

Attendance

Chair Cllr Beverley Momenabadi (Lab)

Labour

Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Paula Brookfield

Cllr Jasbinder Dehar
Cllr Asha Mattu

Cllr Rita Potter

Conservative

Cllr Wendy Dalton

Cllr Stephanie Haynes

In Attendance

Farhana Akthar
Melanie Blake
Fiona Brennan
Michelle Cummings
Esther Douglas
Alison Hinds
Shelley Humphries
Rea Shepherd
Jazmine Walker
David Whatton
Lisa Whelan

Grandmentor Coordinator
Foster Carer
Designated Nurse, Children and Young People in Care
Corporate Parenting Officer
Social Worker and Foster Care Trainer
Deputy Director of Social Care
Democratic Services Officer
Foster Carer
Head of Service, Children and Young People in Care
Foster Carer
Service Manager, Children and Young People in Care

Item No. *Title*

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from members of the Corporate Parenting board Councillor Udey Singh and Councillor Gurmukh Singh.

Apologies were also received from Emma Bennett.

2 Declarations of interests

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

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2021

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2021 be confirmed as correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Matters arising

In respect of minute 8, it was reported that a visit with Councillors and foster carers had been undertaken to view the allotments taking part in the Back to Eden Community Allotment Project.

5 Schedule of Outstanding Matters

Michelle Cummings, Corporate Parenting Officer presented the Schedule of Outstanding Matters report. There was one item referring to the attendance of young people a Health Steering Group meeting. It was noted that this action was in progress and dates were in the process of being confirmed.

Resolved:

That the Schedule of Outstanding Matters be received.

6 Grandmentor Scheme Update

Farhana Akthar, Grandmentor Coordinator delivered the Grandmentor Scheme Update with a supporting presentation. The presentation outlined that the Grandmentors scheme had been designed to provide emotional and practical support for young people leaving care. Young people would be matched with trained volunteers or Grandmentors offering the benefit of their skills and life experience to young people as they move into independent adulthood. Volunteers offered a wide range of support in many areas, for example education, self-esteem, personal development and employability skills.

The presentation covered training process and eligibility to become a volunteer, notable results seen so far, successful case studies and the safety measures taken as lockdown eases.

In response to a query on publicising the scheme, it was reported that various news and social media platforms were used as well as a feature on the Inside Out programmes which was still available on BBC iPlayer.

In response to a query on recognition for the valuable work undertaken by the mentors, it was reported that an annual volunteer celebration was held, as well as continual praise and recognition for a job well done.

It was queried whether there was a peer support network for the mentors and volunteers to share experiences. It was advised that Farhana provided support and the benefit of her expertise and signposted where could not offer further advice. It was noted that meetings had been requested to provide a forum like this and this was currently being explored.

It was added that the REACH team were currently entering a second phase of partnership with Volunteering Matters as it had been so successful following the first phase. This had enabled the Care Leaver Offer to be extended to allow mentors to support care experienced young people from the age of 14 as they approached the age for leaving care. The offer also now included young people living in a 20-mile radius of the City.

In response to a query around using the Council media platforms, it was agreed that Volunteering Matters would be happy to be featured to allow for a wider reach.

Michelle Cummings, Corporate Parenting Officer noted that she had registered her interest in becoming a Grandmentor volunteer.

In response to a query around the age range of Grandmentors, it was noted that the applicants were typically around 50 plus, however there were no set age limits to becoming a Grandmentor as it was acknowledged that anyone with life experience could potentially qualify.

Resolved:

That the Grandmentor Scheme Update be received.

7 Annual Fostering Report 2020-2021

Lisa Whelan, Service Manager presented the Annual Fostering Report and highlighted key points. The report provided an outline of the structure, aims and duties of the City of Wolverhampton Fostering Service and details the performance of the service over the last twelve months. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011) requires that all Fostering Services provide written reports to their Executive or Trustees on a regular basis. In the case of Local Authorities, the 'executive' is the Elected Members of the City of Wolverhampton.

A concern was raised around meeting not just the statutory requirements but aiming for excellence. It was noted that the service did indeed strive not just to meet these targets but exceed them.

A query was raised around what the specific national targets were and it was agreed this would be addressed outside the meeting.

In respect of dormant carers, it was queried whether a retainer was paid during these time periods. It was reported that dormant carers were not typically paid a retainer unless there were extenuating circumstances, such as a break following the end of one placement and awaiting another imminent placement or pending an investigation. Carers who were currently on a break were subject to regular reviews to assess the reasons for the break and when they were ready to return. During these break periods it was not uncommon for carers to undertake home to school travel duties or provide short respite breaks for other families.

Surprise was expressed that carers could stipulate that they wanted children of a certain age. It was reported that they were recruited with the assumption they could offer a home to young people aged from 0 – 18 however carers had the right to choose whether to accept a placement. Babies and toddlers were typically the preference however steps were being taken to highlight the benefits of taking in older children.

A query was raised around number of carers recruited and it was noted that there had been 31 recruited in total and, despite the eight de-registrations, the year had ended with a gain of 23 carers.

It was acknowledged that although Connected Carers were restricted to particular families, this still allowed provision for a home for a Wolverhampton child.

It was noted that some carers had converted to Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs), although there was no requirement to retire from fostering if they wished to continue.

In terms of social workers' caseload, it was noted that 20 cases for full time workers and 16 for part-time workers was typically the average. Staff retention had been steady and there was currently no requirement for agency staff. It was noted that support at the time of lockdown had not faced any great challenges as virtual or telephone contact had continued throughout and face to face meetings had resumed as soon as it was safe to do so.

Resolved:

1. That the Annual Fostering Report 2020-2021 be approved.
2. That the development, progress, and future objectives of the Fostering Service be noted.

8 **Foster Carers' Forum**

Esther Douglas, Social Worker and Foster Care Trainer led a presentation providing an outline of the functions and activities of the Foster Carers' Forum.

It was reported that the pandemic had posed some challenges initially however, once foster carers had become familiar with online platforms, training and communication continued successfully via virtual means. It was noted that this actually improved engagement in many cases as attending remotely freed up travel time and removed the need for additional childcare.

David, a foster carer for five years, reported that he found the regularly held forums an excellent platform to inform foster carers and provide a mechanism for the

Authority to actively listen to and address their views, feedback and concerns. There had been instances where challenges had arisen but been resolved through effective communication and support was readily available for the carer as well as the child in the event of the breakdown of a placement. The out of hours provision and well-communicated training opportunities were also commended.

Foster Carer, Rea added that the restorative practice approach adopted by the service had really helped as well as the discussions around minimum standards. It was felt that these discussions reinforced the task at hand and sometimes offered a different a perspective around challenges. This allowed carers to share solutions to challenges and ideas to enhance their fostering journey.

Foster Carer, Mel reported that she had found the Forums informative and provided learning and support from peers and heads of service, as well as guidance on what was expected of a foster carer. Carers had also benefitted from guests attending such as members of the Children in Care Council, Foster Talk and the Inside Community Engagement (ICE) Team who had provided talks on topics such as empowerment, family values and combatting stress for carers and young people.

The work around facilitating the Foster Carers' Forum was commended and the meetings acknowledged as a valuable tool.

Resolved:

That the Foster Carers' presentation Forum be received.

9 **Performance Monitoring Information**

Alison Hinds, Deputy Director of Social Care presented the Performance Monitoring Information report and highlighted salient points. The report provided an update on service performance as 31 May 2021.

There was still a high number of 10 – 18-year olds within the system however these young people would continue to be supported into adulthood.

Placement analysis showed that there continued to be good placement stability for children in care and increasing performance in this area. There were now more children placed with foster carers approved through the Family Values scheme and the service continued to recruit and retain foster carers. This also enabled children to remain living locally and retain their links to family and friends.

The report showed that 83% of children had up to date assessments which had improved over last 12 months. The majority of children had an up to date review and performance in this area had been exceeding the outturn of the last two years. Participation in reviews and assessments was high which was attributed to the development of many different ways of working with children to enable this to happen.

A report had been submitted to Corporate Parenting Board previously on work the service had been undertaking to improving support for children not engaged in education, employment and training. PEPs were currently at a high level and, although there was a slightly lower performance for year 12 and 13, some targeted work has been undertaken with the virtual school to address this therefore an improvement was anticipated for when the next report was ready.

A significant improvement had been seen with health and dental check performance and the issues experienced with the new recording system had been addressed. Initial health checks had been improving month on month. A slight improvement had been emerging in the number of dental checks however figures were not where the service would like them to be. There was some work to do around getting children and young people back to see the dentist and recording the checks on the new system.

It was reported that there had been an issue nationally with children remaining in care proceedings for longer. The service was working closely with the Local Family Justice Board in order to reduce the time spent moving through proceedings. There had not been many adoptions this year, only four, however there was also a significantly reduced number last year as there had been a delay in scheduling adoption hearings.

It was acknowledged that the impact of COVID had made it a difficult year in terms of employment opportunities however the service and the Council overall had been working hard to support young people in making the most of any work opportunities available. This was a key area of concern and targeted work was being undertaken in alignment with the Relighting Our City work across the Council.

A query was raised around reasons for delays in care proceedings and it was reported that COVID had been the initial reason as face to face hearings had not been taking place. Once hearings had safely resumed, the courts had been faced with a backlog of hearings to schedule which had increased delays, although they had been working hard to clear this. Another factor was the undertaking of independent assessments sometimes requested by birth families' if their circumstances had changed, for example, which was necessary but sometimes caused delays. Councillors voiced concerns that any delays may cause children to feel unsettled however reassurance was provided that children remained placed with their prospective adopters until the final decision was made to ensure stability.

The work undertaken by the Children and Young People in Care service was commended. The commitment of the workforce to the children and young people of the City as well as the level of service delivery standards maintained throughout a pandemic was also acknowledged.

Resolved:

That the Performance Monitoring Information Report be received.

10 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

Resolved:

That in accordance with Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business as it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information contained in paragraph 2 of the Act, namely information that is likely to reveal the identity to an individual.

11 **Councillor Visits to Establishments - Schedule of Visits**

It was reported that no visits to establishments had been undertaken since the last meeting of the Board.