

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING - CABINET COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOMS 1/ 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, ON MONDAY, 29 APRIL 2013 AT 10.00AM

Present:

Councillor H J David – Chairperson

Councillor M E J Nott - Leader
Councillor D Sage - Deputy Leader
Councillor L C Morgan - Cabinet Member – Wellbeing
Councillor P J White - Cabinet Member - Communities

Invitees:

Councillor R D Jenkins
Councillor D B F White

Officers:

C Turner - Head of Safeguarding and Family Support
S Pryce - Head of Regeneration and Development
B Jones - Looked After Children Education Service Coordinator
K Williams - Adoption Team Manager
J Monks - Democratic Services Officer - Committees

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee expressed Members' disappointment that no Officers from other Directorates were present at the meeting and had not sent their apologies.

The Chairperson welcomed the invitees to the meeting.

29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gregory as he was unwell, and also Councillor D Hughes due to family commitments.

30 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor D B F White declared a personal interest under Item 4, as he is a Social Worker for Swansea Council.

31 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting - Cabinet Committee held on the 16th January 2013 were approved as a true and accurate record.

32 ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2012/2013

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support presented a cover report to update the Committee on the delivery of the Adoption Service within the Borough. The Annual Report, which is a requirement for all local authorities under the Adoption Act 2002, was attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

He advised that the number of children and young people being referred to the Adoption Service had significantly increased year on year in line with the national trend, and despite the increase, the size of the Adoption Team had remained the same. He reported that the Adoption Service in Bridgend was well established and one of the highest performing in Wales in terms of the number of children placed for adoption.

The Adoption Team Manager reported that in order to ensure that the team was meeting its targets internal local performance indicators were put in place. The standards were set in terms of achievements and last year, ambitious targets were achieved in excess of the previous year. She went on to explain that there was a shortage of adopters nationally, with on average seven children to every adopter, and in Bridgend, the 22 approved adopters had left a surplus of adoptive placements, which meant that some children were placed outside the Borough. Last year a total of 46 children were referred to the Service, but that number had increased to 58 children this year, 14 of which were referred in the first month of the year. She advised that this year's target would be a challenge to achieve; however she reported that the Team were proactive and flexible despite having no additional resources available.

The Cabinet Member - Communities asked for the reasons why prospective adopters had declined to go forward.

The Adoption Team Manager explained that most local authorities had experienced a decline in adopters and although Bridgend had also experienced a drop, there had been a flux of enquiries this year. She commented that the Adoption Service in Bridgend had such a good reputation, there was no need to advertise and they had also received enquiries from interested people outside the Borough. She explained three possible factors nationally for people declining to become adopters:

- Economic downturn, as adoption was expensive;
- IVF was now being offered to single women and same sex couples, which had impacted on the number of adopters across the UK; as the majority who had come forward were the result of failed fertility;
- The majority of adopters want to adopt babies, or younger children with no issues. However 99% of children had some issues.

She explained that the changes in the Court process meant that there had been an increase in the number of children under the age of 18 months being placed for adoption; with many being placed in care from birth. Although this meant that those babies had fewer issues, there was nevertheless uncertainty regarding residual issues when a child was so young, such as the mother being an alcoholic or drug addict, and the Team worked hard to support adopters and help them understand that placements were not straightforward.

The Deputy Leader commended the Team for the excellent improvements that had been made to the Service year on year. He referred to the review of the Children's Service in 2010 by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) and asked whether the Service was prepared for the next review.

The Adoption Team Manager advised that it was never possible to be totally prepared for such a rigorous inspection, as some areas of the service were not performing as well as others, such as counselling and the Intermediate Service - a mandatory service which was labour intensive, with a long waiting list. The priority was to appoint a Social Worker to those cases. She informed Members that the Adoption Service had also been supporting the Safeguarding Team for the last 10 months, as there were a significant number of LAC cases, and whilst this could appear to detract from performance, she advised that it had been beneficial in ensuring that children were not held up in the adoption process. It also

meant that Social Workers assigned to adoption cases, who could easily become less skilled around safeguarding issues, retained that skill base and were able to utilise that knowledge so that adopters were aware of the risks involved with LAC. She reported that there was still six weeks before the inspection and in that time those areas would be addressed.

The Cabinet Member – Children and Young People pointed out that the Service was just one area covered by the CSSIW, and he reminded Members that in the last inspection LAC and the Adoption Service's strengths had been highlighted in the CSSIW report. The Adoption Team Manager added that the Service had received a glowing report on its achievements and performance had continued to improve.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support reported that there was a strategic approach to developing the service into an Adoption and Permanency Team, alongside the Welsh Government's (WGs) plans to develop the National Adoption Agency through collaboration. He explained that Bridgend currently had a stand-alone Adoption Service, running parallel to the Fostering Team who had also achieved a glowing report from CSSIW, and the Team Manager for Fostering would be reporting on that service at the next meeting of the Committee.

The Adoption Team Manager explained that with the number of adoptions in the Borough increasing, there were alternative options such as Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and Residence Orders (ROs) which were on the increase. The frontline Social Workers also had a number of SGOs and ROs on their caseloads, but those Orders were not necessarily getting the focus they needed. Also, not everyone considered it to be a favourable option. She reported that the LAC Project Team, which was set up in 2007, continued to closely monitor the progress of such cases identified where alternative arrangements could be pursued to prevent the need for those children continuing to be looked after. Last year a Project Worker was appointed and was successful in placing 13 children permanently with their carers. A cohort of those children were subject to Orders with relatives, and had thus reduced the LAC population. The LAC Project Worker had been re-appointed and would be taking the current SGOs and ROs from the Safeguarding Team, allowing the Team to concentrate on other important areas.

The Cabinet Member – Children and Young People welcomed this initiative, as he believed the most important provision was to give those children some permanency in their young lives.

The Adoption Team Manager advised that when the National Adoption Agency came into being, all resources would be in one place, and this move would strengthen the service and enable the Adoption and Permanence Service to provide reports to the Committee. There were currently a total of 24 adoption services in Wales and the plan was to bring them all into one agency. She advised that the Service would not impact on the national agenda and at the moment they were both separate with capacity to manouvre resources to areas where there was the most pressure and need. She reported that the Adoption and Permanence Service had come under the scrutiny of both the WG and Central Government. As agencies were concerned about the suggestion of a National Adoption Service, the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) produced an outline plan, which consisted of a three tier model. She advised that there would inevitably be changes to the legislation, which would give that level of power an opportunity to intervene when adoption agencies failed to perform effectively. The Western Bay Health and Social Care (WBHSC) Programme is exploring the feasibility of developing further collaboration across Health and Social Care. The Chief Executives in the three Local Authorities (Swansea, Neath Port Talbot and Bridgend) and Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University (ABMU) Health Board are members of the WBHSC Programme Board. She advised that there would be a

number of issues as to how it is managed as one Authority, and both Bridgend and Swansea Councils had expressed an interest in hosting it.

The Deputy Leader commented that it was important for the public sector to consider what areas it would collaborate in, not just from a financial viewpoint, but also how it would affect constituents and provide improvements to services through collaboration, as Bridgend was committed to delivering an excellent adoption service.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support reported that there was already collaboration with the Western Bay Integrated Family Support Service (WBIFSS) Social Care Agencies and the three Chief Executives from Bridgend, Swansea and Neath Port Talbot Councils had met some time ago to form a Programme Management Board in order to set the initiatives. It had been stressed to them that the Adoption Service needed to be a part of that agenda and to that end a business case was being developed to bring about an adoption service jointly with the Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board (ABMU). If that proposal is accepted by the Board, he suggested that due to its importance, the report should come before the Committee as well as Cabinet. He added that the initiative would not be given any extra funding.

The Deputy Leader questioned how, as Corporate Parents in collaboration, the Authority would be able to fulfill the responsibility for children and young people in the Neath and Swansea areas.

The Adoption Team Manager explained that the service would be a local delivery and the Authority would maintain its responsibility only for those children within the Borough. The joint service was still evolving, but she advised that there were benefits to being in collaboration; if all three local authorities' adopters were linked, this would widen the scope for those children awaiting adoption as well as the potential for additional adoption support.

The Cabinet Member – Wellbeing asked for Officers' views on the newly formed appointment of Children's Commissioner and whether it was in fact a backward step for children and young people.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support advised that the general opinion was that it was too much too soon, with very little reference to the voice of the children. With minimal consultation having been carried out with those children who would be affected by the Bill, he was concerned that focus on those children's welfare was being lost. He emphasised that it was fundamental to the Authority to put children first rather than policy or money.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

1. Noted the Review of the Adoption Agency and its ability to meet the needs of those affected by adoption within the Borough.
2. That the report on the Business Case to bring about an adoption service jointly with the Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board (ABMU) be presented to the Committee at its next meeting.

33 QUALIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE ACHIEVED BY LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN FOR THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2011/12

The Looked After Children Education Service Co-ordinator presented a report to inform the Committee of the progress that had been made over the past three years in relation to educational support developments. The report also highlighted the qualifications achieved

by Looked After Children (LAC), as well as those young people who had recently left the care of the local authority. The education of children and young people who are looked after is seen as vitally important to the Authority, and it remained a challenge for all participating agencies to ensure those children and young people achieved their full potential.

She took Members through the report and described how 14 of those looked after young people had achieved a range of recognised qualifications. She described how one young person under a Youth Offending Order had achieved four GCSEs, despite the fact that under the Order he was excluded from school and had been provided with a tutoring package instead.

The Cabinet Member - Children and Young People commended the fact that young people had the ability and interest to continue their education and was encouraged by five of those youngsters who had been offered University places. He believed it was important for Members to consider the range of available opportunities open to those youngsters and that it should not be presumed they were only suitable for vocational jobs.

The Looked After Children Education Service Co-ordinator advised that 'after school' clubs were run twice a week for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils to address any difficulties LAC may be experiencing in education; staff worked with them throughout the year providing guidance on career options. She took on board the suggestion made by one Member to arrange visits to companies such as Fords, for them to experience a workshop environment.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support pointed out that many of those children had often had a history of abuse and neglect, which impacted on their learning ability, and for them to gain even one qualification was a significant achievement. He commended the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Team who often worked extended hours with those children.

The Cabinet Member - Children and Young People referred to the recent Achievement Awards Ceremony, held at the Grand Pavilion, Porthcawl and expressed the view of the Committee that it was a moving experience to witness how much those awards had meant to those children. More than 130 looked after youngsters were recognised at the Ceremony, many of whom had faced and overcome adversity in their lives.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the report on educational attainment and outcomes for Looked After Children in 2011/2012.

34 STATEMENTS OF PURPOSE FOR FOSTERING, ADOPTION AND CHILDREN'S HOMES

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support presented a report to seek the Committee's approval of the revised Statements of Purpose for the service areas in line with regulatory requirements. Each Statement of Purpose provides relevant information on the aims and objectives of each service area, and the services and facilities provided by the individual children's homes, or fostering and adoption service. Copies of the Statements were attached to the report. The Statements of Purpose are required for each of the following five areas:

- Adoption Services
- Fostering Services
- Baker's Way Short Break Service
- Newbridge House Transition Unit
- Sunnybank Complex Needs Unit

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support advised that the Annual Report complied with legislation and all Regulatory Services were required to produce a Statement of Purpose, signed off by the Corporate Parenting - Cabinet Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Committee approved the revised individual Statements of Purpose for the named service areas referred to in the report.

35 INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support provided a report in line with the Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance Wales (WAG 2006) which gave IROs the duty to monitor the responsible authority's performance in relation to Looked After Children and young people. The IROs also had the duty to prevent drift and delay for those children and young people. Within the guidance, IROs are expected to improve care planning and decision making and provide consistency in the responsible authority's approach. The report gave an overview of the role and function of the IRS service. He advised that due to an oversight, the Committee had not received annual reports on the service, but this had now been rectified, and the report was the second to come to the Committee.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support described how Bridgend was often compared with Newport and Neath Port Talbot Councils. Over the last six years, Newport had invested in early intervention strategies, and Bridgend were now doing the same through the Families First Programme. However, as it was still in the early stages, the results would not be seen for a couple of years when the service was embedded. He advised that the multi-agency early intervention had been proven to work, but with the increasing trend of children becoming looked after, further investment would be difficult to find. On the positive side, Social Services Improvement Agency had provided funds to participate in a study of the LAC population across seven local authorities and was due to be published in May, after which he would present it to the Committee.

He went on to describe the increase in the number of siblings coming into the care system, with six siblings from each of two families entering the system in the last two months. There were also more sibling groups being placed for adoption. He added that there were also more sibling groups being placed for adoption.

One Member asked if the 11 to 15 year olds remained in foster care.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support explained that it was necessary for all children who were looked after to have a permanent plan in place, usually for long term foster care, which worked out for a lot of children when they reached an age where they were beyond adoption. Those young people usually remained with their foster carers under a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) until they reached 18 or 19 years of age, and although the Order meant that they ceased to be LAC, there was still a cost involved. However, the benefit was that they no longer required a social worker.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the report and the two proposals detailed at Section 4 of the report.

1. Improve the quality of the experience of being looked after and the outcomes that the Authority assists looked after young people in achieving.
2. Ensure closer working relationships with the Just@Plus service to gather better information about the needs of the current 11-15

year old LAC cohort so that looked after exit strategies can be established.

36 OFFICER'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support tabled a briefing note which had been circulated to all his staff, containing information on planned operational and strategic developments across the service. He informed the Committee that he regularly communicated with staff through briefing notes and team meetings. He explained the reason he had highlighted this to Members was as a result of a recent publication in a local newspaper of a Serious Case Review, and stressed the importance of maintaining staff morale under such circumstances. He expressed appreciation at the support of Members during this time.

The Chairperson thanked him for the briefing note, which he suggested should be circulated to all elected Members.

The meeting closed at 12.10pm.