive. It was accepted that foster carers would always leave the Service,

so it was important that efforts were made to improve recruitment.

- There were several excellent foster carers in the City, many of whom had indicated that they received excellent support from the Local Authority.
- In terms of recruitment, nearly all those applicants who failed the assessment process, did so at the final stage. On average, around 100 applications would result in 10 approvals, which equated to around 10%. It was common for applicants to drop out at the various different stages of the assessment process. The recruitment process had changed significantly over the years, with annual reviews now being undertaken in respect of all foster carers, in terms of their on-going suitability, and which would include regular medical and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. If such checks highlighted any areas of concern, relevant action would be taken in accordance with the Council's safeguarding procedures. Up to October 2019, there had been 15 successful applications, with all applicants being booked on to preparation training, 23 applicants were going through the assessment process – 11 families allocated by the end of October, 2019, which represented an increase on last year's figures.
- DBS checks were undertaken in respect of all adults in the household, together with other adults that visited households on a regular basis, or spent considerable time with the children. All approved foster carers, as part of their responsibilities, were asked to ensure that the children were kept safe at all times.
- The cost of placing a child with one of Sheffield's in-house mainstream foster carers was approximately £400 per week and for those children placed with independent fostering agencies, the cost was approximately £800/£900 per week. Costs in terms of placements in Council residential homes or independent residential homes was considerably more.
- A high number of foster carers welcomed the 'Staying Put' initiative, which involved the Service working with carers to support placements for young people staying with them after the age of 18. There were around 28 young people in this position who, unless there were exceptions based on their specific needs, would remain with the foster carer until the age of 21. Foster carers undertaking this role would receive financial support from the Authority.

7.6 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the Fostering Service - Annual Report 2018/19 now submitted, together with the information now reported and the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Councillor Jackie Drayton, Carly Speechley and Paul Dempsey for attending the meeting and responding to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests that the results of the 'Bright Spots' survey be circulated to

Members of the Committee.

8. WORK PROGRAMME 2019/20

- 8.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) containing the Work Programme for 2019/20.
- 8.2 Ms Nicholson highlighted the fact that it had been agreed that an additional meeting be held on Monday, 4th November 2019, from 4.30 pm to 6.30 pm (in addition to the scheduled meeting to be held between 10.00 am and 12 noon on that day) to consider the 'Make Your Mark – UK Youth Consultation Outcomes'.
- 8.3 Councillor Jim Steinke reported on the proceedings of the first meeting of the Committee Task and Finish Group on the Voice and Involvement of Children and Young People, indicating that the Group had heard from the Children and Young People Involvement Team, who worked with, and on behalf of, looked after children, and from Sheffield Futures, on behalf the Youth Cabinet and Young Advisers. Councillor Steinke stated that the Group was keen for the Committee to hear the outcomes of the Make your Mark consultation, an issue that was included on the Committee's Work Programme 2019/20.
- 8.4 **RESOLVED:** That the Committee:-
- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the comments now made;
 - (b) requests that Members contact the Chair and/or the Policy and Improvement Officer in connection with prioritising those items in the Work Programme which had not been allocated a meeting date; and
 - (c) approves the contents of the Work Programme for 2019/20.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETINGS

- 9.1 It was noted that the next two meetings of the Committee would both be held in the Town Hall on Monday, 4th November 2019, one from 10.00 am to 12 noon and the other from 4.30 pm to 6.30 pm.