



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board held on Monday, 25 January 2021 at 10.00 am.

County Borough Councillors - Corporate Parenting Board Members in attendance:-

Councillor C Leyshon (Chair)

Councillor G Hopkins Councillor J Rosser
Councillor R Yeo Councillor E Griffiths

Officers in attendance

Mr P Mee, Group Director Community & Children's Services
Ms C Miles, Childcare Solicitor
Ms A Lloyd, Service Director, Children's Services
Ms C Jones, Head of Access & Inclusion
Mr A Cope, Development Officer - Regional Fostering Services
Mr C Mann, Reviewing Team Manager
Ms K Webster, Deputy Principal Educational Psychologist

Others in attendance

Ms C Urch, Tros Gynnal Plant Cymru

21 Welcome and Apologies for Absence

The Chair welcomed the attendees to the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board and took the opportunity to welcome the newly appointed Group Director of Community and Children's Services to his first formal meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors S. Rees-Owen and J. James.

22 Declaration of Interest

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

23 Minutes

The Corporate Parenting Board **RESOLVED** to approve as an accurate record, the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board held on the 1st December 2020.

24 Children Looked After: Educational Outcomes Improvement Strategy

The Deputy Principal Educational Psychologist provided the Corporate Parenting Board with an Improvement Strategy for CLA Educational Outcomes following the Members' request at the Board meeting on 30th November 2020.

The officer referred Members to Section 5 of the report, where the National and Local data was outlined for information. Members were reminded that overall data for the academic year 2019 – 2020 would be viewed with caution due to the impact of school closures in Summer Term 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that direct comparisons with previous academic years was not possible.

The data showed that CLA attendance was similar and better in certain school types when compared with non CLA pupils, but that an RCT CLA pupil was 3 times more likely to be subject to a fixed term exclusion than that of their mainstream non – CLA peers.

Members were pleased to note that 25 schools had now been successful in achieving the quality mark with 16 schools attaining gold and 9 schools attaining platinum awards. Furthermore, an additional 22 schools had expressed strong interest with 12 schools undertaking the quality mark to be completed in 2021.

The officer advised that educational improvement for CLA pupils remained the ambition but stated that any strategy for improvement would need to be based on effective research-based practice where there is clear evidence of impact. Members were made aware of a recent paper commissioned by Welsh Government - An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales, which considers integrated local authority approaches to supporting CLA, with a particular focus upon how the Virtual School model in England and Scotland could be used as a basis for local authorities in Wales to promote the educational achievement of CLA.

It was explained to the Board that a virtual school does not have a physical environment for pupils to attend, but is, instead, as an 'organisational tool' which for the effective co-ordination of support for CLA at both a strategic and operational level, including CLA who access out of county placements. Members learned that in England, under the Children's and Families Act 2014, local authorities have a statutory duty to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH) whose key role is to promote the educational achievement of CLA which differs from the model in Wales where the key person to undertake this role is the LACE Co-ordinator.

Following a recommendation put forward to Welsh Government to establish Virtual Schools, all Local Authorities had been part of a discussion to consider its area's needs. In the context of RCT, officers were of the view that the introduction of a virtual school head would not only increase capacity within the local authority in relation to supporting educational outcomes but would provide an enhanced voice to advocate for CLA pupils at a senior management level in education – strengthening the corporate parenting role. The role would support the sharing of good practice and strengthen the collaborative practices and provide proactive targeted support when needed, for pupils on both an individual and group level.

The Vice-Chair welcomed the report and commented that it was correct to focus on the educational attainment of CLA, which had consistently been a challenge. The Member emphasised the importance of education for all pupils but

acknowledged that, often, it was not at the forefront of their minds due to a vast range of other factors.

Another Member was also pleased to note the report and the plans in place to improve the educational attainment of CLA. The Member was disappointed to note the number of Fixed Penalty Notices issued and stressed that it should be a last resort. It was hoped that the CLA Friendly School training would help with this.

Discussions ensued around the offer of online tuition in Maths or English for all Key Stage 4 pupils taking exams, which had been established from PDG LAC money. Members agreed that it would be beneficial for the Board to receive a future update with feedback of tuition, as if successful, the intention was to continue to prioritise the PDG LAC grant for the cohort next year.

Members **RESOLVED** to acknowledge the update provided.

25 Tros Gynnal Plant (TGP) Cymru

Ms C. Urch, Tros Gynnal Plant Cymru provided the Board with a quarterly update of progress made by Tros Gynnal Plant (TGP) Cymru.

Members were informed that during the quarter, 35 young people accessed Issue Based Advocacy, presenting with 38 issues; and a further 17 young people were referred for the Active Offer. 14 Active Offer meetings took place and were carried out within the 5 working days; and 12 young people accepted the offer of support and progressing to Issue Based Advocacy.

Members noted that the young people referred for the Active Offer during the period had decreased since Quarter 1 but were assured by Tros Gynnal Plant Cymru that this was being worked on.

Members were pleased to note that during the period, there had been a 55% increase in young people referred for advocacy support, a 41% increase on Active Offer referrals and a 65% increase on advocacy issues.

It was noted that during the period, 4 of the 35 young people who accessed the service were not met within the 5 working days but Members acknowledged the importance of carrying out risk assessments for those young people who wished to meet face to face with the advocates and that self-isolation guidelines had to be adhered to in some cases.

The Board had previously raised questions regarding the ethnicity of those using the service and were pleased to note that the service was moving in the right direction with an increase in mixed race and Asian users.

Members learned that 10 young people had completed feedback with their advocate, which was mainly positive, with 7 stating that they would use the service again. Members were made aware of the difficulties of obtaining feedback from young people upon completion of the service.

Members were informed that Tros Gynnal Plant had secured funding for a participation project and learned that one participant was from RCT.

The Chair thanked Tros Gynnal Plant for the positive report and was pleased to

note that the number of young people taking the Active Offer had increased. The Chair commented that she would have liked to have seen more than one young participant from RCT partaking in the new project but looked forward to hearing the feedback.

Members **RESOLVED** to acknowledge the update provided.

26 Cwm Taf Regional Fostering Front Door

The Regional Development Manager provided the Corporate Parenting Board with an update on the recruitment and retention of foster carers, with a focus on the regional front door for fostering recruitment.

The Regional front door for Fostering recruitment was established in April 2019 as a joint collaboration between RCT CBC and Merthyr Tydfil CBC to address some of the concerns about the numbers of foster carers recruited, the speediness of responses to enquires and the quality of recruitment work being undertaken. The primary objective of the team was to achieve a net gain in approved mainstream foster carers.

Members were referred to Section 4 of the report, where the Performance Data for the year was detailed. The officer advised that enquiries had dropped in the first three quarters compared with the previous year, which could be attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Members were assured that a strategy had since been adapted, with officers now working successfully through a virtual means.

Members were pleased to note that the conversion rate from Initial Enquiry to the pre assessment Initial Visit screening has increased from 26.3% to 40.9% compared to the figures from 2019/20 and the conversion rate from initial enquiry to proceeding into full assessment had increased from 13.2% to 17.2% compared to the figures from 2019/20.

The officer went on to inform Members of the future developments planned to further improve the robust service:

- A comprehensive recruitment and marketing strategy had been put in place, including introducing more paid advertising on Facebook, the use of a Digi-van campaign and generating more case studies from current foster carers, in order to raise attention and interest of fostering;
- Intentions to further increase assessment capacity, following the recent appointment of a Senior Practitioner within the placement team;
- Following the establishment of the process for assessments during the Covid:19 pandemic, it was hoped that there would be a continued improvement in the number of applicants progressing from enquiry stage to assessment; and
- To further strengthen the pool of resources, when Bridgend CBC are expected to join the Regional Front Door in April 2021.

The Chair thanked the officer for the positive report and was pleased to note that like many other areas of Children's Services, despite the challenges of the pandemic, officers had adapted well to virtual working and timescales had reduced substantially from enquiry to Initial Visit (IV) stage.

The Chair was interested to note the marketing campaigns for 2020/21

highlighted within the report and requested that the Board receive a future report detailing its impact and potential improvements on figures.

Members were encouraged to note that despite the November 2020 National Lockdown in Wales, enquiries had increased substantially from those in the same quarter last year.

The Corporate Parenting Board **RESOLVED** to note the update.

27 Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Regional Adoption Annual Report

The Service Director, Children's Services provided the Corporate Parenting Board with the Regional Adoption Collaboration Annual Report, which was considered by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on the 13th January 2021.

Members learned that, during the year, there had been a reduction in demand for adoption across Wales, and within VVC by 34%, but were assured that, during the first 3 quarters of 2020/21, there had been a subsequent increase in demand.

It was explained that although there had been a 35% increase in supply of adopters during the year, the supply remained insufficient and would therefore, remain a focus for the year ahead.

Members were pleased to note that there had been an improvement noted in the provision of Life Journey Work, from 44% to 60% during the year.

In order to provide transparency, the Service Director informed the Board of the following comments made by the Scrutiny Committee, following the attendance of the Regional Adoption Manager, Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Collaboration:

- The decline in RCT demand for adoption during the reporting year;
- Recruitment of adopters;
- Children who are subject to a referral to the regional adoption;
- Collaboration, who do not go on to have a plan for adoption (withdrawn cases);
- Operational arrangements, and impact for the regional adoption;
- Collaboration and its services during the Pandemic; and
- Arrangements for post adoption support.

Acknowledging the issues with recruitment and retention and the inclusion of Bridgend within the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region, one Member questioned whether there was an opportunity to review the Regional arrangements. The Service Director advised that any changes would need to be made at a Ministerial level but that RCT would be part of the conversation, should the opportunity to review the arrangements arise.

The Chair thanked the Service Director for the informative update and Members **RESOLVED** to acknowledge the update provided.

28 Independent Reviewing Officer Report

The Reviewing Team Manager provided the Corporate Parenting Board with information about the discharge of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

functions for children looked after (CLA) for the period 1st April 2020 – 31st December 2020. Corporate Parenting Board Members were already familiar with the IRO role from prior reports but for information, the context was attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

Members learned that the Reviewing Service comprised of 12 IRO full-time posts, following the successful appointment of a permanent Service Manager.

The officer stated that during the period (Quarter 2, 3 and 4), the total number of children looked after fluctuated between 700 and 716, which was a reduction in overall numbers on the previous reporting period.

Members were provided with the CLA data as of the end of 31/12/20:

- The highest number of CLA numbers were in the 10-15 age group, which was consistently the highest percentage;
- 33% children were placed with relative carers; and
- 70% of CLA were residing within RCT, 211 children were in placements outside RCT and of these, 11 were residing outside Wales.

It was explained that during the period 1st January 2020 to 31st March 2020, there had been 1,382 CLA review meetings and the CLA Review performance was at 97% at the end of December 2020. Furthermore, IROs chaired 11 combined CLA Reviews and Review Conferences to remove the names of children looked after under Care Orders from the Child Protection Register.

In respect of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, the officer assured Members that despite the pressures, officers had continued to prioritise and engage with young people and their families virtually. Members learned that although parent uptake for virtual meetings was considered to be positive, the young people found it easier to decline or not participate through a virtual means. The officer hoped that with the vaccine rollout and potential easing of lockdown restrictions, future meetings could be undertaken on a hybrid basis, which would allow those who prefer to do so, to meet face to face but could also reduce the travelling time for officers.

It was reported that despite high CLA numbers, the recent IRO appointments had ensured that every Looked After Child was allocated a named IRO from within the service.

The officer then referred Members to Section 9 of the report, where key development work of the service was outlined. Members were provided with information in respect of consultation documents, the 2Sides website, the Orb and Muse.

The Chair thanked the officer for the detailed report and commented on the importance of utilising the Bright Spots Survey and undertaking youth engagement to ensure the child's voice is heard.

The Corporate Parenting Board **RESOLVED** to note the update.

This meeting closed at 11.05 am

Cllr C Leyshon (Chair)