

Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting: 29 September 2020

Report Title: Corporate Parenting Update Report

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Kathryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

Senior Officer: Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People

1. Report summary

- 1.1. This report will advise the Corporate Parenting Committee of how the service are delivering the priorities for cared for children and care leavers which are clearly set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy.
- 1.2. This is the second report to the Committee following the Covid-19 restrictions that were imposed in March 2020 and will provide further information about the impact of the national pandemic for cared for children and care leavers.

2. Recommendation/s

- 2.1. Corporate Parenting Committee is asked to:
 - Note the contents of the report.
 - Provide support and challenge to the local authority's actions in respect of the report.

3. Reasons for Recommendation/s

- 3.1. The Corporate Parenting Committee is an advisory group to the Cabinet and, as such, needs to be aware of any national or local issues that are likely to impact on cared for children and care leavers. The Corporate Parenting Committee needs to be able to scrutinise and challenge performance to improve outcomes for cared for children and young people.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. None; this is an update report.

5. Background

- 5.1. This report provides an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the last report which was presented on the 14th July 2020. The lived experiences for some of our cared for children and care leavers have continued to be affected by the impact of the Covid-19 in areas such as education and employment and planned transitions to more permanent homes.
- 5.2. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 for Children's Social Care services has been in place since the 6th April 2020 and are intended to remain in place until the 25th September 2020. A review of the amendments is currently taking place and it is likely that the date will be extended for a small number of the regulations. The Government has said that, subject to consultation, it plans to extend the regulations for areas such as virtual visits, the frequency of Ofsted inspections, and medical reports required for adoption panel, by implementing a statutory instrument to be laid before Parliament 21 days before it comes into effect. This amendment has enabled local authorities to adapt traditional working practices in order to safeguard all involved from the risks of Covid-19 whilst continuing to undertake statutory social work.
- 5.3. As previously reported, in the early stages of the pandemic, virtual visits were undertaken to our cared for children and care leavers where this was assessed to be safe, however we very quickly returned to our statutory obligations. During this period all children and young people's needs were assessed individually, as were the risks to our frontline practitioners, in determining whether it was necessary to continue to undertake virtual visits. The current position in relation to our visiting frequency is that 80% of our visits are being done face to face with the remaining 20% occurring virtually for Covid-19 risk assessed specific issues.
- 5.4. Children and young people who are cared for by Cheshire East Council live in a variety of different homes with different types of carers depending on their assessed needs. As of the 2nd August 2020: 118 children live with in-house foster carers and 50 of these children have been matched to live within these families until they are adults. 152 children live with external foster carers and 53 of these children are matched to live in these families until they reach adulthood. Where

children and young people are not permanently matched, the Court and the local authority are identifying long term plans for them or family finding for the most suitable long term homes. In addition there are 39 children who live in residential childrens homes and a further 7 children who live at residential schools. We also have 27 children who live in supported accommodation as they prepare for their transitions to adulthood. The remainder of our cared for children population live with their parents or a relative or family friend and are the subject of an interim care order or care order and the local authority shares parental responsibility to safeguard the needs of the children. Where a child continues to live within their family network they have a clear plan for the ending of social care involvement.

- 5.5. During the Covid-19 period we did experience a rise in the number of cared for children being cared for in residential childrens homes as a result of a lack of internal and external fostering provision however as a service we are clear that where children can be cared for within foster homes this should happen and so for each child where there is a plan to step back into foster care this will be achieved for them in a timescale that is right for them.

Pledge 1 - Being a Good Corporate Parent

- 5.6 Cheshire East Council committed to the pledges of the Corporate Parenting Strategy at full council on the 13th December 2018. It is the responsibility of all corporate parents across the council to consider the needs of our children and young people and advocate for how services can be designed, delivered and crucially influenced by what they need.
- 5.7 We must, particularly at this time, look to prioritise our cared for children and young people and care leavers where we know they are likely to have experienced the pandemic in a detrimental way. Some of these known areas are in relation to access to employment and training, mental health services and social isolation. Officers are focused on how we think creatively across the council to ensure that these young people are at the forefront of our minds to provide them with every opportunity to continue to be prioritised as we move into recovery from Covid-19.
- 5.8 Officers and members are keen to reestablish plans for frontline visits to take place across the service and the menu of options will be presented to members at committee on the 29th September 2020.

Pledge 2 – We will improve education, employment and employment outcomes

- 5.9 The educational and employment experiences of our cared for children and care leavers was significantly disrupted from March 2020 to the end of the school term in July 2020. Initially, in line with government guidance the local authority took the decision that it was in children's best interests to remain at home, however as the guidance around children safely returning to school emerged Cheshire East Council took the approach to prioritise the reintegration of cared for children back into school with a focus on transition groups. This resulted in many children returning to school and having a positive experience, crucially preparing them for a more permanent return to school in September 2020.
- 5.10 In preparation for the beginning of the academic year in September 2020, frontline teams and the virtual school worked closely with schools and educational settings to ensure that Personal Education Plans for children were targeted and focused on responding to the 'gaps in learning' that have been experienced by our cared for children. It will be necessary within the first half term for there to be a focus on supporting cared for children back into school, acknowledging their potential worries and anxieties and also seeking to continue to be ambitious corporate parents for them and for these ambitions to be actioned within up to date Personal Education Plans. In addition, enabling our cared for children to access any necessary transport to their educational setting has also been planned and individual plans have been put in place to ensure that transport to school does not act as a barrier to attendance.
- 5.11 The experiences of our care leavers are of equal significance where we observe a varied outcome; one care leaver achieved a First Class Honours Degree and another lost their employment because of redundancies within their place of work. In July, 54% of care leavers were in education, training or employment (EET). This is out of a population of 197 care leavers (18-24 year olds). This is a shift in direction where we are seeing care leavers lose employment opportunities and apprenticeships. However the service are already targeting our most vulnerable young adults with an autumn and winter NEET programme set up with young people enrolled, and through the Journey First Programme we will be able to target further care leavers who have struggled during this period and support them back into employment. It is however worthy to note that in addition to the 10 care leavers currently at university, a further 4 have places secured for September 2020. One young woman in particular has

shown resilience and commitment to Cheshire East residents in working in a local care home for elderly people and supporting them through this crisis. Fantastic achievements all round.

Pledge 3 - Achieving Permanence and Keeping Children Safe

- 5.12 Achieving permanence for cared for children and care leavers is our service priority and we have a clear plan to ensure that the children who do require local authority care receive this in a timely way and that the care they receive is excellent. For children who no longer need to be in care, we are ensuring that their plans are progressed without delay so they can exit from care.
- 5.13 There are some children who have experienced delays in their care plans as a result of Covid-19 restrictions such as children transitioning to adoption or achieving adoption in the Court arena. It is positive to note that the barriers have now been resolved and children are now moving forward with achieving their plans of permanence with the first Adoption Order of the year being achieved in August 2020.

Bespoke Childrens' Homes

- 5.14 All four commissioned childrens homes in Cheshire East are open and Ofsted registered and are providing care to six Cheshire East children. Five of these children were previously cared for in external provision and were living outside the borough, and a return to their home community is a positive one. There is a clear trajectory for how we will support the homes to be fully occupied however this need to be done at the pace that is right for children. We have a variety of services linked to Bespoke such as Speech and Language Therapists, mental health services and the virtual school who are all supporting ambitious outcomes for the children in our care.

Adoption Counts

- 5.15 Cheshire East have been in regional arrangements with Adoption Counts since 2017 where success in the partnerships is evident in children achieving permanence via adoption and the timeliness of achieving these plans. Officers have been working in partnership with Adoption Counts and are seeking an 'in principal' decision to move to permanent arrangements within the year, subject to TUPE consultation and agreement of the Intergrated Service Agreement.

Pledge 4 – We will Improve Health and Wellbeing Outcomes

- 5.16 Our cared for children and young people and care leavers have not received a 'lesser' or reduced service as a result of Covid-19. Some the the assessment of their need has been undertaken virtually where appropriate and currently assessment clinics are now operating face to face once again. Intitial Health Assessments completed by community paediatricians improved from 23% in Quarter 4 2019-20 to 67% in Quarter 1 2020-21. Review Health Assessments continued to be good at 85% in Quarter 1 from 80% in Quarter 4. The partnership are exploring how we can offer a varied service going forward as for some young people, having options about how we assess and meet their health needs has been of benefit to them.
- 5.17 The emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of our cared for children and care leavers has been an issue raised throughout the pandemic and is a current focus for our Lead Nurse for Cared for Children and Care Leavers, Shan McPharland. We seek to make the offer to children and young people much more visable to them as we continue in our recovery phase and challenge providers to ensure that cared for children and care leavers are prioritised in the delivery of their service.

Pledge 5 – We will prepare young people for Adulthood

- 5.18 It is notable that during the period from the beginning of April 2020 to date, the care leavers service have seen an increased need to support care leavers who are 21 and over (often described a returners) which is an increase of approximately 20%-40%. This equates to 23 individuals and 15 remain open to the service for ongoing support.
- 5.19 The education, employment, training experiences of care leavers have been described in elsewhere in this report however the accommodation needs of our care leavers also remain a priority. The Local Authority are currently in the process of recommissioning the 16+ supported accommodation offer which has been co-produced with care leavers.

National or legislative changes

- 5.20 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulation 2020 were introduced to provide flexibility in the statutory obligations of local government relating to cared for children, adoption and fostering. They have been the subject of criticism due to concerns

that there has been a dilution of responsibility towards the most vulnerable children in our society, bringing in through the back door many of the provisions first proposed by the original draft of the Care Act 2014. This has included criticism from the Children's Commissioner. Nationally, Local Authorities have used the flexibilities sparingly and where this is in the best interests of children. There is no evidence to suggest a child has been harmed as a result of the flexibilities being used.

5.21 The approach in Cheshire East remains as it always has been, to promote best practice to achieve the best outcomes for the children and young people in our care. Set out below is the response to the changes and how we foresee them being used in Cheshire East, however the underpinning principles will be as follows:

- The initial assumption is that we will always seek to act within the current legislation as this underpins best practice.
- Where variation is required this will only be on the basis of a best interests decision for a child.
- A variation request that sets out the circumstances for the child, the variation being requested and impact for the child, and review point will be provided to the relevant senior manager for agreement.

5.22 A consultation has recently taken place regarding the amendments and it is expected that for a small number of regulations the agreed flexibility will be extended past the 25th September 2020.

6. Implications of the Recommendations

6.1 Legal Implications

6.1.1 There is a strong possibility that the referenced Regulations will be extended in part beyond 25th September 2020 subject to consultation but only for a small number of issues as highlighted above. For the sake of clarity, Parliamentary Under Secretary Vicky Ford indicated an intention that the continuing Regulations will be:

- The requirement for a medical report to become a foster carer or adopter from a GP.
- The provision for virtual visits but noting provisions regarding the frequency of visits are intended to lapse.
- The frequency of Ofsted inspections.

6.1.2 The majority of the Regulations will however expire as planned on 25th September 2020. There is a need to ensure as outlined above that any choice to use this remaining flexibility is documented and that caution is used. The Local Authority's other obligations will therefore be required to be followed from 25th September.

6.2 Financial Implications

6.2.1 There are no financial implications or changes needed to the MTFS as a result of the recommendations of this report.

6.3 Policy Implications

6.3.1 Cheshire East is ambitious and committed to ensuring it is a great place to be young and every child has the best start in life. This is demonstrated through the Council's core priorities that people live well and for longer and have the life skills and education they need to thrive. These priorities are supported and driven through the Children and Young People's Plan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategic Plan. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy has a clear vision that our cared for children and care leavers are safe, happy, healthy and achieve their full potential.

6.4 Equality Implications

6.4.1 Cared for children and care leavers can be a vulnerable group because of their experiences and so the impact of Covid-19 could mean further marginalisation.

6.5 Human Resources Implications

6.5.1 HR and Public Health have been supportive of officers in ensuring that robust risk assessments are in place and available to staff in undertaking their duties.

6.6 Risk Management Implications

6.6.1 Cared for children and care leavers are a vulnerable group that are at risk of a number of factors, including poor education and training, health, safeguarding and transition into adulthood; the Corporate Parenting Strategy prioritises these areas.

6.7 Rural Communities Implications

6.7.1 There are no direct rural communities' implications of this report.

6.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

6.8.1 The contents of this report have implications for cared for children and care leavers, who are some of Cheshire East's most vulnerable children.

6.9 Public Health Implications

6.9.1 The impact of Covid-19 is well documented within this report.

6.10 Climate Change Implications

6.10.1 There is a commitment to ensure that Cheshire East cared for children live as close to their home community as possible, wherever this is safe to do so. This will ensure that children can continue to feel connected to their families and local community. It also reduces the geographical footprint of children, families and staff as travel is reduced.

7. Ward Members Affected

7.1 Although the number of Cheshire East cared for children and young people is relatively small, they are a vulnerable cohort, who live across Cheshire East and in other local authority areas.

8. Consultation & Engagement

8.1 Our cared for children's group have been unable to meet as a group as a result of Covid-19 however the participation service intend on undertaking a children and young people survey in the coming months which may form part of our planning in relation to the shadow committee. Specifically we have coproduced the 16+ supported accommodation offer with our care experienced adults to ensure that the offer we commission is delivered in line with their needs and wishes.

9. Access to Information

9.1 None.

10. Contact Information

10.1 Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

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