

Corporate Parenting Board

Minutes - 11 November 2015

Attendance

Chair Cllr Val Gibson (Lab)

Labour

Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Jasbinder Dehar
Cllr Julie Hodgkiss

Cllr Peter O'Neill
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Stephen Simkins

Cllr Martin Waite

Conservative

Cllr Christine Mills

Liberal Democrat

Cllr Richard Whitehouse

Employees

Emma Bennett
Fiona Brennan
Carl Craney
Alison Hinds
Mandy Lee
Darren Martindale

Service Director - Children and Young People
Designated Nurse, Looked After Children
Democratic Support Officer
Head of Looked After Children
Consultant
COPE Team Manager/Virtual School Head, Community
Directorate

Item No. *Title*

1 Apologies for absence (if any)

No apologies for absence had been received.

2 Declarations of interests (if any)

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

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2015

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Matters arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2015.

5 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 Corporate Parenting Board.

The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, reported that she had yet to undertake a visit to Upper Pendeford Farm but intended to do so shortly. Cllr Peter O'Neill reported that he had yet to visit Merridale Street West but would be arranging to do so in the near future.

With reference to the role of schools in improving contact between Looked After Children and their siblings, Darren Martindale, Virtual School Head for Looked After Children reported that this matter had been raised with the Designated Teachers at a recent meeting but had not met with such support. It was not considered that schools provided the appropriate venue for such contact. Cllr Stephen Simkins suggested that schools had a pastoral duty of care to Looked After Children and that schools would provide a safe environment for such contact sessions. The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, commented that if supervised visits were to be held these should be at the home of the Looked After Child or at the Contact Centre. If the visits were unsupervised it would be inappropriate for the Council to determine the venue.

Cllr Peter O'Neill questioned whether the Youth Zone could be used for such contact sessions. Emma Bennett, Service Director for Children and Young People advised that the number of venues for contact sessions was not an issue. Cllr Paula Brookfield referred to Minute No. 6 of the meeting held on 30 September 2015 and drew to the attention of the Board that the original suggestion had related to unsupervised visits. Cllr Stephen Simkins opined that if schools could be used for such visits the Council could dispose of the Contact Centre. The Service Director for

Children and Young People acknowledged this point but reminded the Board that a venue would still be required for visits for children under school age and again as previously discussed the contact centre was actually used for supervised contact rather than unsupervised..

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

6 **IRO's Annual Report 2014/15**

Mandy Lee, Safeguarding Manager - Children, presented the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service 2014/15. She reported that the Wolverhampton Safeguarding Service had a statutory duty for overseeing and ratifying the care plans for Looked After Children (LAC) via the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officers. As such, the service was bound to provide the Board with an annual report that outlined the activity of the service, the impact for children and recommendations for service improvement that would enhance young people's experiences. Furthermore, she reported that a real challenge faced by the service was a lack of useful performance management data and that requests for such data had been outstanding from the past three annual Reports over a period of two years. The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, sought clarification as to the type of information required. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that she required the Business Intelligence Service to treat the request as a priority. The Service Director, Children and Young People reported that the request had now been actioned.

Cllr Julie Hodgkiss referred to paragraph 3.4 of the report inasmuch as it referred to caseload. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that the IRO Handbook recommended IRO caseloads of 50 – 70 children per IRO. Despite being fully staffed and having an additional agency IRO it had not been possible to achieve this recommended caseload due to the high number of LAC. She informed the Board that IRO's were also required to undertake Chairing duties at Child Protection Conferences and together with ensuring that reviews were undertaken on time it was not always possible to monitor LAC between reviews. She assured the Board that the statutory minimum duties were fulfilled. The Service Director, Children and Young People reminded the Board that caseload had now reduced significantly with additional opportunities created to monitor LAC between reviews.

Cllr Peter O'Neill referred to those LAC with mental health problems and who were remanded in custody and questioned where the reviews were undertaken. The Safeguarding Manager - Children reported that the reviews would be undertaken wherever the LAC was living and confirmed that the reviews would be undertaken by City of Wolverhampton Council employees.

Cllr Stephen Simkins referred to paragraph 3.4 of the report and the earlier comment that IRO's were also required to Chair Child Protection Conferences resulting in caseloads exceeding the recommended levels. The Safeguarding Manager - Children reported that three new IRO's had been appointed, some IRO's would only deal with LAC and not Child Protection cases and that some had a caseload of 70 or under. She advised that caseload management was important as every effort was

made to maintain a relationship between an individual IRO and a LAC. With the reduction in the LAC population caseloads were now more manageable. Cllr Stephen Simkins advised that he remained to be assured on the current position. The Service Director, Children and Young People advised that it was common practice for IRO's to combine their duties with Charing Child Protection Conferences as the roles complimented each other. She emphasised the importance of maintaining the relationship with the LAC and the family. In relation to this point, Cllr Stephen Simkins questioned the independence of the IRO. The Service Director, Children and Young People explained that the role of the Social Worker was entirely different. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that the term "caseload" referred to the number of LAC and the number of Child Protection Plans which were the responsibility of an IRO. The Service Director, Children and Young People assured the Board that there was no tension between the dual roles and that the high caseloads were being addressed through the reduction in the number of LAC and additional temporary resources within the service.

Cllr Martin Waite enquired as to the follow ups conducted after reviews and the actions taken to ensure that Social Workers were following the correct procedures and taking any necessary actions. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that this was the type of information which was required from the Performance Monitoring Data referred to previously. Cllr Martin Waite opined that after each review the IRO should be in a position to report back on any steps required. The Safeguarding Manager - Children reported that did happen and was how the RAG ratings were established and referred the Board to paragraph 5.2 of the report. She assured the Board that any issues arising were reported to her and the appropriate steps were then actioned.

Cllr Paula Brookfield commended the steps taken to maintain the relationship between IRO's and individual LAC in the face of the previous high caseload.

Cllr Julie Hodgkiss enquired whether the Performance Monitoring Data, once available, would include comparisons with other local authorities. She also suggested that the next Annual Report include a case study with all names redacted to ease the Board in understanding the role. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that comparisons would only be possible on common elements.

Cllr Peter O'Neill referred to paragraph 7.2 of the report inasmuch as it referred to increasing LAC caseloads and the impact on the ability of IRO's to monitor progress of cases where some areas of shortfall had been identified. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that Ofsted required to know where IRO's had challenged the local authority. She confirmed that during the period of high caseloads it had not always been possible to monitor progress of cases but the situation had eased with the reduction in the LAC population.

Cllr Stephen Simkins questioned whether, in the event of an area of concern being established, it was possible to circumvent the system and for a report to be made direct to the Cabinet Member. The Safeguarding Manager - Children reported on the "dispute resolution" procedure which operated at Officer level and on the facility available for matters to be escalated upwards to CAFCAS and to the Courts. She advised that it had never been necessary to use the escalation measure. The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, reported that if non –case specific matters could not be resolved

appropriately that the matter would be drawn to her attention. Cllr Stephen Simkins welcomed this assurance and reminded the Board that all 60 Councillors were Corporate Parents. The Service Director, Children and Young People confirmed that in the event of blockages within the system that the matter would be referred to the Cabinet Member. Cllr Stephen Simkins opined that this Board should receive early notification of any such issues. The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, advised that such issues would be included within the Performance Monitoring Report considered at each meeting or be the subject of a report to the Executive Team with a view to securing the allocation of additional resources as had occurred when the LAC population had increased.

Cllr Rita Potter queried the level and quality of participation of LAC in the reviews. The Safeguarding Manager - Children explained that this varied depending upon the individual child but that it was the role of the IRO to establish ways of communicating with the individual child. Alison Hinds, Head of Service, Looked After Children referred the Board to the Performance Monitoring report which indicated a 91% participation rate of children in reviews. Cllr Rita Potter asked what steps would be taken if a child did not wish to or refused to participate in a review. The Head of Service, Looked After Children reported that it would be for the IRO to establish a way forward.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

7 **New Belongings**

The Head of Service, Looked After Children presented a report in connection with the New Belongings project. The project aimed to;

- Embed the principles of the Care Leavers Charter;
- Join up services to care leavers, as outlined in the Access All Areas report. This report called on Central Government Departments to improve the support offered to young people as they left the care system and in their early years after leaving care. It examined how working across government was essential to improve the support care leavers received and removed obstacles to their progress;
- Brought in the energy of local communities to support care leavers.

She reported that the project had been launched during “Care Leavers” week held during week commencing 2 November 2015. Furthermore, she reported on joint working with other Black Country authorities in a Cluster Group in which priorities were shared. A survey had been undertaken with Care Leavers to establish what was important to them and following the compilation of responses received an Action Plan had been prepared. She reported that work in relation to the project was being progressed through the Care Leavers Forum.

Cllr Paula Brookfield reported that the Mayor, Cllr Ian Brookfield and her, in her capacity as Mayoress, had met recently with representatives from the Care Leavers

Forum, and that a very positive response to this project had been indicated. It was considered to provide a platform from which to provide their views for consideration.

Cllr Peter O'Neill commended the initiative and also the use of the Care Leavers Forum to continue progressing this initiative. He enquired as to the actions being taken with regard to LAC currently classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). The Head of Service – Looked after Children advised that the Council was proactive on this issue and worked closely with Partners with particular emphasis on arranging Work Experience / Apprenticeship opportunities etc. Cllr Peter O'Neill enquired as to whether the NEET figures were monitored on a regular basis. The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, assured the Board that this position was kept under review and reported to the Board through the Performance Monitoring report considered at each meeting. She suggested that enough work was not done with LAC or Care Leavers to promote opportunities in Further or Higher Education.

Cllr Julie Hodgkiss referred to paragraph 6.1 of the report and queried whether the Council needed to think differently in relation to its dealings with the most vulnerable young people in society or whether this had already happened. The Head of Service, Looked After Children explained that the Council was very conscious of the extra help that could be required by Care Leavers and endeavoured to provide this.

Cllr Stephen Simkins advised the Board that Universal Credit was to be introduced across the Black Country shortly and, in his opinion, it was essential that Care Leavers were well informed as to their respective entitlements. Also, there appeared to be an increase in the aspiration levels of younger LAC to participate in Higher or Further Education. The Head of Service, Looked After Children, commented that joint working across the Black Country would assist in identifying solutions to common problems. She confirmed an increase in interest from Care Leavers in accessing opportunities for Further or Higher Education. The Chair, Cllr Val Gibson, assured the Board that access to benefits would be addressed.

Cllr Rita Potter welcomed the report and the initiative as it presented a better opportunity for Care Leavers to move on independently. She asked, however, what would happen if a Care Leaver decided to return to their original family home to reside with their family. The Head of Service, Looked After Children confirmed that this did happen in some cases. Cllr Paula Brookfield opined that in some cases Care Leavers who were struggling with leaving care would welcome an opportunity to return to the familial home. The Head of Service, Looked After Care, reported on the working relationship between the Council and Wolverhampton Homes and the amount of support available to Care Leavers.

Cllr Peter O'Neill referred to previous housing arrangements which had been made for Care Leavers which had failed due to a lack of management interventions and enquired as to the present arrangements. The Head of Service, Looked After Children commented that it was now the practice to review those provisions that worked well and to seek to expand such schemes. The Service Director, Children and Young People advised that the Council worked closely with Wolverhampton Homes in the provision of suitable accommodation but that not all Care Leavers required assistance from the Council following discharge from care. Cllr Stephen Simkins commented that in any event it was no longer possible to house Care Leavers in clusters as this would be contrary to Age Discrimination legislation.

Cllr Julie Hodgkiss enquired as to progress with the “Talent Match” scheme. The Head of Service, Looked After Children, confirmed that the Council was working closely with the providers of this scheme.

Resolved:

1. That the implementation of the New Belongings Project across the City of Wolverhampton Council be supported;
2. That the New Belongings Action Plan be noted.

8 **Performance Management Data**

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

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

9 **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.

Part 2 – items not open to the public and press

10 **Councillors visits to establishments**

No visits to establishments had been undertaken by Councillors since the last meeting of the Board (see Minute No. 5 above.).