

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Clydach Vale on Monday, 21st December 2015.

Present:

County Borough Councillor (Mrs) C Leyshon – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

H Boggis	(Mrs) J Bunnage	S Carter
A L Davies MBE	S Evans-Fear	(Mrs) S Jones
B Morgan	G P Thomas	L G Walker

Co-opted Members:-

Mr J Fish – Parent Governor
Mr J Horton – Parent Governor
Mrs S Jones – Parent Governor
Mr D Price - UNISON

Officers in Attendance:

Mr G Isingrini – Group Director, Community & Children's Services
Ms A Batley - Acting Service Director, Children's Services
Ms G Davies – Acting Service Director for Access, Engagement & Inclusion
Mr P Griffiths – Service Director, Performance & Improvement
Mr P Nicholls – Principal Solicitor, Litigation
Ms A Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

In attendance:

County Borough Councillor G Hopkins – Cabinet Member for Children's Services,
Equalities and the Welsh Language
County Borough Councillor C Willis – Scrutiny Performance Co-ordinator

In attendance for agenda item3:

Ms Rachel Evans, Head of Children's Services for the Vale of Glamorgan
Ms Angela Harris, Regional Adoption Manager

23. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors (Mrs) J Cass, M Griffiths, P Jarman and B Stephens and also from co-opted Members Mr C Jones, GMB.

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

In accordance with the Code of Conduct, there were no personal declarations of interests made, pertaining to the agenda.

25. MINUTES

RESOLVED: to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee held on 16th November 2015.

26. VALE, VALLEYS AND CARDIFF REGIONAL ADOPTION COLLABORATIVE (VVC) PROGRESS REPORT SEPTEMBER 2015

The Chairman welcomed Ms Rachel Evans and Ms Angela Harris to the meeting and invited them to present their report.

Ms Evans introduced herself and her colleague and informed Members that the partnership agreement between The Vale of Glamorgan, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Merthyr Tydfil and Cardiff Councils (the Vale, Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Collaborative) provides for an annual update report. However, in advance of this it was the wish of the Collaborative to provide a report on the progress made to date since the VCC became operational on 1st June 2015. Ms Evans explained that her colleague, Ms Harris, the Regional Adoption Manager would present the report to Members.

The Regional Adoption Manager presented her report which provided information in relation to the governance of the Collaborative, staffing resources, service delivery, the priorities set by the National Adoption Service, performance management and budget and financial considerations.

The Committee was provided with performance data for quarters 1 and 2 on a regional basis and also for Rhondda Cynon Taf. It was explained that as the VVC was not fully operational during the first quarter, individual reports from the four local authorities had been compiled. Members were informed that whilst the data represented a downturn in certain areas, performance needed to be seen in the wider context of the impact of regional re-organisation, staffing shortfall and national trends and that the other regional collaboratives had also reported a dip in performance during their first year. There had also been a reduction in the number of children being referred for adoption and in the number of adopter enquiries on a national level which had impacted on regional performance. It was noted that historically Cardiff as the Capital had attracted an above average number of enquiries from potential adopters. The Regional Adoption Manager explained that the larger pool of prospective adopters is advantageous as it provides more opportunities to better match children with adoptive parents.

Members were informed that one area of concern for the Collaborative is the number of children who have waited over six months for a placement and

although these numbers have since reduced, there is a need to place children more quickly and this is a key action point for the Collaborative.

As well as coping with a staff shortfall, the Regional Adoption Manager explained that a further challenge during the year had been establishing the Joint Regional Adoption Panel which became operational in October.

In summary, the Regional Adoption Manager explained that the first 6 months had been a significant challenge for staff in dealing with operational change whilst still delivering a service. There had been areas where improvements had been achieved but the service was also aware that there were areas that required further work. It was hoped that during the next 6 months the service would further embed and with a full complement of staff the benefits of collaborative working will be further evidenced.

Following the presentation of the report, Ms Evans and Ms Harris responded to Members' questions.

In relation to the low take-up of Birth Parent Counselling it was explained that as the vast majority of parents had not voluntarily put their children up for adoption it was a challenge encouraging the take up of counselling. This was a sensitive area of work and it was the intention to reconsider the current approach to ensure further opportunities for counselling were offered.

With regard to private adoption agencies it was explained that there are two voluntary adoption agencies in Wales which undertake similar work in relation to recruiting and assessing prospective adopters. However, they have no responsibility for the children. These agencies are partners within the National Adoption Service and voluntary adoption agencies are represented on each of the regional collaborative's management boards.

The Cabinet Member expressed his concern that the Westminster Government had not acceded calls to amend the Welfare Reform Bill to protect foster carers and kinship carers from benefit changes.

A Member welcomed the interesting report but suggested that the report appeared to be weighted toward Cardiff and the Vale. She pointed out that the report mentioned that the service would be implemented from June 2015 and she asked for an update. She also referred to the conversion rate from enquiries to approvals and asked what was judged to be a high conversion rate. She asked for more information in relation to the second adoption review and also questioned why out of 13 enquiries there had only been 1 approval.

Ms Evans responded that there had been no intention to weight the report toward Cardiff and the Vale and she welcomed the Members perspective on this. She advised that whilst the Vale of Glamorgan Director of Social Services chaired the Board, the vice chair was the Director in Merthyr Tydfil and that she would commence chairing of the Board after one year. It was

intended that the Chairman's role would rotate each year between the constituent authorities.

Ms Evans confirmed that the Collaborative had become operational in June and the first joint Adoption Panel had been held in October. This Panel operated on a North/South basis, the South for the Cardiff and Vale area being held in Barry and the North ie Merthyr and Rhondda Cynon Taf sitting in Pontypridd. However, she explained that unless constrained by the need for medical advisors to attend a case could be presented to either panel.

In relation to the conversion rate, the Regional Adoption Manager explained that there could sometimes be a large drop-out rate and generally in the past the drop-out rate had been higher. Ms Harris reported that across the region there had been 74 adopters approved during 2014/15 whilst for quarters 1 and 2 of this year there had been 35. She confirmed that Rhondda Cynon Taf's figures were generally lower this year than before. With regard to the timeliness of responding to enquiries she explained that the number of responses within 5 days had now increased to 98% and it was hoped that by the end of quarter 3 it would reach 100%.

In relation to the second Adoption Review, Ms Harris explained that it was a statutory requirement to review a placement within the first month of a child's placement and again at 4 months. If the evidence is that everything is satisfactory then at this stage the formal adoption application is made to the Court.

Ms Harris reported that whilst the numbers of enquiries had been lower than in the past she pointed out that prospective adopters did have the option of approaching the voluntary sector or other regions. Ms Harris said that there was a need to gain an understanding of the downturn. She reported that there is a need to gain an understanding of the change in pattern. However, she reported that there are a number of Rhondda Cynon Taf assessments underway at the moment and the Collaborative has the benefit of providing more choice for children.

A Member questioned why there is such a difference between Rhondda Cynon Taf data and the Regional data.

Ms Harris explained that the data would be higher at the end of the year but also explained that there was a need to analyse the data in more detail to try and look for answers. However, part of the reason was that when the new service came together, in most instances the social workers brought their on-going caseload with them. In the case of Rhondda Cynon Taf there had been a concerted effort to clear the cases beforehand.

A co-opted Member questioned whether the performance matrix was fit for purpose.

Ms Harris agreed that there is a need to make the information gathered more meaningful but that currently the information is constructed from the data sets

which they are required to collect and report to the Welsh Government. Ms Evans added that previously there had been very little performance data in relation to adoption so in some respects the current data is a positive development albeit there is a need for amendment.

A Member welcomed the formation of the CCV pointing out that it widened the market of potential adopters and stated that he would welcome a further progress report at the appropriate time.

A Member asked if it was easier for a child to be placed nearer to home.

Ms Harris reported that sometimes children could not be placed too near home and sometimes had to be placed outside the area. However, the collaborative did provide more choice and would hopefully reduce the need for placements much further away.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked Ms Evans and Ms Harris for their report and the Committee **RESOLVED** to receive future progress reports at the appropriate time.

27. RESPONSE FROM CABINET TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TWO SCRUTINY WORKING GROUPS IN RELATION TO LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Equalities and the Welsh Language presented the Committee with information in the form of an action plan setting out how the scrutiny recommendations in relation to children looked after by the Council would be taken forward and monitored.

The Committee was reminded that two scrutiny working groups had been formed to consider issues in relation to the educational attainment of those children in the care of the local authority and also placement costs. These reports were formally considered by the Cabinet at the meeting held on 24th November 2015.

The Cabinet Member reported that the Service Director, Children's Services and the Acting Service Director, Access, Engagement and Inclusion in discussion with himself and the Cabinet Member for Education had developed an action plan which sets out the actions needed to address the recommendations made, along with proposed timescales and the names of those responsible for carrying out the actions. He thanked the scrutiny members for their work and provided the Committee with an overview of the Action Plan.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Hopkins for the presentation of the Action Plan and invited Members to respond.

The Committee discussed the intention to produce a LAC Reduction Strategy and officers reassured Members that the plan was to safely reduce the number of children looked after by the Authority and that any future financial

considerations would not compromise safety. Members also raised their concerns in relation to the suitability of the proposed strategy's name; this was a view which was upheld by the Cabinet Member and he agreed that terminology needed to be re-considered both at a local and national level.

The Cabinet Member explained that the intention was to shift toward more early intervention in line with the requirement of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and to improve risk management rather than increasing risk taking. The Service Director, Children's Services reported on the range of intervention services currently in operation and the Acting Service Director for Access, Engagement & Inclusion referred to the improvement in profiling data and the sharing of information.

In conclusion, the Committee welcomed the Cabinet's response and agreed that progress of the Action Plan should be reviewed.

RESOLVED:

- (i) to support the implementation of the Action Plan subject to requesting that a more suitable name for the proposed LAC Reduction Strategy be considered;
- (ii) that a progress report be presented to the Committee in approximately 6 months time.

28. CSSIW ANNUAL COUNCIL PERFORMANCE EVALUATION REPORT FOR 2014/15

The Chairman invited the Group Director, Community & Children's Services to provide his overview of the CSSIW's Annual Performance Evaluation Report for 2014/15 in relation to Children's Services.

The Group Director referred Members to page 50 of the agenda pack which summarised the areas identified as making progress and those areas requiring further improvement. He explained that he accepted their report but for him the key issue was the last bullet point on that page, namely, to increase the impact of prevention and early intervention to safely reduce need for greater levels of intervention. He emphasised the importance of learning how best to improve the life chances of children in order to break the cycle and suggested that scrutiny needed to focus on these elements.

Following consideration of the report Members discussed the reduction in the numbers of children on the Child Protection Register during 2014/15, although the long term trend was that numbers had increased by 63% in 7 years. It was reported that there was a similar situation in relation to the numbers of children looked after by the Council. These numbers had peaked around 18 months ago but were now reducing. However, it was pointed out that just a couple of families in crisis with several children could skew the figures.

A Member referred to the CSSIW's comments in relation to the Authority's childcare provision and it was agreed that Members would be provided with the details of a recent child care sufficiency audit.

In conclusion, the Committee accepted the report with no further recommendations.

29. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME - UPDATE

The Chairman advised Members of the proposals for the next meeting of the Committee along with minor changes to the Committee's work programme. The Committee was also reminded that a Member workshop had been organised for 5th January 2016 at 3 pm with the aim of informing Members of the key challenges facing Children's Services and how the Committee's work programme can be developed to support this work.

(Mrs) C Leyshon
Chairman

The meeting closed at 6.36 pm

