

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL** held at Room 14, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Monday, 6 July 2015

PRESENT

Elected Members (voting)

Cllrs C Hegley (Chairman)
Mrs A L Dodwell (Vice-Chairman)
Mrs A Barker
N B Costin
Mrs S A Goodchild
T Stock
M A G Versallion
B Wells

Officers (voting)

Mrs J Ogley - Director of Social Care, Health and Housing

Carers (non-voting)

Mrs H Phillips MBE

Officers in Attendance:	Ms A Craig	- Practice Manager, Fostering
	Mr M Gray	- Team Manager, Placement Resources
	Mr G Jones	- Assistant Director Children's Services Operations
	Mr L Manning	- Committee Services Officer
	Ms N Phillips	- Interim Practice Manager Adoption Team
	Ms M Short	- Participation Officer
	Ms I Wilks	- Practice Manager, Conference and Review
	Mr E Wong	- Head of Corporate Parenting

Others in Attendance: Children in Care Council Representatives

CPP/15/1. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 23 March 2015 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

CPP/15/2. **Members' Interests**

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

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

CPP/15/3. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

As this was the first Corporate Parenting Panel of the new Council, and there were several new Members present, the Chairman introduced herself. The other attendees then introduced themselves.

The Chairman stated that she was looking forward to learning about those areas of Children's Services for which she was now responsible. She, together with the former Chairman of the Panel, explained the recent reorganisation of Executive Member responsibilities which had been undertaken in order to enable a more effective focus on services.

CPP/15/4. **Fees and Allowances for Foster Carers**

The Panel considered a report of the Executive Member for Social Care and Housing which outlined a review of the new foster care allowance scheme for Members' consideration.

Following an introduction to the report by the Team Manager Placement Resources, the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations reminded the meeting why, in April 2014, the new scheme had been introduced and how it had successfully addressed many of the challenges that had existed. The meeting noted that the review aimed to continue these successes and also achieving greater fairness through the following actions:

- Being more competitive with neighbours and attracting more carers
- Preventing children going to independent fostering agency placements and bringing those in IFA's back to in-house placements in a planned way (each child placed with an in-house carer resulted in a cost reduction of £23,400 per year compared to an agency placement (figures calculated at current average rates))
- Incentivising foster carers to complete mandatory training and enabling them to feel that the Council was treating them as paid professional carers
- Preventing the loss of existing carers either to competitors or because they could no longer afford to foster

- Encouraging foster carers who would otherwise need to work to be more available for fostering at no financial detriment to their household
- Having carers more available to meet the needs of younger children, and potential savings on extra costs such as transport to school
- Encouraging foster carers to increase the number of children they wished to foster to take advantage of the increased fee income available
- Increasing the provision of in-house placements and reducing the use of IFA placements by 25 over the two years to 31 March 2016.

The Panel identified the importance of training to ensure that the quality of carers improved. However, the meeting also acknowledged that some carers failed to take up the training opportunities offered to them. Members discussed in full the possible reasons for this and the means by which this could be overcome, including the proposed incentive of linking fees with training. Following discussion the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations emphasised that every opportunity was already taken to encourage carers to attend training sessions.

RESOLVED

that the review of the new foster care allowance scheme, as set out within the report of the Executive Member for Social Care and Housing, be implemented.

CPP/15/5. **Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report 2014-15**

The Panel considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which introduced the Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report for the period April 2014 to March 2015. The meeting noted that, under the statutory guidance, the Independent Reviewing Officers' (IROs') Manager was responsible for the production of an Annual Report for consideration by members of the Corporate Parenting Panel. To this end a copy of the Annual Report was attached at Appendix A to the Director of Children's Services report.

The Practice Manager Conference and Review, as the author of the Annual Report, worked through it and highlighted matters for information. However, initial discussion centred on ensuring the content of future reports to the Panel was as accessible as possible for all readers by including a clear explanation of all acronyms and abbreviations used. The Directors of Social Care, Health and Housing and Children's Services undertook to ensure that future reports complied with this requirement.

Discussion covered the interactive event day organised by the IRO's with the assistance of the Participation Officer at which 12 young people and four IRO's had attended. The response by the young people to the questions raised by

the IRO's on what made a good IRO and what made a good Looked After Review was considered as was the feedback by the IRO's to their colleagues and the action which had subsequently been agreed. Following comments by a Member the Practice Manager Conference and Review explained that the IRO's were already challenged through both an internal auditing process and by Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) reviews.

The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations informed the meeting of the important role played by the IRO's and their statutory right to directly approach the Chairman of the Panel and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) if they believed the Council was not acting in a child's interest. He added that the work involved a huge administrative and professional task and he expressed his thanks to the Practice Manager Conference and Review for undertaking this role.

Discussion took place on the resilience of the IRO service and its ability to respond to challenges. In connection with this issue the Practice Manager Conference and Review referred to the substantial financial pressures arising from the increase in unaccompanied asylum seekers. The meeting noted the UK Border Agency's practices in relation to the assessment of illegal immigrants and the impact on the IRO service. Full discussion took place on the action Members should take should they become aware of the presence of illegal immigrants and/or unaccompanied asylum seekers. The Chairman felt that clarification and further information on this matter was required.

The Panel considered a CiCC representative's personal experiences with his IRO. The Participation Officer explained how young people wanted to spend more time with their IRO's. She emphasised the importance of the relationship given that this remained a constant whenever possible. The Participation Officer also acknowledged that Looked After Children were not seeing their IRO's to a degree which the former found acceptable.

Arising from a query by the Vice-Chairman discussion took place on the availability of suitable accommodation for young people. The Head of Corporate Parenting stated that this issue was being examined with the aim of examining the framework in the summer. The Panel felt that this presented an opportunity for an update to be presented on the progress made.

NOTED

the activity of the Conference and Review Service in relation to the reviews of Looked After Children during 2013-14 as set out within the Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report.

RESOLVED

- 1 that an update on accommodation provision for young persons be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel;**
- 2 that the Director of Social Care, Health and Housing and Assistant Director Children's Services Operations draw up a briefing note for**

circulation to Members setting out the impact of the growth in the numbers of illegal immigrants and unaccompanied asylum seekers and what action Members should take if they became aware of their presence.

CPP/15/6. **Fostering Agency 2014/2015 Quarter 4 Performance Report**

The Committee considered the report of the Executive Member for Social Care and Housing which introduced the Quarter 4 Performance Report for the Fostering Agency. In view of the overlap in content with the next agenda item, which dealt with the Fostering Agency Annual Report for 2014/15, it was agreed that both reports should be considered concurrently (Note: Minute CPP/15/7 below also refers).

Following an introduction by the Practice Manager, Fostering the meeting turned to consider various issues contained within the reports.

A Member referred to the Quarter 4 report and to the increase in Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's) from 81 at the end of March 2014 to 114 at the end of March 2015 and how the Orders helped to maintain links within families. The meeting noted that the majority of the SGO's granted were to family and friends and foster carers so the children they cared for were no longer classified as Looked After. However, the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations queried the role of the Council to fund long term family care arrangements through the use of SGO's in view of the budget implications. He indicated that consideration would need to be given to this issue in the near future and a report would be forthcoming which identified the options available. The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations referred to the changes in family court arrangements which placed an emphasis on placing children within their family of origin though the cost to local authorities of providing this service was high. In connection with this matter the Practice Manager, Fostering advised that the Government was also undertaking an examination of how SGO's were used.

The Children in Care Council representatives invited the members of the Panel to the Awards Evening scheduled for 25 September 2015.

(Note: The Children in Care Council representatives left the meeting at this point).

Further discussion followed relating to fostering and adoption activity being carried out concurrently by the same persons. In response the Practice Manager, Fostering explained that fostering and adoption rarely took place within the context of the same carers at the same time as these functions were undertaken by different types of people. However, some carers might first foster a child and then adopt him or her. Discussion also took place with regard to the extent that life story work was undertaken with Looked After Children and the role it played. The Member commented on the absence of any reference to this in the Annual Report.

(Note: Councillor M A G Versallion left the meeting at this point to attend another meeting).

In response to a query by a Member the Practice Manager, Fostering stated that whilst some foster carers might have vacancies this could be a short term position. She stressed that the Council never experienced a situation where there were no vacancies. The Practice Manager, Fostering added that the Council had a list of foster carers with vacancies and that the list was reviewed every day. In response to further queries from the Member the Practice Manager, Fostering acknowledged that some foster carers had been highly specific in the children whom they fostered however, moves were being made to expand the range of children that carers were willing to foster. She also referred to the peer mentoring scheme for all new and existing carers to offer encouragement, support and opportunities for collaborative working.

The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations referred the meeting to the report of the Fostering Panel Chair and the role undertaken by the Panel Advisor. The Assistant Director briefly set out the difficulties that had been experienced as a result of not being able to fill the post of Panel Advisor on a permanent basis.

NOTED

- 1 the Fostering Agency Quarter 4 Performance Report for 2014/15;**
- 2 the Annual Report of the Fostering Agency for 2014/15.**

CPP/15/7. Fostering Agency Annual Report for the Period 2014/2015

In view of the related content in agenda items 7 (Fostering Agency 2014/15 Quarter 4 Performance Report) and 8 (Fostering Agency Annual Report for the Period 2014/15) these items were considered in conjunction with each other (Note: Minute CPP/15/6 above also refers).

CPP/15/8. Adoption Agency Annual Report

The Panel received a report of the Executive Member for Social Care and Housing on the Adoption Agency Annual Report for 2014/15. A copy of the Annual Report was attached at Appendix A to the Executive Member's report together with a report by the Chairman of the Joint Adoption Panel at Appendix B. The meeting noted that the Annual Report described the activities of the Council's Adoption Agency during that period, including achievements and the remit and focus of the Agency's work. The report also identified recommendations for the development of the service.

Following an introduction to the Annual Report by the Senior Practitioner – Adoption the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations drew Members' attention to the disrupted adoptions which had occurred during 2014/15. He stated that, of the 29 children matched for adoption in this period, there had been five disrupted placements where the adoption process had ceased.

Detailed analysis of the circumstances had been undertaken with the aim of understanding the reasons for the disruptions and the measures that could be introduced to improve practices. He suggested that the Panel might also wish to consider this issue in greater depth. The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations also suggested that carers be invited to attend the Panel to provide Members with details of the challenges faced by adopters and the nature of the support provided to them during the introductory process.

The Assistant Director Children's Services Operations next referred to the role of the Adoption Fund and the level of resources provided by the Fund and undertook to report on this matter to the next Panel meeting.

Following further discussion the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations advised the meeting of the Government's intention to introduce legislation which would amend adoption arrangements, including the enforced merger of local authority adoption services, to ensure greater collaboration. He added that the Council was to examine possible options on the way forward with its neighbouring authorities at an autumn workshop.

A Member on the Joint Adoption Panel suggested that the membership of the Panel should be expanded to include a parent as a lay member to present the 'ordinary' viewpoint on issues. She also requested that a substitute elected Member from this Council should be appointed to attend in those circumstances when she could not. In response the Director of Social Care, Health and Housing acknowledged the value of appointing a lay member as a counterbalance to the professional viewpoint of other members on the Joint Adoption Panel.

NOTED

the Adoption Agency Annual Report for 2014/15.

RESOLVED

- 1 that the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations invite carers to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel to discuss the challenges they experience with the adoption process;**
- 2 that the Assistant Director Children's Services Operations report to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel on the role, level and availability of the Adoption Fund;**
- 3 that further consideration be given to the appointment of a lay member/parent and to the appointment of a substitute elected Member for the Joint Adoption Panel.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and concluded at 12.25 p.m.)