

**Minutes of the Children's Corporate Parenting Board
Thursday, 18th April, 2024 at 6.00 pm
In Committee Room 3, The Council House,
Priory Road, Dudley, DY1 1HF.**

Present:

Councillor R Buttery (Chair)
Councillor S Ridney (Vice-Chair)
Councillors C Bayton, P Bradley, P Lee, K Lewis and D Stanley.

Dudley MBC Officers

K Graham – Service Director of Children's Social Care, S Thirlway – Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions, E Thomas – Acting Virtual School Head Teacher, J Mupombi – Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources, N Hale – Head of Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance, L Berry – Service Manager, M Brown – Service Manager (All Directorate of Children's Services), J Edwards – Public Health Manager (Directorate of Public Health and Wellbeing) and H Mills – Senior Democratic Services Officer (Directorate of Finance and Legal).

Also in Attendance

S George – Designated Nurse for Children and Young People in Care – Dudley

13. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors H Bills, S Keasey, E Taylor and M Westwood.

14. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

No substitute members were appointed for this meeting of the Committee.

15. **Declarations of Interest**

No Member made a declaration of interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in respect of any matter to be considered at this meeting.

16. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27th July 2023, be agreed as a correct record and signed.

17. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

18. **Action Tracker**

The Service Director of Children's Social Care gave a verbal update on the outstanding actions included on the Action Tracker and in doing so commented that a report on Care Experienced Apprenticeships was programmed to be considered later on the agenda, during which Members may wish to consider how best to meet with young people in the future.

It was further commented that whilst it had been the original intention for an analysis report on the success rate of young people who entered their own accommodation to be presented to this meeting, work was ongoing with the Housing Directorate and a housing theme agenda was proposed to be presented to a future meeting of the Board.

Arising from a comment made by the Chair, the shortage of adapted homes and bungalows would be requested for inclusion in the joint report of the Director of Housing and Communities and the Director of Children's Services on how services were working collaboratively to ensure Council homes for connected carers, special guardians or foster carers were fit for purpose. The need for a representative from the Housing Directorate to attend future meetings was also emphasised.

In referring to a site visit to the Tipton Road facility, it was commented that previous dates circulated had not been convenient for Members and that alternative dates would be circulated in the new municipal year.

Resolved

That the verbal update in relation to the Action Tracker, be noted.

19. **Municipal Report 2023/2024**

Members considered the annual municipal report for 2023/24, which was circulated to Members electronically prior to the meeting.

The Service Director of Children's Social Care introduced the report and in doing so suggested that the report would be a useful tool during the induction of new members to the board, as it provided detail in terms of the scope of the work that was considered, as well as demonstrating the impact.

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources presented the report in detail, referring to the areas that the Board had particularly focused on during the year, namely the impact on the progress of children in care and achieving permanence.

The impact of the Special Guardianship and Adoption No Detriment Policy, which was introduced in December 2020, was referred to in that 82 children had achieved permanency through these arrangements in the three years that it had been operating, with more carers coming forward. However, it was acknowledged that the target to increase the number of foster carers had not been achieved and there would be more focus to increase publicity for the recruitment of foster carers moving forward.

It was reported that during 2023/24, the Board had received regular updates on the health of children in care and care experienced young adults, with an improvement in performance for initial assessments being achieved as a result of scrutiny from the Board. It was also commented that the Integrated Care Board (ICB) had enlisted to the Care Leavers Covenant and would support care experienced young adults working within the NHS and that the offer of free prescriptions for care experienced young adults up to the age of 25 had been launched in April 2023.

In referring to the staffing within the Children in Care Team it was confirmed that there was now a permanent management team in place, with a permanent care experienced manager now in post.

Reference was made to the work undertaken by the Board in relation to pocket money savings and children's leisure membership. It was reported that the new savings scheme was effective from April 2024 and that provision of leisure passes had been effective from October 2023, with the addition of training opportunities made available for a National Pool Lifeguard Qualification, with the potential for employment in local leisure centres.

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources referred to the education of children in care and care experienced young adults, in particular referring to the Dudley Virtual School Post 16 Programme including Smashlife which had been a great success.

It was reported that emotional wellbeing and mental health had been a key focus for the Board since 2021. In July 2023 a Family Safeguarding Model was introduced which provided a whole family strength-base approach to child protection and resulted in working collaboratively with public health and NHS providers to deliver an integrated service across all safeguarding and support teams.

In referring to Fostering and Permanency, it was recognised that the Fostering Annual Report 2023/24 which was presented to the Working Group on 7th December, 2023, highlighted a number of challenges for the Fostering services. It was reported that there was now a full complement of staff and that the application for the Fosterlink programme had been successful.

Following the presentation of the report, Members made comments, asked questions and responses were provided where necessary as follows:-

- (a) Members commented positively on the opportunities available for young people to undertake training to gain the National Pool Lifeguard Qualification.
- (b) Members commented positively on the Smashlife programme, which had supported young adults, and which contributed to them successfully seeking employment, and welcomed a further update in the new municipal year.
- (c) Councillor P Lee referred to discussions at a previous meeting, where consideration was to be given to providing practical life skills to a young person on how to change a fuse, plug or light bulb and questioned if this had progressed.

In responding, the Chair commented that this had been delayed whilst an appropriate base was identified. However, a base had now been located and there was a need to develop a programme to provide young people with life skills.

The Service Director of Children's Social Care confirmed that a base on the Priory Estate in Dudley was launched in October 2023, with weekly drop-in sessions for Young People arranged. A copy of the programme would be shared with Members following the meeting.

- (d) Arising from comments and questions raised with regards to the emotional wellbeing and therapeutic support for children in care, care experienced young adults and carers, it was confirmed that carers could complete the assessment tool online via the Thrive Framework application, which would then generate a questionnaire for the relevant school to complete. Both assessments would be considered collectively to develop a plan and to identify where to focus efforts and prioritise resource. It was confirmed that this assessment and support would be provided swifter than a CAMHS referral, timeframes of which would be provided following the meeting. A case study following a young person on their journey and the support provided via Thrive would be presented to Members in a future Virtual School Report.

Resolved

- (1) That the Municipal Year Report 2023/24 be received and noted.

- (2) That a copy of the programme for the Young People's drop-in sessions held at the base on the Priory Estate, be circulated to Members following the meeting.
 - (3) That comparative data for the completion of Thrive Framework applications, with CAMHS referrals, be circulated to Members following the meeting and that a case study following a young person on their journey and the support provided via Thrive, be submitted to a future meeting of the Board.
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20. **Health of Children in Care Annual Report April 1st 2022 – March 31st 2023**

A report of the Designated Nurse for Children in Care Dudley was submitted to summarise the key areas of development and outcomes achieved by local health service providers during the period 1st April, 2022 to 31st March, 2023.

In presenting the report, the Designated Nurse acknowledged that the data provided was virtually 12 months out of date and would endeavour to present future reports earlier in the municipal year. The core health activities that required commissioning for children in care was referred to, together with the service model, which it was reported had been subject to a number of changes in service providers as of the 1st April, 2024 due to the Dudley Integrated Health and Care Trust no longer being a stand-alone Trust.

The Designated Nurse referred to the Dudley Care Leavers Passport, which had been designed in association with Care Leavers, to provide as much detail with regards to a young person's families history as possible. The passports had been received positively by Care Leavers and Foster Carers and were updated regularly following a health assessment, although it was recognised that further improvement was required to ensure that they were as comprehensive as possible.

The governance arrangements, the role of the Children in Care Workstreams Group and the timescales in which the Review of Health Assessments were completed were referred to. It was reported that there had been significant partnership working to improve performance in relation to health assessments, with more time allocated by paediatricians for appointments and an overflow clinic arranged weekly and it was therefore anticipated that there would be an improvement in performance data moving forward.

In referring to circumstances when a young person refused to undertake a health assessment it was commented that the allocated social worker would discuss the matter with the young person and encourage them to continue to attend the appointment so that they could discuss with the doctor directly the reasons as to why they wished to refuse the assessment.

It was recognised that there had been an ongoing issue with dental appointments/assessments since the Covid Pandemic, which was reflected nationally and that there had also been a drop in the uptake of immunisations, although it was reported that Dudley still performed higher than the West Midlands and the rest of the UK.

In referring to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), it was reported that the SEND Team, Children in Care Health Team, the Designated Nurse, and the Virtual School were working collaboratively to share information regarding health assessments and Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP), to ensure that there was a consistent approach in meeting the needs of the child. There was currently no evidence to share with Members on how successful the collaboration was working, although it was expected that this would be available and presented in future reports.

The key priorities for 2023/24 were presented and it was reported that the ICB had been enlisted to the Care Leavers Covenant and were looking to appoint care experienced apprentices to work across Health Services.

Arising from the presentation of the report, Members commented positively on the update and made comments, asked questions and response were provided where necessary as follows:-

- a) The Chair commented positively on the Dudley Care Leavers Passports, which would include information regarding genetic background and details of illnesses and treatments to help and support a young person to manage their own health needs.

- b) Arising from a question raised by Councillor D Stanley in relation to children/young people placed outside of the Borough and how this may cause detriment in terms of friend and family contact and if health assessments were undertaken, it was clarified that whilst it was a challenge, health assessments continued the same as if the young person lived within the Borough as a social worker continued to be allocated to that person and would travel on a regular basis to visit. It was also commented that some young people that were cared for outside of the Borough were sometimes placed with extended family.
- c) In referring to Care Experienced Children apprentices, the Chair suggested that consideration be given to inviting representatives to a future meeting to present in their own words their experience.

Resolved

That the Health of Children in Care Annual Report for the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023, be received and noted.

21. **Care Experienced Apprenticeships**

Members considered a report and received a presentation on apprenticeships for care experienced young people. The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance provided the background to the apprenticeship programme which commenced in September 2021 and consisted of 6 care experienced young people. The apprenticeships focussed on a Customer Services qualification with placements based across Children's Social Care Teams. It was reported that two young people had successfully completed their apprenticeship and had successfully secured internships with the Ministry of Justice.

It was considered that there had been benefits of the apprentices being placed within the Children's Social Care Team, although challenges were identified. An evaluation process had been completed, with a learning paper presented to Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) which proposed increased structure in terms of the arrangements for care experienced apprentices and to ensure opportunities were offered for placements across all Council Directorates.

It was reported that a Project Group was established in Spring 2023, which had recently been renamed Chances4YOUth and which met bi-monthly with representatives from Human Resources, Connexions and the Virtual School in attendance. The role of the project group was to review best practice findings and ensure that Dudley was fulfilling its corporate parenting responsibility ensuring that young people of the Borough had the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The work and outcomes achieved by the project group so far were outlined. It was reported that a recruitment exercise had been undertaken with 12 expressions of interest received. A swimming teacher qualification opportunity was also being promoted with four paid work placements available. It was further reported that there were currently care experienced young person apprentices working in Repairs Management and in Health Services.

The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance commented that a former care experienced young person, as a result of her positive experience, had undertaken her Social Worker training and recently been interviewed and successfully offered a position as a Social Worker in Dudley.

Arising from the presentation of the report Members made comments, asked questions and responses were provided where necessary as follows:-

- a) In referring to the Swimming Teacher qualification opportunities, Councillor P Bradley commented that Lifeguard Training was also available and should be promoted to care experienced young people.
- b) Councillor C Bayton referred to possible work experience and apprenticeship opportunities with building developers, as part of their social value model, in that young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) were employed to help develop new skills, and it was suggested that this be pursued with the procurement team to maximise opportunity.

Councillor P Bradley also commented on the possibility, as part of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 agreements, to ask businesses/developers to include the recruitment of care experienced young people or NEET apprenticeships/work experience as part of their social value aspect of their application.

The Service Director of Children's Social Care agreed to take the comments back to a future meeting of the Chances4YOUth project group, with opportunities for developers to attend the 'I want to be' event scheduled to be held on 9th July, 2024.

Resolved

- (1) That the work with Care Experienced Young People and the support to meet their employment aspirations, be received and noted.
 - (2) That the Service Director of Children's Social Care to refer the comments made by the Board with regard to pursuing apprenticeships and work experience opportunities with building developers within the Borough to the Chances4YOUth project group and to invite prospect developers to the 'I want to be' event scheduled to be held on 9th July, 2024.
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22. Permanence Activity Report

Members considered the annual report of the Director of Children's Services that outlined the activity of the service, in relation to achieving permanence for the children in care of the Local Authority.

The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance presented the report in detail, referring Members to paragraphs of specific importance. It was commented that a substantial amount of work had been undertaken to improve reporting measures as well as the practice approach in line with Restorative Practice. It was further commented that 90% of children were now more likely to have a permanence plan identified at their second review and were less likely to experience sequential placement moves, with formal matches with prospective foster carers made.

It was reported that improvements had been made in terms of timely agency decision making and permanency opportunities were repeatedly revisited, with the expectation that permanency planning meetings would take place every six weeks until permanency was achieved.

In terms of the data analysis reported for 2023, it was demonstrated that there was a solid approach to practice framework principles to reduce statutory intervention, as 39 children had returned to their parents or family when safe to do so.

A key priority for the service had been in relation to the formal matching of children in fostering arrangements to carers, with 22 matches achieved, which was reported to be double than the amount the previous year. The reduction in the number of Special Guardianship Orders over the preceding three years was referred to, which was considered to be due to a high number being secured when the no detriment policy was first introduced.

Arising from a question raised by the Chair in relation to whether a family member needed to be registered as a foster carer to provide care, the Service Director of Children's Social Care commented that conversations continued, and every effort was made to try to alleviate barriers when in the best interest of the child, permitted that the process was in accordance with the law.

The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance referred to the consistent practice guidance in terms of adoption activity; the permanency planning quality assurance which was a key consideration in monthly practice learning audits; the training offer that was continually offered for all qualified Social Workers; practice guidance; staffing and the next steps were outlined.

Arising from a question raised by Councillor S Ridney, it was confirmed that there were currently 573 children in care and that there had been an increase in the number of foster carers that wished to adopt, with the oldest child being 13 years old.

Resolved

That the report to inform strategic planning for Dudley children and young people in care population, be received and noted.

23. **Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8**

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

24. **Remarks by the Chair**

As this would be the last meeting of the municipal year and Councillor R BATTERY's final meeting as she was not seeking re-election, she expressed her thanks and gratitude to all for their support whilst she had been Chair of the Board and as Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education.

Members returned their gratitude to Councillor R BATTERY for her dedication and commitment and expressed their best wishes to her for the future.

The meeting ended at 8.12pm

CHAIR