

## CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL** held at Room 14, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Monday, 2 July 2012

### PRESENT

#### Elected Members (voting)

Cllrs M A G Versallion (Chairman), A L Dodwell (Vice-Chairman), D Bowater, N B Costin, Mrs S A Goodchild, Mrs D B Gurney, N J Sheppard and A M Turner

#### Officers (voting)

Mrs J Ogle – Director of Social Care, Health and Housing

Apologies for Absence: Cllr Mrs A Barker  
Mrs J Crawford  
Cllr B Wells

Members in Attendance: Cllr P N Aldis

Officers in Attendance: Ms Y Corden – Interim Assistant Director,  
Children's Services Operations  
Ms F Mackirdy – Head of Adoption and Fostering  
Mr L Manning – Committee Services Officer  
Ms I Wilks – Team Manager, Conference and Review

#### CPP/12/6 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 14 May 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### CPP/12/7 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman praised the foster carer awards ceremony held on 25 May 2012. He stated that meeting the foster carers at the event had proved a humbling experience for him and he referred to the experience and length of service within their ranks. The Chairman then expressed his thanks to the Vice-Chairman of the Panel, the Chairman of the Council and the Head of Adoption and Fostering for their support.

CPP/12/8 **Declarations of Interests**

| Member              | Item | Nature of Interest                                 | Present or Absent during discussion |
|---------------------|------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Cllr A L Dodwell    | 6    | Is a member of the Fostering and Permanence Panel. | Present                             |
| Cllr Mrs D B Gurney | 6    | Is a member of the Adoption Panel.                 | Present                             |

CPP/12/9 **Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report 2011-2012**

The Panel considered a report by the Team Manager Conference and Review which outlined the team's activity in relation to the reviews of Looked After Children during 2011-12.

The Chairman queried what the Council's procedure governing the oversight of review management had been before the statutory requirement had been introduced. In response the Team Manager explained that the Quality Assurance Service within Children's Services Operations had held the same responsibilities but the data collected had been reported to central government. There had been no specific requirement to report findings to Members though it was acknowledged that some authorities did so.

Turning to the timeliness of reviews the Chairman queried why five children and young people had experienced late initial reviews. In reply the Team Manager explained that several factors had been identified including that all five were late notifications from the operational teams and that in three cases there had been a lack of clarity and slight delay in notification in the notification of a change in the children's status to Looked After. She added that the issues had been raised with the operational teams to ensure future compliance with the regulations. She also stressed that the children and young people had not been disadvantaged in any way and that the performance target had of 95% had been met.

The Chairman next referred to the participation by children in their reviews. The Team Manager explained the procedure governing participation and the efforts made to ensure that child's views were made known. She added that participation was defined as a child having taken part at some point in the review and did not mean that he or she had been present throughout.

A Member referred to the rising number of Looked After Children and sought clarification on the reasons for this. In response the Interim Assistant Director Children's Services confirmed that the number was continuing to increase year on year but that the rate per 10,000 of population was still below the national

figure. The Interim Assistant Director advised that she was now responsible for determining which children would be taken into care to ensure consistency. She further advised that almost all of the later had come about as a result care proceedings and therefore was in line with national social care activity. In addition Central Bedfordshire had also been more stringent than the legacy authority in applying thresholds and intervening to protect children. The Panel considered the ethnicity statistics for Looked After Children and noted that the white ethnic group was largely made up of two or three extended gypsy and traveller families. It was further noted that, whilst some targeted work had been carried out with families in general that required special assistance, there had been no particular focus on gypsies and travellers. Further discussion followed during which the possibility of measuring and displaying the data in alternative forms, such as by cultural background or by age, was considered. During the discussion the Interim Assistant Director explained that the breakdown of data based on ethnic origin was a statutory requirement.

In response to a Member's query regarding the placement of children with a foster carer (non relative or friend) outside the Authority the Head of Adoption and Fostering stated that a few children had required placement at highly specialist carers some 50 miles away but the majority were placed within 20 miles of Central Bedfordshire.

Turning to parental participation in the review progress, and in particular that by fathers, a Member commented on the comparatively low level of participation by fathers. The Team Manager acknowledged the participation gap and the need to establish both why this had occurred and whether this was experienced by other local authorities. The Interim Assistant Director stated that unfortunately in many cases the father was no longer present. She stressed that a child's links with both parents was promoted if this was appropriate for the child's wellbeing.

The Chairman queried the current stability of the Review Manager establishment in view of the challenging staffing situation during 2010-11. In response the Team Manager confirmed that, over the past year, there had been very high continuity of employment and stability in the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) provision.

The Chairman next queried the stability of placements for Looked After Children. In reply the Team Manager commented that the recent Ofsted inspection had identified deterioration down from 74.2% to 63% in the number of Looked After Children remaining in the same placement but explained that this had arisen due to effect of a specific cohort of children on the statistics. With regard to Ofsted's concerns regarding placement availability the Head of Adoption and Fostering stated that work was being undertaken with colleagues in Housing to examine semi-independent provision and this would be reflected in the placement strategy contracting arrangements. In response to a query regarding the time and resources required she explained that the number of Looked After Children concerned was relatively small.

Following further discussion the Chairman expressed his thanks to Members and officers for their work.

**NOTED**

**the activity of the Conference and Review Service in relation to the reviews of Looked After Children during 2011-12 as set out within the Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report.**

CPP/12/10 **Annual Reports for the Adoption Service and Fostering Service**

The Panel received a report which outlined the statutory framework for the submission of annual reports on the adoption and fostering services and summarised the key points contained in the Annual Adoption and Fostering Service Reports for 2011-12. Copies of the Service Reports were attached as appendices to the report. The meeting was aware that the Adoption and Fostering Service was currently a shared service for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Councils and that the reports contained information in respect of both Councils.

**a) Adoption Service**

The Head of Adoption and Fostering introduced the Adoption Agency Annual Report.

A Member referred to the forthcoming end of the Shared Service Arrangement with Bedford Borough Council on 31 January 2013, expressed concern regarding the impact on panel workloads and the need to organise new panels and sought an update on developments. In response the Interim Assistant Director, Children's Services Operations explained that the Regulations set out the composition of the new panels. She added that officers from both authorities met every three weeks to consider aspects of the service disaggregation. The Interim Assistant Director stated that the cost of the replacement service would be relatively high but this increase had been anticipated. Further, it was felt to be more acceptable in relation to the quality of service provision than continuing with the existing Service Level Agreement.

The Head of Adoption and Fostering advised that Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Council were committed to working together to ensure the process of disaggregation was managed as efficiently as possible. Officers were also fully aware of the risk that foster carers or adopters could decide to leave the Council as a result of the changes. As a result a communications strategy had been drawn up and meetings were to take place with carers to explain the decision to disaggregate.

It was noted that draft staffing structures had been prepared in anticipation of the disaggregation and a staff consultation had been carried out.

The Interim Assistant Director, Children's Services Operations advised the meeting of the Borough Council's intention to substantially reduce its funding contribution towards the Shared Service and, in view of the

resulting impact on the quality of service, how this had led to the decision by Central Bedfordshire to disaggregate.

**b) Fostering Service**

The Head of Adoption and Fostering turned next to the Fostering Agency Annual Report.

Following a description of the process undertaken when appointing foster carers a Member advised the meeting of the heavy workload associated with the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel and suggested possible means of overcoming this. In response the Head of Adoption and Fostering first stated that there would be a number of changes to the adoption service in the coming year which would lead to a reduction in the number of cases being considered by the Adoption Panel. She added that there was a possibility of the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel adopting the same procedures and, if this occurred, it would lighten that Panel's workload.

With regarding the forthcoming end of the Shared Service Arrangement with Bedford Borough Council the Director of Social Care, Health and Housing stated that the disaggregation of the service would allow a greater focus on the children within Central Bedfordshire. Following a query by a Member the Head of Adoption and Fostering assured the meeting that the law was clear on the allocation of responsibilities between the two authorities and there should be no adverse issues arising for the service within Central Bedfordshire.

The Vice-Chairman referred to the Family Link Scheme, which offered short breaks to children who had a physical or functional disability, and queried whether there were sufficient Family Link carers to enable sufficient short breaks to be provided. In response the Head of Adoption and Fostering stated that the number of carers varied and any further expansion of the Scheme would require an examination of their capacity. She added that, fortunately, the Scheme enjoyed good links with staff in special schools who were able to undertake this role if required. In addition the short breaks themselves could vary from between an occasional few hours to whole weekends on a regular basis so carers could participate in the Scheme at a range of levels. The Interim Assistant Director, Children's Services Operations emphasised that carers could simply provide their service for a few hours to provide parents with an opportunity for a break. She stated that the Council had a reasonable capacity for this purpose.

A Member commented on the successful recruitment programme under the Youth Care Scheme to approve additional households to provide specialist care to young people over the age of 10 who had needs which were particularly challenging or complex and expressed her gratitude for this increase.

The Chairman thanked the officers for their efforts.

**NOTED**

**the content of the Annual Adoption and Fostering Service Reports for 2011/12.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 1.00 p.m. and concluded at 2.22 p.m.)

Chairman.....

Dated.....