

Central Bedfordshire Council

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

25 October 2018

Looked After Children Social Worker Stability

Report of Sue Harrison, Director of Children's Services
(Sue.Harrison@Centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Advising Officers:

Sacha Rymell, Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Early Help
(Sacha.Rymell@Centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Ruth Coals, Head of Professional Standards and Principal Social Worker
(Ruth.Coals@Centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Alex Coman, Head of Corporate Parenting
(Alex.Coman@Centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Purpose of this report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide information for consideration on social work stability for looked after children in Central Bedfordshire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to:

1. Note the content of the report
2. Comment on the report

Introduction

2. The Corporate Parenting Panel has asked to be advised on the social work stability for looked after children in Central Bedfordshire.
3. This report will reference and comment upon the Children's Commissioner Stability Index data, published in August 2018. This report allows us to benchmark Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Services against the national picture in terms of performance on social work stability for looked after children against the regional and national picture. In this data, social work instability is defined as two or more changes of social worker in 12 months. Repeated social work instability is defined as looked after children who have two or more social workers in 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Local Context

4. Central Bedfordshire Council currently holds Corporate Parenting responsibility for 311 children. Whilst the number of looked after children has remained stable overall, the composition of this group is continuously subject to some change, with care episodes ending for some children and beginning for others.
5. In Central Bedfordshire in most cases children become looked after when they are receiving a social work service in the Assessment or the Family Support Services. When children become looked after, social worker case responsibility is transferred to the specialist Corporate Parenting Service. This service is composed of the Court and Permanence Team and the 13+ and Care Leavers Team, with allocation within the service depending on the age and legal status of the child.
6. The transfer points and related changes of social worker for children are built into our processes and form part of the child's journey so that children receive an expert service from specialist social workers that is responsive to the particular circumstances of the child. Changes of social worker in these circumstances are carefully managed and planned for to minimise disruption for children at these points of transition.
7. When children become looked after they are also allocated an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The IRO is an experienced and independent social worker. IROs visit the child they are responsible for and hold the social worker and partner agencies to account, to ensure that the child's plan progresses in line with the child's wishes, feelings and assessed needs. The IRO continues to work with the child regardless of any changes in social workers, providing an additional layer of stability for our children.
8. As for all children who receive a social work service, looked after children may also have a change of social worker when the social worker changes job, if a social worker has an extended period of sick leave or, exceptionally, when a child asks for a change of social worker. In these circumstances the team manager will ensure that a planned case transfer takes place and the child is allocated to a social worker within the same team within the Corporate Parenting Service. This means that the same supervising manager continues to have oversight of the child's situation and their needs. The Ofsted Inspection 2017 noted that case transfers were well planned for in Central Bedfordshire.
9. We believe that consistency of Social Worker enables positive relationships to be developed between children and their Social Worker and for this reason we strive to sustain Social Work stability. The importance of stability is exemplified by one of young people who has recently nominated their Social Worker for a national award stating in their written nomination that:

"EH is funny, kind, calm and humble. I didn't really want to talk to anyone about how I was feeling. I was worried that people would try and push me

to tell them my thoughts. EH isn't like that. She made me laugh and eventually I opened up and I'm so happy that I did."

Findings

10. The Children's Commissioner provided the most recent collated Stability Index data on 14 August 2018. This provides bench marking data for Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Services against 77 other local authorities that submitted data, in respect of the Children Commissioner's three measures of stability: care placement, school placement and changes in social worker. The data gathered is in respect of 2015/16 and 2016/17. The full report is attached for the reference of Members.
11. In terms of social work stability 24% (73) of our looked after children had two or more changes of social worker in 2016/17. This is lower than the national average of 26% and higher than the eastern region average of 21%. 6% of our looked after children had two or more changes of social worker in both 2015/16 and 2016/17. This is the same as the national average and higher than the eastern region average of 3%.
12. It should be noted that Central Bedfordshire Council has significantly lower rates of single year (2016/17) social worker instability for 5-11 year old children, with 11% (102) having two or more social workers in one year compared to the eastern region average of 18% and the national average of 24%. Also, single year social worker instability (2016/17) for children aged 12-15 years, at 18%, was lower than the eastern region average of 20% and national average of 24%.
13. However single year instability (2016/17) for children aged 0-4 years was higher in Central Bedfordshire at 36% (45 children) compared to the eastern region average of 23% and national average of 30%. For the same period, instability rates were higher for children aged 16+ in Central Bedfordshire at 38% (86 children) compared to the eastern region average of 24% and national average of 25%.
14. Repeated social work instability is defined by the Children's Commissioner as children having two or more changes of social worker in 2015/16 and 2016/17. Repeated social work instability was lower in Central Bedfordshire at 5.6% (304 children) as compared to the national average of 6.4% (38,906 children) but higher than the East of England average of 3.4% (2,131 children). Unlike in the single year instability rate data, no subgroups, such as differences in social work stability for particular ages of looked after children, were noted by the Children's Commissioner in the data for repeated social work instability in Central Bedfordshire.

Conclusions

15. Social Workers are choosing to come and work in Central Bedfordshire and stay working here. Good staff satisfaction, as indicated in the recent Organisational Health Check, is high and this is reflected in the declining vacancy rates and reduced use of agency staff across the service as a

whole. This is despite the fact that social work recruitment is intensely challenging in a significant number of other local authorities, locally and nationally.

16. Effective recruitment and retention of social workers has contributed to our overall social stability rates being better than the national average. Performance stability in respect of 5-15 year olds was better than the national and eastern region averages. However, we aspire to high performance across all age ranges and comparative measures. The Children's Commissioner Report has supported us to concentrate our attention in particular areas of our work. We are committed to addressing this issue over the next twelve months. This will include regular review of our recruitment and retention practice.

Council Priorities

17. Protecting the vulnerable
18. Improving wellbeing
19. Creating stronger communities
20. A more efficient and responsive Council

Corporate Implications

21. None

Legal Implications

22. The report does not have specific legal implications. However, the Council has a statutory obligation towards its looked after children and this report provides information as to how some of those obligations are being met.

Financial and Risk Implications

23. This report does not have specific financial implications. However, recruitment and retention of social workers costs less than use of agency so contributes to good budget management.

Equalities Implications

24. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Ensuring that looked after children are provided with stable relationships with their social workers enables Central Bedfordshire Council to achieve better outcomes for children and young people who are additionally vulnerable.

Recommendations

25. Social Worker churn, whilst moderate, is an area we continue to work hard to address. We will review and develop the recruitment and retention programme for social workers, so that looked after children and young people have good social work stability in Central Bedfordshire.

Appendices

26. Children's Commissioner Stability Index August 2018

Background Papers

27. None