

Central Bedfordshire Council

Corporate Parenting Panel

11 February 2019

Eastern Region Peer Review Looked After Children and Permanence

Report of: Cllr Steven Dixon, Executive Member for Families, Education and Children and Lead Member for Children's Services (steven.dixon@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Responsible Director(s): Sue Harrison Director of Children's Services, (Sue.Harrison@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

This report relates to a decision that is Non-Key

Purpose of this report

This report provides members with detail on the outcome of the November 2018 Eastern Region Peer Review of Looked After Children and Permanence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel is asked to:

1. Note the contents of the report
2. Agree that a plan will be formulated in response to the findings of the Peer Review

Background to the Eastern Region Peer Review

1. Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Services is part of an Eastern Region network of Children's Services. The purpose of the network is to support peer led continuous improvement through collaboration and challenge. Peer Review is part of the Eastern Region offer to the sector. After the Ofsted Inspection in July 2017, Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Services requested that a Peer Review was undertaken focusing on our looked after children services and achieving permanence. This area of the service was a key element of the Ofsted Action Plan, developed in response to the July 2017 Ofsted Inspection. The November 2018 Peer Review provided Central Bedfordshire with an opportunity to test the impact of the Ofsted Action Plan in terms of services to looked after children and young people and permanence, and to help identify how services might be progressed from good to great.

Process of the Eastern Region Peer Review

2. The Peer Review Team was composed of an Assistant Director and Head of Service from Cambridgeshire and a Head of Service from Hertfordshire. The Peer Review team were provided with key data on relevant services in advance of the Peer Review. The Peer Review team undertook field work for three days beginning 27 November 2018. The field work involved meetings with service leaders and colleagues from health, observing Resources Panel, meeting with social workers to consider in detail the work they are undertaking with families, and meeting with representatives from the Children in Care Council. The discussions with Social Workers included reference to the electronic case records for children.

Focus of the Eastern Region Peer Review

3. Central Bedfordshire Council asked the Peer Review group to consider in detail the quality of services to children up to the age of 16 years in five Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs). The KLOEs were informed by the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework and the elements of the Ofsted Action Plan that related to looked after children and permanency. The five KLOEs were:
 - i. Children subject of letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions
 - ii. Quality of decisions about entering care
 - iii. Quality of matching and decision making for children in care
 - iv. Permanence planning and achieving permanence
 - v. Quality of management and leadership

Findings of the Eastern Region Peer Review

4. **KLOE 1** considered pre-proceedings work. The Peer Reviewers concluded that there had been effective dedicated activity in respect of pre-proceedings work since the July 2017 Ofsted Inspection. The Peer Review team concluded that the workforce has a clear and accurate understanding of their roles and responsibilities in this area of work, underpinned by clear guidance (written and from managers) and attendance at action learning sets.
5. Letters for parents were clear and SMART and in a format that is accessible to families and staff. Social Workers are well placed to consider early permanence for children from the onset of the process, if not before, with the support of routine complex case discussions between Social Workers and managers to decide on the right plan for the child. These discussions agreed which assessments would be required. Identifying assessments at an early stage and having these endorsed by the Resources Panel allows for focused and timely interventions for children.
6. This 'front loading' of activity suggested better outcomes are being achieved in Care Proceedings, with Court proceedings average timescales being lower than the national and regional average (28 weeks), Court decisions mainly (80%) matching the request of the Local Authority, and adoption timeliness for children.
7. Senior Manager and Legal Services oversight was judged to have been transformational, by embedding real time tracking of the plans for children in pre-

proceedings and Care Proceedings. Effective processes had resulted in themes and trends being identified so that planning for potential demand was possible.

8. The Peer Review Team recommendations:

- Use the insights from the pre-proceedings and legal tracking processes with Early Help services to further inform the targeted offer
- Identify a more consistent drug and alcohol support service
- Guard against over optimism with some children and families who could have a permanence decision made at an earlier stage
- Take planning for early permanence to the next stage by including the adoption service as soon as possible in planning and decision making, such as Resources Panel and pre-proceedings processes

9. **KLOE 2** considered the quality of decisions about children entering care. The Peer Reviewers advised that the weekly Resources Panel allows for consistency and timeliness of decision making in respect of children entering care, assessments and resources to support care planning. Representation on the Panel is reflective of services that are important to children and members are of appropriate seniority to make decisions and commit resources.

10. The Peer Reviewers concluded that the Panel is well led by the Assistant Director and understood by the workforce. Requests to panel are clear, thoughtful and child focused, supported by the complex case discussions that take place prior to Panel. As a result, good and timely decisions are made for children. Regular Lead Member attendance and participation at the panel confirms investment from the Council in understanding in 'real time' not only the demand for services and impact of these for children but a good investment in corporate parenting responsibilities.

11. The Peer Reviewers advised that the reach and influence of the Virtual School was apparent at the time of the decision for children to enter care and in some cases prior to this. Social Workers were found to have a sound understanding of the importance of stability in children's education and how they could influence this through the Personal Education Plan (PEP) and working with the Virtual School.

12. Plans and reviews for children were judged to be responsive and child focused.

13. The Peer Review team recommendations:

- Consideration be given to widening the membership of the Resources Panel to include Commissioning and Early Help key decision makers
- Genograms are presented in a consistent format
- Greater clarity as to the purpose of complex case discussions and how these build on supervision
- Consider opportunities to delegate some Resource Panel decisions to Heads of Service

14. **KLOE 3** considered the quality of matching and decision making for children in care. The Peer Reviewers concluded that Social Worker really knew their children and were advocating effectively on their behalf, supporting them to achieve their full

potential. Permanency Planning Meetings were timely and well informed. The footprint of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was evident throughout the planning for children.

15. Child Permanence Reports were found to be written sensitively, with information to support children throughout their lifetime to know and understand their story.
16. A whole system approach to matching children for permanency was found by the Peer Reviewers. Social Workers reported confidence in the Placement Resources Team and a good relationship was found between these teams of colleagues. The child's profile, including a pen picture, were found to be used when searching for placements for children and long-term matches. Social Workers felt matching was more successful for children as the process is managed carefully and the pen picture allows the foster carers to get a sense of the child before being provided with their detailed profile.
17. The Peer Reviewers reported that comprehensive sibling assessments are completed by Social Workers that fully inform the care planning for children. Team Managers have clarity regarding Court time frames and when papers need to be ready for the Agency Decision Maker to complete the best interest decision. Social Workers showed the Peer Reviewers evidence of how this is discussed in supervision to support their planning, avoiding drift and delay for children.
18. The Peer Reviewers noted that the Senior Management Team scrutinise Court outcomes on a monthly basis, and this activity supports learning for practitioners when making applications to the Court. The Peer Reviewers saw evidence that in the main, the Order requested by the Local Authority at the initial Court Hearing is the Order granted. This supports timely care planning for children.
19. The Peer Review team recommendations:
 - The knowledge and experience of the Adoption Service is used earlier on in care planning for children
 - Greater consistency in Permanency Planning Meetings
 - All practitioners are able to articulate the timeframes for matching for all permanency options and the quality assurance framework around these
20. **KLOE 4** considered permanence planning and achieving permanence. The Peer Reviewers saw evidence of Life Story Work being collected by Social Workers from a wide range of people and sources. The Peer Reviewers judged this to be impressive and supported Social Workers really knowing their children and their story.
21. The Peer Reviewers found evidence of creativity in permanency planning, including thinking outside of the box for a sibling group to be placed together by using legislation to support an early match. This was an example of focused and child centred planning.
22. The Peer Reviewers noted that placement stability figures indicate children are not experiencing unnecessary placement moves. The Peer Reviewers concluded that this is due to careful planning and matching for children, as highlighted in KLOE 3.

23. Relationship based social work was judged to be 'taken to the next level', with relationship based work evident across the partnership. The investment made by Social Workers and managers in supporting partners to understand their role as corporate parents was judged to be very effective.
24. Service provided by the Virtual School, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the Looked After Health Team were considered to be strong and impressive. Services were found to be timely and responsive for children. The Virtual School was found to be demanding of all involved in the care of the child so that children are effectively supported.
25. The in-house fostering service was judged to be good, with evidence of strategic planning to enable growth in the service.
26. The Peer Reviewers concluded that the high levels of placement stability are a result of the activity detailed in KLOE 4.
27. The Peer Review team recommendations:
- Adoption Social Workers are included in the induction of newly qualified social workers, to reinforce the importance of timely adoption planning
 - Promotion of the impact of the IRO role in quality assurance
 - Placement stability data matches Social Workers' narrative and that it is reflected in case tracking
 - The Permanency Tracking Meetings are reinstated
28. **KLOE 5** addressed the quality of management and leadership. The Peer Review team found that Social Workers valued the attention of the leadership team to keeping their caseloads realistic and manageable, reflecting their levels of experience. The Peer Reviewers noted that the Council has invested in 'growing your own' workforce, through opportunities to gain a social work degree and continuous formal and informal training opportunities for Social Workers. This is allowing the workforce to reach their full potential, with the knowledge and skills to undertake their work. Social Workers were reflective and able to confidently share practice and articulate how missed opportunities for children can inform learning. Relationship based practice was recognised as the 'golden thread' throughout the organisation.
29. The Lead Member for Children's Services and the Head of the Virtual School are integrated into the senior leadership team and as such promote the role of corporate parents across the Council.
30. The Peer Review team recommendations:
- The relationship based approach of the organisation is promoted in opening presentations and in Central Bedfordshire Council literature
 - Checks and balances are revisited to ensure over optimism is challenged, particularly for younger children

- Opportunities are identified for Team Managers and Practice Managers to act into positions that stretch their potential through safe delegation of some decision making tasks

Legal Implications

31. 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

32. This report does not have specific financial implications. However timely, considered and effective care planning in pre-proceedings work and for looked after children is an efficient use of resources and for this reason contributes to good budget management.

Equalities Impact

33. 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 timely, considered and effective care planning enables Central Bedfordshire Council to achieve better outcomes for children and young people who are additionally vulnerable.

Conclusion and next Steps

34. The Eastern Region Peer Review that took place for three days beginning 27 November 2018 concluded that pre-proceedings work and services for looked after children up to the age of 16 were sound. This is a positive outcome for children and families in Central Bedfordshire and indicates that the Ofsted Action Plan has supported effective service development.

35. The Peer Reviewers made a number of considered and helpful recommendations for further service development, as detailed in the body of the report. It is proposed that these recommendations form the basis of a further action plan, drawing on the consultation with managers that took place in December 2018, and that this plan is overseen by the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

Report author: Ruth Coals

Head of Professional Standards and Principal Social Worker

Ruth.Coals@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk