

**Minutes of the Children's Corporate Parenting Board
Thursday, 27th July 2023 at 6.00 pm
At Saltwells Education Development Centre, Bowling
Green Road, Netherton, Dudley**

Present:

Councillor S Ridney (Vice-Chair) (In the Chair)
Councillors C Bayton, H Bills, J Foster, M Howard, L Johnson, P Lee, K Lewis
and D Stanley.

Dudley MBC Officers

R Jones – Virtual School Deputy Head Teacher, J Mupombi – Head of Children
in Care, Care Leavers and Resources, S Thirlway – Service Director of
Education, SEND and Family Solutions, A Wright – Virtual School Head Teacher
(All Directorate of Children's Services), J Edwards – Public Health Manager
(Directorate of Public Health and Wellbeing) and K Buckle – Democratic
Services Officer (Directorate of Finance and Legal).

Also in Attendance

S George – Designated Nurse for Children and Young People in Care – Dudley
Place and L Powell – Assistant Designated Nurse for Safeguarding (Dudley)
(Both Black Country Integrated Care Board)
D Deans – Service Manager Adoption@Heart

1. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of
Councillors P Bradley, R Buttery, E Taylor, and M Westwood.



2. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

It was reported that Councillor J Foster had been appointed as a substitute Member for Councillor E Taylor for this meeting of the Board only.

3. **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor K Lewis declared a pecuniary interest as an Early Years Provider and Councillor P Lee declared a pecuniary interest as he was engaged by the Local Authority as a Foster Carer.

4. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23rd March 2023, be agreed as a correct record and signed.

5. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

6. **Opening Remarks of Members of the Board**

Councillor D Stanley thanked M McFadden, the Corporate Parenting Co-ordinator for the professional manner in which she had served members of the Board for several years stating that she was high calibre first class Officer who was dedicated to her profession.

Members echoed their appreciation for the work conducted by M McFadden and the reason for her leaving the Authority.

The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions referred to the structural changes as part of the Children's Services re-design and undertook to take Members comments back to the Director of Children's Services.

Councillor J Foster raised concerns that neither the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education or the Deputy Leader were in attendance at the Board, although they were both Members and it was noted that both were on annual leave.

7. **Action Tracker**

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources reported that the Council's Maitland Road facility was being considered as a 'drop in' property for care experienced young people, however the facility required some adaptation and costings were being sought.

- (a) Councillor C Bayton again suggested that 14 St James's Road be considered as she was aware of the covenant on the building stating it be used for children and families.

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources responded, stating that both properties would be considered, however Maitland Road was more adaptable for the proposed purpose of use.

- (b) Councillor H Bills reminded those present that it had been agreed that a freezer would be provided together with ready meals at the drop in property.

There followed a discussion in relation to members exploring the possibility of reinstating the rounding up fund to use to support children in care and care experienced young people and it was agreed that the matter would remain with the Director of Finance and Legal Services for further consideration.

In relation to care experienced apprenticeships and details of the provision of apprenticeships for care leavers, the Head of Children in care, Care Leavers and Resources stated that all Council Directorates were being encouraged to employ care leavers as apprentices.

In relation to child Trust Funds, Councillor H Bills advised that parents/carers could complain to their banks if experiencing problems with releasing funds, and Councillor D Stanley suggested the use of the Castle and Crystal Credit Union for children in care saving schemes.

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources suggested that she should be the first point of contact should problems with releasing funds arise and referred to a report that had been prepared regarding matching funds and identifying those resources to provide savings for children in care. A report would be presented to the next meeting of the Board.

It was noted that the Service Director Children's Social Care was preparing a report on the scoping work conducted and the provision of a useful space, to include workshops for care experienced young people to access. together with the provision of community resources and the possibility of utilising the property adjacent to the Netherton Arts Centre.

Resolved

That the information reported on in relation to the Action Tracker, be noted.

8. **Adoption@Heart Adoption Service Report 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023**

The Service Manager of Adoption@Heart presented the report submitted, referring to the regional adoption agency objectives including meeting needs, promoting best practice, and providing early placements.

Adoption support was also provided, with adoption continuing to have a high profile within the service.

The Government had launched an Adoption Strategy which included areas of focus and in February 2023, Ofsted had produced an Inspection Framework, with five Ofsted inspections of the service taking place to date.

In relation to the regional context, there were five Regional Adoption Agencies represented and the key aims included in the report submitted were referred to. The placement figures for 2022/23 were reported together with details of the recruitment of adopters, the number of virtual events and the number of enquiries received by the service.

Members noted the details in relation to the marketing overview which had been keen to raise the profile of the service, with a number of national campaigns taking place including 'You Can Adopt' which focused on the children who waited longer (ie; older children, siblings, children with additional needs and children from ethnic minorities).

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBTQ plus) Adoption and Fostering week had taken place in March 2023 to encourage those from an LGBTQ plus community who were considering adoption and would like more information to come forward.

Regular meetings continued with the Communication Leads across the three Local Authorities and the Trust.

The adopter recruitment statistics contained in the report submitted were outlined and it was noted that in quarter four there had been an increase in adopter enquiries.

At the end of March 2023 there were 21 families approved and waiting compared to 43 families approved and waiting at the end of March 2022.

Detail of complaints and adoption panels contained in the report submitted, were referred to and panel membership.

Panel training and a Panel Development Day had taken place, with the panel meeting on 45 occasions during 2022/23.

There had been 40 adopters approved in the reporting period and feedback had been obtained from Adopters and Social Workers in relation to their experiences at panel.

One referral had been made to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM), with the IRM upholding the decision of Adoption@Heart.

There were 20 children subject to placement orders, but not yet placed for adoption. Timescales for the 20 children waiting since the granting of their Placement Orders were reported on, together with statistical data on those children.

It was noted that the number of Dudley children placed for adoption had decreased from 22 for 2021/2022 to 16 at the end of March 2023, however that decrease appeared to reflect the national trend as opposed to practice within Dudley.

The adoption timeliness figures were referred to.

There were four Dudley children placed in early permanence placements via Foster to Adopt, spread across the quarters and all were placed with internal adopters.

It was reported that the starting point for accessing the Adoption Support Service was an Assessment of Need and details of the number of those in a twelve-month period were noted.

Adoption@Heart were also responsible for Keep in Touch arrangements, offering support to adoptive parents and birth relatives however, due to staff absences a breakdown of 'Keep in Touch' exchanges by Local Authority/Children's Trust were not available and that would be rectified for the next annual report.

- (a) Councillor L Johnson requested confirmation of what age an older child would need to be in relation to those who waited longer (ie; older children, siblings, children with additional needs and children from ethnic minorities). In view of his employment, Councillor L Johnson also requested clarification on whether occupations would preclude a successful application to adopt.

The Service Manager Adoption@Heart stated a child would be assessed as those in the category of waiting longer at age of eight and employment would not prevent anyone from adopting, however it would be important to consider the background and potential family network support. Councillor L Johnson was invited to attend an information event.

It was also reported that Adoption@Heart undertook risk assessments should adopters have had previous complex issues.

- (b) Councillor S Ridney referred to the case where a female adopter became fearful and anxious, making the decision to end a placement, and the learning identified that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services had ended too quickly, and should have supported the children in their transition plan recognising their level of trauma, which raised concerns in relation to the service.
- (c) Councillor L Johnson questioned how many ethnic minority children were awaiting adoption.

The Service Manager Adoption@Heart undertook to provide a written response to the question.

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources reported that a 12-year-old Dudley child had been adopted in 2023 and it was acknowledged that a number of foster carers go on to adopt children in their care.

- (d) Councillor D Stanley requested clarification of how the service remained in contact following adoption.

The Service Manager Adoption@Heart advised that once an Adoption Order was made, both the child's and the adopter's Social Worker would withdraw and, in their place, would be an Adoption Support Social Worker being responsible for the child until the age of 21.

- (e) Councillor C Bayton referred to that content of the report relating to Inspections and more specifically Dudley receiving an overall requires improvement judgement, with recommendations in both Ofsted reports for Adoption@Heart to follow through which were contained in a business plan and requested a report back to the Board on those recommendations, with the requirement to see some improvement.

The Service Manager Adoption@Heart responded stating that she would report back to a future meeting on the recommendations referred to above.

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources referred to the effective work of Adoption@Heart, with several positives being identified. There remained the need not to lose memento in relation to early permanency and the need to stop utilising unregulated provision.

- (f) Councillor P Lee raised concerns in relation to adoption and fostering being a lengthy process and a hard route to navigate especially for those who had not had children of their own previously.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on the overall work within Adoption@Heart and the progress with adopter recruitment from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023, be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Service Adoption@Heart be requested to email to members details of how many ethnic minority children were awaiting adoption.

- (3) That the Head of Service Adoption@Heart be requested to submit a report to a future meeting of the Board on the improvements made within the Service following the recommendations made by Ofsted.
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9. **Savings Update**

The Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources provided a verbal update on savings for children in care and care leavers. It was confirmed that following research across the Black Country Authorities the amount needed to meet requirements had been calculated, with the next step entailing identifying a resource to provide healthy savings for children and undertook to present a report to the next meeting of the Board, which would be reflected in the 2024/25 budget.

Resolved

- (1) That the verbal presentation of the savings update, be noted.
 - (2) That the Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Resources be requested to submit a report to the next meeting of the Board in relation to savings for children in care and care leavers.
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10. **Informal presentation on the Post 16 Children in Care Review**

The Virtual School Head Teacher referred to the Post 16 programme, including the Virtual School integrating with the Department for Education (DfE) Pilot Project with the existing offer to inform future developments.

The Virtual School had worked with both Dudley and Halesowen Colleges in January 2023 to launch a programme for learning, training and employment pathways for all Post 16 children in care. The programme ensured that each individual was supported by, subject to need, a range of enhanced development offers.

The Virtual School Deputy Headteacher had introduced a Professionals Forum which was growing.

The Virtual School wished to ensure that young people in colleges had a key adult in those settings to ensure the stability of those learners.

The review and refinement of the current workforce allowed an expansion of the mentoring available.

The number of children in care attending both Dudley and Halesowen College were noted.

The 'Smashlife' programme had been launched and had grown over the weeks with 35 young people engaging to date. This had raised awareness of Social Workers and included participation across the college teams. The programme had enabled a lot of learning across the whole system with several key strands emerging with young people requiring the right skills to become independent. The programme would continue next year.

The 'I want to be' event was held on 18th July 2023 at Dudley College. The pilot event engaged over 50 young people and their Carers/Teachers, with the event providing several learning areas for future events and it was intended to involve all Council Directorates in future events.

There had been a Post 16 Conference for professionals across the phase at Halesowen College with over 80 delegates, which challenged those professionals to examine policies and procedures with Dudley College achieving a 100% retention rate for the current academic Year.

Work continued to support those not in education, employment, or training (NEET) with figures for that cohort remaining low.

There were exciting opportunities with a Pupil Premium Plus for post 16 children in care now being available.

The Virtual School would continue to meet with the Dudley College leadership team.

The Virtual School Head Teacher congratulated the Virtual School Deputy Head Teacher on all the work she had been involved with.

- (a) Councillor D Stanley referred to previous conversations with children in care when they had raised concerns with access to Social Workers and requiring someone to speak to.

The Virtual School Head Teacher reported that this was the reason for the introduction of pastoral support with post 16 children in care with those young people now having a key adult worker, in addition to the Virtual School Head Teacher and Connexions, and this was reflected in the 100% retention rate at Dudley College.

The Virtual School Deputy Head Teacher referred to a programme of work developed following consulting upon young people's needs, which included driving lessons, purchasing a motor vehicle, and how to buy a car that was suitable and roadworthy. Websites had been investigated and work was conducted with Dudley College in workshop settings on how to determine whether a motor vehicle had been in an accident, car insurance was also examined, with everyone who attended requesting that the workshops continue.

There were also conversations in relation to taking your first foreign holiday.

It was noted that further sessions would be organised on cooking meals that were healthy and on a budget. There had followed a suggestion in relation to acquiring an allotment to grow fruit and vegetables, with a piece of land in Dudley being identified for that purpose.

There was the ambition to organise 12 workshops for those from Year 8 onwards during the next academic year.

Following the 'I want to be' event, feedback had been provided when it had become apparent that young people wanted to know how they would enter their chosen profession and what subjects they should study at school.

The Apprenticeship Team had conducted a three-year review to inform future planning.

- (a) Councillor D Stanley referred to a previous programme of work entitled *Wheels on Wheels* whereby young people worked on two old vehicles to construct one roadworthy vehicle.

In response the Virtual School Deputy Head Teacher referred to a Cart Scheme that was facilitated by Connexions.

The Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions shared concerns with the stability of relationships with Social Workers, however he reported that 449 children had a Social Worker who had not changed and remained stable, confirming that Social Workers were accessible.

Resolved

That the information reported on the Post 16 Children in Care Review, be noted.

11. **Closing Remarks of the Chair and Members**

Councillor D Stanley requested the Chair to write a letter of thank you to M McFadden, the Corporate Parenting Co-Ordinator for all her help and support that she had provided to the Children's Corporate Parenting Board over the years.

The Chair referred to the impending retirement of A Wright the Virtual School Head Teacher and thanked him on behalf of the Board for all of the work done in the Virtual School and wished him well for his retirement.

A Wright thanked the Board for their best wishes and referred to Ms Emma Thomas who would be taking over his role to move forward with the good achievements during the next academic year.

Resolved

That Democratic Services prepare a letter of thank you to M McFadden, the Corporate Parenting Co-ordinator.

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

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

The meeting ended at 7.30pm

CHAIR