

Corporate Parenting Board

Minutes - 6 January 2016

Attendance

Labour

Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Jasbinder Dehar

Cllr Julie Hodgkiss
Cllr Peter O'Neill

Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Martin Waite

Conservative

Cllr Christine Mills

Liberal Democrat

Cllr Richard Whitehouse

Employees

Daphne Atkinson
Parveen Bal
Emma Bennett
Fiona Brennan
Carl Craney
Dawn Duggan
Louise Haughton
Craig Veasey-Ralph
Alice Vickers

Senior Social Work Manager
Foster Carer
Service Director - Children and Young People
Designated Nurse, Looked After Children
Democratic Support Officer
Foster Carer
Senior Social Work Manager - Adoption
Foster Carer
Corporate Parenting Officer

Item No. *Title*

1 Election of Chair for the meeting

In the absence of the Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, it was proposed by Cllr Paula Brookfield, seconded by Cllr Rita Potter and

Resolved:

That Cllr Peter O'Neill be elected Chair of the meeting.

2 Chair's Announcement

The Chair, Cllr O'Neill wished those present a Happy New Year and invited them to introduce themselves. Introductions were duly made.

3 Apologies for absence (if any)

Apologies for absence had been received from the Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, Cllr Stephen Simkins and Alison Hinds, Head of Looked After Children.

4 Declarations of interest (if any)

No declarations of interest were made relative to items under consideration at the meeting.

5 Minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2015

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

6 Matters arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2015.

7 Schedule of outstanding matters

Carl Craney, Democratic Support Officer, presented a report which appraised the Board of the current position with a variety of matters considered at previous meetings of the Board.

Jan Barlow, Strategic Improvement Development Officer – LAC presented a Briefing Note in connection with the number of external placements in residential and foster care and the steps being taken by the Council to address quality and cost issues. She responded to various questions raised by Councillors.

Resolved:

That the report and the Briefing Note be received and noted.

8 **Fostering Service Annual Report 2014/15**

Daphne Atkinson, Senior Social Work Manager, presented the Wolverhampton Fostering Annual Report for the period April 2014 to March 2015. She explained that existing Foster Carers' were used to assist with the recruitment of new Foster Carers' and acted as "Champions" during recruitment campaigns. She advised on a number of recruitment events and campaigns which had been held during the period covered by the Annual Report. The Chair, Cllr Peter O'Neill commented that the marketing exercises had been more visible than those staged previously.

The Senior Social Work Manager reported that whilst the recruitment campaigns generated a lot of interest the expressions of interest did not always convert into tangible candidates as the essential criterion were not always met, for example: a free spare bedroom. She advised that 18 approvals had been made during the 2014/15 period and that 94.4% of placements had been filled. She advised on the support mechanism which was available to all Foster Carers'. She drew attention to the 141 Annual Foster Home Reviews which had been completed during the period with the standard remaining at a good level. Some 90% of Foster Carers' had completed their Children's Workforce Development Council Workbook.

The Chair enquired as to whether many Foster Carers' took up professional qualifications in the subject. The Senior Social Work Manager explained that all Foster Carers' were required to undergo formal training and that the Council was now providing opportunities for Foster Carers' to enrol on National Diploma courses with access to degree level courses being explored. She advised that the needs / skills base / competencies of each Foster Carer was assessed on an individual basis. Furthermore, some courses to support capacity to care were recommended to specific Foster Carers'.

Cllr Rita Potter questioned whether potential Foster Carers' were afforded the opportunity of a "trail run" in order to experience what was involved. The Senior Social Work Manager responded that the background and experience of each potential Foster Carer varied and those with no experience of child care were encouraged to undertake babysitting / child minding duties for friends and / or family. The assessment process did include scenario testing to assist in forming a view on the suitability of potential Foster Carers'. Assistance was available to potential Foster Carers' in determining whether the vocation was appropriate. Emma Bennett, Service Director for Children and Young People reminded the Board that Looked After Children could not be used in "trials".

Cllr Martin Waite commended the measurement of responses to the advertisements to recruit Foster Carers' but commented that a short term approach should not be adopted. He suggested that the profile of the service needed to be raised. He opined that the initial assessment process appeared to be labour intensive and enquired whether the key requirements were detailed from the outset in order to avoid applications which were unlikely to be able to progress.

Parveen Bal commented that the Council had a positive approach to recruiting Foster Carers' but that the lack of practical help to Foster Carers' was lacking. She was of the view that the lack of such practical assistance during difficult circumstances led to a breakdown in some relationships and that the lack of investment in internal carers'

in practical ways was detrimental to the service. She also expressed concern that such comments were ignored. Craig Veasey-Ralph informed the Board that after the completion of the initial assessment potential Foster Carers' were afforded the opportunity to attend a two day course which detailed the process and likely scenarios. The Senior Social Work Manager advised that a comprehensive range of literature was made available to potential Foster Carers' to assist them in determining whether they wished to progress their application. Furthermore, existing Foster Carers' were also used during the recruitment / assessment process. This approach was supported by Cllr Mrs Christine Mills.

Cllr Mrs Christine Mills enquired as to the checks undertaken when family / friends fostered children. The Senior Social Work Manager assured the Board that the same checks and support were undertaken and available to family and friends as to Foster Carers' who were not known by or to the Looked After Child.

Cllr Jasbinder Dehar enquired whether specialist training was made available to those Foster Carers' who were responsible for Looked After Children with, for example, Special Educational Needs, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The Senior Social Work Manager confirmed that training was provided as appropriate and that currently some 120 courses were available on-line. The Service Director, Children and Young people reported that part of the training was provided via the Virtual School and that access to a Link Worker was also available. Dawn Duggan spoke highly of the training which was provided and / or available to Foster Carers'. Craig Veasey-Ralph advised that in his experience as a Foster Carer looking after a child with behavioural needs he had attended training sessions at The Gem Centre which had been very helpful. The Senior Social Work Manager reported on a 16 week validated course which was available to Foster Carers'. Dawn Duggan advised that she had found this course very helpful.

Cllr Richard Whitehouse referred to Sections 10 and 11 of the Annual Report and enquired what assistance was available to Foster Carers' who experienced a problem with a particular child. The Senior Social Work Manager advised that, occasionally, there were disruptions in placements and that the initial response would be to attempt to stabilise the situation. If this was not possible an alternative placement would be sought. If this was not feasible every effort was made to address the issue and intensive support would be provided if appropriate. The primary issue would be to ensure that the Looked After Child understood what was happening and why. Every effort was also made to learn from the experience to avoid a repetition elsewhere. Parveen Bal commented that if the concerns raised initially by Foster Carers' had been acknowledged the number of such incidents would be reduced. The Senior Social Work Manager reminded the Board that every effort was made to make suitable matches between Looked After Children and Foster Carers'.

Craig Veasey-Ralph commented on the closure of the Foster Care Support service which had provided an accessible means of support and assistance. The service had been terminated on 31 December 2015, with this decision to change provider having been made in October 2015 but Foster Carers' had only been notified recently. He suggested that there was a need for communication between the Council and Foster Carers' to improve.

Resolved:

That the Fostering Service Annual Report for 2014/15 be approved subject to reference to the closure of the Foster Care Support service being included.

9 **To meet representatives of Foster Carers'**

Alice Vickers, Corporate Parenting Officer, reported that the representatives of the Foster Carers' had been requested to identify three points where the service worked well together with a further three points covering challenges faced by Foster Carers'. She advised the Board that a formal report had not been prepared and that it was proposed that a discussion be held.

Cllr Paula Brookfield enquired whether all Foster Carers' had been afforded the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Craig Veasey-Ralph advised the Board that the issue had been discussed at the Foster Carers' Communications Group and that he and his two colleagues were representatives of the Foster Carers'. He outlined his experience as a Foster Carer and confirmed his dedication to the service. He expressed concern at the lack of communication between the Council and Foster Carers' and cited the example of the cessation of the contract with Heantun for the Foster Care Support service on 31 December 2015 which had been replaced by Foster Talk but the Foster Carers' had only been made aware recently of the new arrangements. He suggested that there was an urgent need for communications between the two parties to improve quickly.

The Chair, Cllr Peter O'Neill, commented that there appeared to be a need to ensure that there was a seamless transfer between service providers and also a need for improved communication and engagement between the Council and the Foster Carers'. The Service Director, Children and Young People undertook to take on board these issues and also to continue to support the Foster Care Forum. Craig Veasey-Ralph requested that the Newsletter be continued. The Corporate Parenting Officer confirmed that the Newsletter would continue to be produced and also that communication via Facebook would be used.

Parveen Bal advised that there was a lack of practical assistance at an early stage in emergency situations. The Service Director, Children and Young People sought clarification as to the type of assistance required. Parveen Bal replied that this was dependent on the child and Foster Parent in question as individual circumstances and experiences differed. She commented that all the problems previously drawn to the attention of the Foster Care Support service still existed. She cited a personal experience where assistance had not been available. Cllr Rita Potter enquired whether Social Work staff could have been expected to assist in such circumstances

Cllr Julie Hodgkiss enquired whether Foster Carers' had any input into health checks or dental checks of the children in their care. The Corporate Parenting Officer advised that in such circumstances it was the voice of the child which was significant. The Service Director, Children and Young People commented that this was an issue which could be given further consideration as there should be a number of opportunities for Foster Carers' to have an input into such consultations. Fiona Brennan, Designated Nurse for Looked After Children, advised that health reviews were conducted on a six monthly basis and Foster Carers' were invited to attend.

Craig Veasey-Ralph opined that, in his experience, this was not the case. The Designated Nurse for looked After Children confirmed that Foster Carers' should be invited to attend the assessments and that an opportunity also existed for input via the "Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) where the views of both the Foster Carer and the Looked After Child had an opportunity to express their views. She undertook to look further into this issue.

Parveen Bal reported that Foster Carers' received a good level of support from the Council and were also afforded a lot of opportunities to undertake training. Dawn Duggan explained that she had been a Foster Carer for ten years and had always attended the medical assessments of children in her care. On occasions she had accompanied the child's natural parents to such assessments as they were able to provide background history and details of family health issues. She opined that lack of support in emergency situations was an issue which needed to be addressed and suggested that the "buddying" scheme be re-introduced.

Cllr Paula Brookfield enquired whether the Foster Carer Forum would be self-supporting. Craig Veasey-Ralph commented that the Forum would require some support from the Council. The Service Director, Children and Young People confirmed that the "buddying" scheme was being continued. The Senior Social Work Manager reported that a Training Officer had been appointed and the process of recruiting to the Family Support Worker's post to support the buddy scheme was on-going. Dawn Duggan enquired whether the Volunteer Driver scheme was still in existence. The Service Director, Children and Young People confirmed that this service was available to assist Looked After Children to continue to attend their original school after being placed in care. Dawn Duggan explained that whilst this was welcome it was not sufficiently flexible to enable Looked After Children to participate in after school activities. The Service Director, Children and Young People offered to discuss this matter further outside the meeting.

Resolved:

1. That the representatives of the Foster Carers' be thanked for attending and participating in the meeting;
2. That the Service Director, Children and Young People and the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children follow up the various issues now raised;
3. That all Foster Carers' be appraised of the proposed way forward for the service.

10 **Interim Adoption Agency Report**

Louise Haughton, Senior Social Work Manager – Adoption, presented a report which detailed the work of the Adoption Service during the period April 2015 to September 2015 and which provided information in relation to adoption locally.

Resolved:

That the City of Wolverhampton Council Adoption Service Interim Report be received and noted.

11 **Performance Management Data**

The Service Director, Children and Young People, presented the Performance Report for January 2016 (data as at November 2015) and responded to a number of questions.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

12 Exclusion of the press and public

Resolved:

That in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information contained in paragraph 1 of the Act, namely information relating to any individual.

13 Councillors visits to establishments

The Board considered a report on the visit to Upper Pendeford Farm undertaken by Cllr Val Gibson on 19 November 2015. The Service Director, Children and Young People reported that steps had been taken to put a Quality Assurance system in place and on the proposals to change the use of this establishment to a respite care and edge of care home. In response to a question from Cllr Richard Whitehouse she advised that the concerns raised by staff in relation to the change of use had been addressed.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.