

**CABINET COMMITTEE CORPORATE PARENTING - THURSDAY, 8 APRIL 2021**

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CABINET COMMITTEE CORPORATE PARENTING HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 8 APRIL 2021 AT 14:00**

Present

Councillor NA Burnett – Chairperson

HM Williams  
CA Green

N Clarke  
D Patel

HJ David

J Gebbie

Apologies for Absence

RM James, JC Radcliffe, CE Smith and DBF White

Officers:

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Julie Ellams     | Democratic Services Officer - Committees         |
| Alex Fitzpatrick | Team Manager Placements                          |
| Lindsay Harvey   | Corporate Director Education and Family Support  |
| Steven Howell    | Group Manager Placements & Provider Services     |
| Mark Lewis       | Group Manager - Integrated Working               |
| Claire Marchant  | Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing |
| Mark Shephard    | Chief Executive                                  |
| David Wright     | Family Support Services Manager                  |

225. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Huw David declared a personal interest in item 4, “Update on the Establishment of a National Fostering Framework and Current Work in relation to In House Foster Care Provision” as he was a WLGA spokesperson involved in discussions around the National Fostering Framework appointed to the WLGA by BCBC, but had not been involved in recent years.

Councillor Nicole Burnett declared a personal interest in item 4, “Update on the Establishment of a National Fostering Framework and Current Work in relation to In House Foster Care Provision” as she was a member of the Foster Panel and had been appointed by BCBC.

226. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting dated 4 February 2021, be approved as a true and accurate record.

227. UPDATE ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL FOSTERING FRAMEWORK (NFF) AND CURRENT WORK IN RELATION TO IN HOUSE FOSTER CARE PROVISION

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing welcomed the opportunity to talk about fostering in Corporate Parenting Committee and highlighted that for Bridgend, the foster care service was an essential part of what the Council did to be good corporate parents. This year had been an extraordinary year, especially for the foster families and children. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing thanked foster carers for everything they had done throughout the pandemic, acknowledging them as unsung heroes for that period.

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In Bridgend the fostering service, led by the Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services, was part of a whole system approach to provision for children and young people. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing stated that they wanted to continue to grow the foster care service both in recruitment and also in retention and the figures around recruitment, the stability of placements and the retention of foster carers were encouraging.

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services presented a report, the purpose of which, was to update the Corporate Parenting Committee regarding the progress of work undertaken on establishing a National Fostering Framework in Wales along with updated information about Bridgend Foster Care service provision and the fostering service review and developments that were underway. He concurred with the comments made by the Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing and thanked the foster carers and the team supporting them in a particularly difficult year.

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services explained that the report followed on from previous information brought to the Corporate Parenting Committee by the Head of Services back in 2018. He outlined phase one, phase two and phase three where regional development managers were appointed throughout Wales to engage with the national work streams and coordinate plans for delivery in their areas. The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services outlined the current position and that since April 2019, Bridgend was part of Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional Partnership/Health Board. The Regional Development Manager post for this region was hosted by Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) CBC. To support the implementation of the National Fostering Framework across the region a strategic group had been established to provide overview and scrutiny in order to monitor the performance of the NFF work-streams at a local and regional level. The strategic group was supported by an operational group to deliver the identified priorities and a regional Work Programme had been agreed that supported the National Fostering Framework.

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services was pleased to report that as of the 1<sup>st</sup> April the Regional Front Door went live and they had already taken phone calls on behalf of Bridgend County Borough Council with enquires from people who wanted to be foster carers and there had been a first visit to a new prospective foster carer. The next area of work was to develop a regional 'Local Authority Offer' and all three LA's had completed the national core offer template designed by the Regional Development Manager, who collated and highlighted consistencies/differences across the region. Work had been undertaken to develop a new HR policy for each LA with a view to establishing them as "Fostering Friendly Organisations".

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services explained that fees and allowances was a key area to harmonise payments for all foster carers. All three LA's had linked with the national working group for this area of development and were in the early stages of considering options that would support a Regional approach to payment of carers.

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services concluded by saying that the collaboration across the region was very positive in terms of quarterly meetings, representation from each LA in regional task and finish groups, the regional strategic group and the launch of the operational group bi-monthly meetings.

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services explained that in 2018 it was proposed that 6 Transitional Foster Careers would be recruited who would act as a step-down for young people coming out of the residential units before being placed in long-term family or independent placement. The scheme was only successful in recruiting 3 Transitional Foster Carers who were approved at the beginning of 2019 and this did

have an impact upon the overall success. In January 2021 a review of this scheme was undertaken, with one of the previous transitional foster carers' central to and informing the discussions/decisions and they were currently seeking to recruit an additional 5 carers.

The Deputy Leader referred to the 6 transitional foster carers and asked what would be done differently this time and how confident the team was that the positions would be filled. The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services advised that there would be a clear policy in place which supported the work of the transitional foster carers, so they could understand what to expect from the service in terms of what support would be available and how it would be delivered. Some previous feedback was that foster carers who came into the role had been told one thing and then they were asked to do a slightly different role eg, the carer believed they would only have a child placed with them over long introductory periods where they had would get to know the child first but were asked to look after children with very short notice and in an emergency. Some of the support such as respite wasn't available to them.

The Deputy Leader thanked the Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services for his comprehensive answer and asked how support could be given without a full team. What was being done to attract the social carers to come into the service, were payments competitive with neighbouring authorities and what was the difference between the in-house service and the independent sector?

The Group Manager - Placements and Provider Services replied that having a full team of transitional foster carers was significant as was having a full staff team. Since Nov 2019 they had funding for four reunification workers as part of the support which was in addition to what was there previously. In terms of foster carers, the money paid to the foster carers would not be the same as an independent fostering agency. However, support to undertake the role played a significant part in attracting foster carers and it was important to make sure that the foster carer felt like part of a professional team.

The Corporate Director – Social Services and Wellbeing added that having a regular break from foster caring, given the intensity of the work, was important. This was not a standalone service and was part of the overall remodelling linked into what was done through Maple Tree and the workforce there. A behavioural analyst had been recruited which made a real difference in terms of the practical support on how to deal with situations. All these things would be critical to make sure that it was fair financially for foster carers.

The Team Manager – Placement Services gave a presentation, "Bridgend Foster Care update". She explained that in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 there were 142 initial enquiries, they undertook 40 initial visits, they commenced 21 fostering assessments and approved 8 foster carers. They achieved a conversion rate in BCBC of 5.6% compared to 2.6% for RCT and 6.5% for Merthyr. In 2021 there were restrictions on movement due to the pandemic and the team adapted how they worked with carers as part of their assessment process undertaking virtual assessments and by using smartphones and technology. No assessment was approved at appeal without at least one face to face assessment.

The Team Manager – Placement Services outlined changes to pre-approval training which was an extremely important opportunity to make sure the foster carers were aware of the challenges and issues they might deal with and the big rewards that came with fostering. She outlined Fostering Care Fortnight, the Fostering Network's annual two week national campaign to raise the profile of fostering and played a video of a young lady who was previously looked after and still resided with the same foster carer under a 'when I am ready' arrangement.

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The Team Manager – Placement Services presented the findings for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 when they received 104 initial enquires, undertook 43 initial visits, commenced 27 Fostering Assessments and approved 16 foster carers. This was an increase in approvals by 100% and an increased conversion rate of 15.3%.

The Team Manager – Placement Services provided details regarding the Connected Persons assessments of which 53 had commenced. He added that looking ahead, they had learned the value of personal stories and were working to identify carers and young people to be part of recruitment campaigns. They would continue to use social media heavily within campaigning activity. The National Foster Wales campaign would further promote the benefits of local authority foster care to enable them to build on this foundation and a regional approach to recruitment would enable them to share best practice and further improve screening at initial visit stage.

The Chairperson thanked the Team Manager – Placement Services and the Group Manager – Placements and Provider Services. She also thanked the foster carers and everybody involved with the foster teams.

A member commended foster carers for doing a wonderful job. She felt the film was very touching and showed a sense of belonging and thanked the Team Manager – Placement Services and the team for all the work they were doing.

The Chief Executive thanked the Team Manager – Placement Services for the powerful presentation. He was impressed by taken by the engagement and success of stories and social media and was interested to know what the Council could do across all its resources and staff to assist to build on the success they had already had.

The Team Manager – Placement Services advised it would be helpful if people could share their post on social media and ensure the settings were set to public. She would also be happy to go into different environments and deliver presentations about fostering. She had given a presentation at Parc Prison and from this, someone did come through who was assessed and approved to become a foster carer.

The Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing added that when refreshing the Corporate Parenting Strategy it should take into account how the whole council could contribute and what would make a difference for foster carers.

The Group Manager – Placements and Provider Services acknowledged that the Communications Team had done some fantastic work to support the team and their continued support would be appreciated. He challenged members to identify individuals and point them in the right direction and encourage them to become a foster carer in Bridgend.

The Chairperson requested more training for Councillors to help recruit within their environment and what to look out for and information that they could share specifically with individuals.

The Leader congratulated the team on their performance whilst maintaining high standards and a minimum of one visit to a home. The Leader asked if there were any figures on reunification and stability that they could use as a bench mark against other authorities. He asked if they had connections with local churches and positive minded people who could provide stable caring homes for children. He also asked if there was support for siblings and birth children of foster carers. They were an important part of the family environment and some placements had broken down due to the relationship not working with birth children.

The Team Manager – Placement Services confirmed that she had met with three priests within the area who were really enthusiastic and supportive and happy to work with them

in the future. They may also have social media channels that could be explored. With regards to the birth children of foster carers, some excellent work had been done in that area and there was a dedicated social worker in the post who had previously arranged various activities/trips with them and part of the action plan was to start these activities when safe. She confirmed that the feedback from carer's children had been really good and they shared the same value base as their parents and that were committed to the fostering environment. The other consistent feedback was through the support given by the supervising social workers, where the household was discussed and not just carers or children. Extending the training provision to online had enabled the children of foster carers to also access that training and build on their knowledge.

In terms of the regional partners and performance with regards to reunification and placement stability, she advised they would need to look at the National Fostering Framework Returns for evidence. It was something that could be looked at and was very much in keeping with regional approach, sharing practices, and looking to improve things as a region and targeting areas.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations asked about where the voice of the looked after child would fit in with the restructure and how the experience of the child would shape the service going forward. Also in relation to housing, they had identified certain characteristics such as relationship status as a potential barrier to fostering and she asked if housing had been identified as a potential barrier and if something could be done with housing partners to help get around it.

The Corporate Director – Social Services and Wellbeing explained that in terms of the voice of children and young people, a Corporate Parenting Officer post was being created and that post would have a particular role in terms of engagement and participation across all the children looked after and care leavers. They would be working across partnerships and different departments and with the third sector, with RSLs and with health and this was reflected in their corporate parenting work.

The Team Manager – Placement Services agreed that housing had been a challenge particularly when accessing a connective person as part of court proceedings. It was not appropriate to not place a child with someone who had the capacity to provide a permanent home to a child where the only issue was access to housing. It was tackled case-by-case and all the housing agencies were supportive with regards to converting rooms etc.

The Chairperson added that this was really positive and agreed that housing could be a barrier to those that wanted to foster and that it would be helpful to have support in place.

**RESOLVED:** The Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting noted the updated information contained within the report and supported the further development of the Bridgend Foster Care service as set out in the report.

**228. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN IN EDUCATION**

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained that the purpose of the report was to provide an update on the support for Looked After Children in Education (LACE) across the local authority. The report specifically focussed on the support provided to Bridgend's Looked After Children for the school year 2020-2021.

The Group Manager, Family Support provided some background to the current position and then explained that as at 19 March 2021, there were 271 statutory school age pupils who were looked after by the local authority, 64 of these were educated out of county.

The role of supporting LACE sat within the Education Engagement Team (EET) and this provided a single point of contact for all agencies including schools, Children Social Care (CSC) and other services for information, advice, training and guidance for vulnerable learners including LAC. The team delivered training to the schools and remained a point of contact for the schools designated teacher relating to Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and any other issues presenting for LAC. The EET worked with each school cluster to develop a clear and coherent plan to support LAC via their PDG. This included the appointment of a school-based counsellor to acknowledge the impact of becoming looked-after, could have on learning, Learning Support Officers (LSO) delivering 'Thrive' training to promote educational attainment for looked-after children and mental health and trauma training for staff to consider how behaviour could present itself within school for children who had entered the care system.

The Group Manager, Family Support explained that to support LAC, the local authority via EET had access to PDG funding. This year, the funding had been used to offer additional education to those looked after children most in need of extra support. To date, 33 looked after children had accessed additional tuition via a school teacher over the course of the pandemic. This support ranged from one hour a week to six hours per week dependent on their needs. Support had focussed on literacy, numeracy and practical skills such as forest schools and online music projects. The EET also delivered training to schools and partners in respect of the impact of trauma and how this could affect a child's ability to engage in learning. The team facilitated mental health first aid training to schools in response to the impact on LAC emotional wellbeing. He added that PDG plans produced by schools in Bridgend had been noted in a recent Estyn thematic review regarding good practice with looked-after children (eg tracking of pupils and dedicated transition work). In particular, Brynteg School and Penybont Primary School were identified as implementing good practice models for those learners. The local authority had also been central to the development of work experience and apprenticeship opportunities for LAC. This was developed as a pathway for those learners leaving education in the summer with the aim of securing an employment opportunity. All Year 11 looked after learners were presented with the opportunity to engage in work experience over their summer holidays.

The Group Manager Family Support explained that with the impact of COVID-19, multi-agency working had been key to ensure that all children continued to access education during this period. This included the opportunity to access on site provision within schools when national restrictions were being implemented. Digital equipment was provided for those learners who had required it to assist with home learning. There was regular monitoring and liaison by schools and children's social care to ensure looked after children's needs continued to be met during the pandemic. All looked after children were considered for on site school provision, however, emphasis and priority was given to those children in foster placements that were at risk of placement breakdown. Since January 2021, on average, 50 looked after children were accessing on site provision (primary school age through to Year 8) each week. These children were those deemed by schools, social care and foster carers to be most in need of accessing on site support during the height of the pandemic.

The Group Manager Family Support explained that moving forward, improvements would be made to the PEP process for look after children via EET. This work would focus on the plans being tailored to be more child centred and reviewed consistently within LAC reviews. Joint work between children's social care and Education and Family Support was being undertaken in this area. Ongoing support would be offered to schools in respect of PDG to include the re-introduction (following Covid-19 restrictions) of the termly designated LAC leads forum facilitated by EET. The aim of this was to share good practice across schools in Bridgend with each other.

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The Group Manager Family Support concluded that there had been lots of good work in challenging times for all pupils but in particular for LAC. This area would continue to be a challenge with the transition back into education and they would continue to do what they could to support those children.

The Chairperson thanked the Group Manager Family Support for the report and asked him to extend the Committee's thanks to the teams for the way they had reacted in difficult circumstances.

The Deputy Leader thanked the Group Manager Family Support for the report and referred to section 4.7 of the report and the ultimate goal of getting young people into meaningful employment. He asked what range of work experiences were offered and how children were placed, was there interaction with them and did they have the opportunity to go to a preferred area. He replied that yes, opportunities were tailored to young people to allow them to consider more options. The Family Support Services Manager

referred to the importance of multi-agency working and that in terms of the work experience offer this was through joint working with children's social care, Post 16 service, youth development, Inspire to Work and HR. Opportunities ranged from care work, hospitality to business administration and depended on where the young person said they had an interest. For 2019/20 they had 24 year 11 LAC and 14 were identified as being in schools in Bridgend. Of those 7 demonstrated an interest and went on to work experience placements. One young person then took up a business administration apprenticeship within the local authority.

The Deputy Leader asked if COVID had affected the provision of the scheme. The Family Support Services Manager replied that they were in the process of talking to the year 11 young people and exploring opportunities. They were trying to establish exactly what could be done given the restrictions with social distancing etc. The Chairperson added that having teenage children herself, developing that work ethic, routine and confidence building were all key to a young person's future development.

A Member said that she appreciated they had had a very difficult year and asked if the gap in achievement between LAC and other children was consistent across all secondary schools. She asked which schools were doing most for their LAC. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained that it was very challenging drawing on the data for a particular cohort such as LAC because they did not have data particularly from last year and this year would continue to be challenging. The last time there was a national comparison around the performance of LAC was around 2015 so it was difficult to compare the national picture. A statutory requirement was for local authorities to look closely at how schools deployed different resources for example if schools were in receipt of the Pupil Development Grant and the Looked After Child element of that they were required to publish what they did with those learners. Officers would work closely with those schools to ensure the resources were being deployed effectively and that best practice was shared across schools. They were trying to close the gap across schools to make sure there was more consistent performance. The Chairperson explained that she thought the question was more to do with identifying schools at a local level. Brynteg had been identified as a school with good practice and asked if it was being shared with other schools. The Group Manager Family Support replied that there were variations in terms of attainment across secondary schools but it started from a good point in terms of the schools engaging. Clearly LAC would be at different points depending on when they came into the system so there would be variations. Good practice was shared across the schools. A young person's support plan was developed to maximise their performance and ensure the best possible outcome both in terms of educational engagement and practical examples such as being ready

for adult life. The Member confirmed that she was not looking to name and shame but for confirmation that good practice was shared.

The Leader asked if officers were confident that all LAC had proper digital access in terms of their own individual devices. At the start of the pandemic they were keen to ensure every home had access to a device but this could create problems if the device was shared. Also he asked if all young learners were part of the book literacy scheme where children received books from the Trust and how successful this had been. He asked if LAC were encouraged to sign up to libraries and take part in some of the activities that took place such as the Lego Club and the Coding Club, activities that had taken place since the pandemic. The Group Manager Family Support replied that yes, all LAC had been offered a laptop and if required, a dongle to help with connectivity issues. The Book Club was still running and was overseen by the Education Engagement Team and figures could be provided if required. Through the Youth Justice Management Board arrangements, they were looking to work with staff in the library service to encourage young people to sign up. There were significant numbers and they could encourage this although there could be a logistical problems. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support said that this was an area they were proud of in Bridgend and that over the last year they had worked closely with Welsh Government and the families of 23,000

Learners of which 2,000 learners were identified as being at risk of digital exclusion at the start of the pandemic. Over the last year supported by Welsh Government funding they had now distributed over 6000 devices, often to multiple recipients within the same household. It was not just laptops but also those not having access to the internet with more than 310 supportable broadband devices also distributed, enabling children across the county to have unlimited access for education resources. This was something they were very pleased with and currently there were no outstanding requests for additional kit. The Chairperson agreed it was very positive and added that the authority was committed to its socio-economic duties so it was really important to ensure the learners weren't discriminated against in any way.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations asked with regard to literacy and numeracy, why only 33 of the 271 had accessed additional tuition during the pandemic. Why was there such a big discrepancy between the figures? The Family Support Services Manager replied that the authority had used the PDG funding to look at the impact the pandemic had on learners and in particular the LAC cohort to identify those that required additional support in addition to what the school was already doing. That offer would continue moving forward, liaising with schools to make sure they were aware that the support was available.

The Leader suggested that if the Summer Reading Challenge was being organised again this year, it would be a fun way of engaging children in learning with lots of activities. It was an opportunity for some to help narrow that gap and do some reading over the summer. He suggested that they consider that initiative specifically because it was a fun and engaging way of getting children more interested in reading. The Chairperson added that introducing children to audio books could be worth exploring in future.

**RESOLVED**

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the content of the report.

229. **URGENT ITEMS**

None

The meeting closed at 16:45