

## CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL** held at Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Monday, 2 December 2013

### **PRESENT**

#### **Elected Members (voting)**

Cllrs:

M A G Versallion (Chairman)  
Cllr A L Dodwell (Vice-Chairman)  
Mrs A Barker  
D Bowater  
N B Costin  
Mrs S A Goodchild  
N J Sheppard

Apologies for Absence: Mrs J Dickinson  
Mrs E Grant  
Mrs J Ogley  
Cllr B Wells

Officers in Attendance: Mr G Jones – Assistant Director Children's Services Operations  
Mr L Manning – Committee Services Officer  
Mr N Wood – Interim Head of Service for Adoption and Fostering

#### CPP/13/28 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 7 October 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### CPP/13/29 **Members' Interests**

Councillor Mrs A Barker declared an interest as a member of the Council's Adoption Panel.

Councillor N B Costin declared an interest as the Chairman of Barnfield College.

Councillor A L Dodwell declared an interest as a member of the Council's Fostering Panel.

#### CPP/13/30 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

Further to minute CPP/13/25 Members were advised that Children in Care Council (CiCC) representatives had attended a meeting of the All

Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers to discuss entitlements for Looked After Children and care leavers. A number of recommendations had arisen from that meeting and, in order to ensure that they meshed with the forthcoming presentation by the Assistant Director Housing Services on housing and Looked After Children, it was intended that the CiCC representatives report to the next meeting of the Panel in February followed by a response by the Assistant Director Housing Services (Minute CPP/13/31 also refers).

In connection with the Virtual School the meeting was advised that a number of changes had taken place regarding this body. The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations undertook to provide an explanatory report to the next meeting of the Panel on this development.

The Chairman stated that, locally, National Adoption Week had proceeded well though he was unsure as to whether it had generated interest from prospective adopters. He added that he had been interviewed by Three Counties Radio and he believed this had generated good publicity.

Arising from the above the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations advised the meeting that the number of local adoptions had more than doubled from 7 last year to an expected 16 in the current year and that, overall, good progress had been made in this area. He then reminded the Panel of the recent changes within the field of adoption and the challenges which had arisen. He drew Members' attention in particular to the expectation by the courts that all relevant information on a proposed adoption would be available for presentation at the first hearing. Whilst this situation enabled judges to make their decisions in a far speedier manner than previously it generated an extremely high level of work for local authorities and had already led to criticism by the courts of those councils which had failed to meet this requirement.

In response to a query the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations explained that the changes had not merely seen the 'frontloading' of the workload but an increase in the amount of work and a reduction in the time available in which to do it. Furthermore, whilst the costs for expert reports had been shared amongst various bodies in the past, these now fell in full to the Council to pay.

Discussion took place on the need to ensure the wellbeing of the child remained the priority and concern was expressed on impact of a poor, hasty decision by the courts on children who were already vulnerable. In response the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations stated that, whilst adoption might not be suitable in all cases, the courts did usually find the correct way forward.

Further discussion followed on the breakdown rate for adoptions, coupled with reference to the situation in other European countries. Whilst the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations was unable to confirm if the rate had increased nationally he acknowledged that an increasing number of children, often in sibling groups, had much wider needs than had been found in the past and this factor was likely to lead to an increased number of breakdowns. He explained that even if a child was removed from abuse or neglect at a very

early age the long term impact of psychological damage remained and this could generate stresses leading to a breakdown in the adoption. Nonetheless, he emphasised that, for the majority of children, adoption was the single most effective action that could be taken for their benefit. Further, the Council retained responsibility to assist adoptive families should they require support.

Following further discussion the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations undertook to report to the next meeting of the Panel on both national and local breakdown rates for adoption.

**CPP/13/31 The Experience for Looked After Children with Housing**

Members were aware that this item had been withdrawn and that it would now be considered at the Panel's next meeting on 3 February 2014.

**CPP/13/32 Quarter Two Report on the Fostering Service - July to September 2013**

The Panel received a report by the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations which outlined activity in the Fostering Service during Quarter Two (July to September 2013) with comparison to previous quarters.

The report contained updates on the following areas:

- Background
- Recruitment of Foster Carers
- Placements for Children
- Training for Foster Carers
- Key Events and Advertising
- Ending of the Shared Service Arrangement

The Interim Head of Service for Adoption and Fostering advised that, in view of the impending disaggregation of the Adoption and Fostering Service, he would amend the presentation of the report at the Panel's next meeting to focus on Central Bedfordshire data.

Comment and discussion then took place on the report. Clarification was sought on a number of issues.

In response to a Member's queries the Interim Head of Service acknowledged the seasonal pressure on the fostering service but emphasised that carers were available over Christmas and New Year to cover both anticipated and unplanned demand.

The Interim Head of Service advised the meeting of intended amendments to the charts within the Assistant Director's report in order to ensure clarity and greater accuracy.

A Member referred to 'Fostering for Adoption' placements and sought clarification on the scheme's operation within Central Bedfordshire and the role

of Members. In response the Interim Head of Service for Adoption and Fostering briefly outlined the legislative basis and how, locally, the scheme applied to only a very small number of Looked After Children. Following further discussion it was felt that a short briefing on the legislation and its application in Central Bedfordshire should be given to a future meeting of the Panel.

Turning to service disaggregation the Interim Head of Service reported that this was in its final stages and all foster carers were aware of which council they had been aligned to. No complaints had been received regarding the alignment. The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations added that there had been an approximately 50/50 split in both foster carers and staff between the two authorities. A number of key vacancies had arisen as a result and action was to be taken to remedy this situation.

In conclusion a Member suggested that the Council consider the wider, strategic, use of communications to assist in the use of foster carer recruitment. She also queried whether Central Bedfordshire's profile had been raised as a result of National Adoption Week and whether officers monitored how inquiries were generated. The Member then thanked the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Panel and the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services for their efforts relating to disaggregation.

#### **NOTED**

**the content of the Quarter Two report on the Fostering Service for the period July to September 2013.**

#### **RESOLVED**

**that a short briefing session on 'Fostering to Adoption' and its application within Central Bedfordshire be provided to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.**

#### **CPP/13/33 Six Monthly Report on the Adoption Service - April to September 2013**

The Panel received a report by the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations which outlined the activity in the adoption service over the six month period from April to September 2013.

The report provided updates on the following areas:

- Background
- Recruitment of Adopters
- Adoption Planning and Placements for Children
- Special Guardianship and Adoption Support
- Adult Adoption Work
- Key Events
- Adoption Reform Grant

Members were aware that adoption service issues had already discussed at some length earlier in the meeting (minute CPP/13/30 above refers).

For Members' benefit the Interim Head of Service for Adoption and Fostering introduced the report. In particular he drew Members' attention to the large number of significant changes in adoption legislation, regulations and guidance during the six month period. The meeting noted that the Adoption Agency had disseminated knowledge and training about the changes and had continued to embed them in practice.

Following a query by the Chairman regarding the current upper age limit for adopters the Interim Head of Service explained that the advice from the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) was to look for health and vigour in prospective adopters rather than be guided by strict age limits. He added that over the previous ten years the upper age profile of adopters had moved from 40 to 50 and emphasis was now placed on individual suitability and the ability to connect with a particular child or children.

**NOTED**

**the content of the six monthly report on the Adoption Service for the period April to September 2013.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 11.00 a.m. and concluded at 12.28 p.m.)