

## **DECISION REPORT**

### **Corporate Parenting Committee**

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**Date of Meeting:** 30 March 2021

**Report Title:** Corporate Parenting Update Report

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

**Senior Officer:** Kerry Birtles, Director of Children's Social Care

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#### **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 report will provide the fifth update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the restrictions of Covid-19 came into force. Services for cared for children and care leavers embraced new ways of working in the initial stages of the pandemic, this report will outline any existing variations to our statutory service delivery and also highlight the progress in planning for children and young people, as we approach 12 months into the pandemic.

#### **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 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 and care leavers.

### **4. Other Options Considered**

- 4.1. None; this is an update report.

### **5. Background**

- 5.1. The report provides an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the last report which was presented on the 19 January 2021. Frontline services, in line with the priorities set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy, continue to deliver our statutory duties. 12 months into the pandemic we continue to see evidence of permanence for children within the Court arena, including an increasing number of children achieving adoption than in previous year, where 24 babies and children (twice as many last year) have been matched and permanently placed (as of February 2021) and where children and young people require a forever home in long term foster care. The tremendous efforts of our frontline colleagues, partners and children and young people themselves is testament to the resilience that exists within the services that we deliver and the children and families that we serve.
- 5.2. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 for Children's Social Care services continue to reflect the amendments authorised on the 25 September 2020. This ultimately means that frontline services have a statutory obligation to operate within 'a mainly business as usual' model. There remains a small number of regulations in place to assist social care services in responsibly managing their statutory safeguarding responsibilities to children and young people whilst managing the risks of the virus to frontline practitioners. We are now working with established weekly reporting systems which identify how and where we are applying the amended regulation, in the main in relation to some Covid specific virtual visits and regularly undertake quality assurance activity which provides reassurance around the appropriate use of the regulations. These temporary regulations remain in place and have been extended from March 2021 following a public consultation.

- 5.3. We oversee and report on a daily basis staff welfare and vaccination rates across our workforce.
- 5.4. The service continue to use individual risk assessments to support safe services delivered for children, young people, their parents, carer and family members and also our frontline colleagues. These risk assessments include physical risk management and also the emotional impact of the prolonged period of alternative ways of working where there are many avenues available including mindfulness, the employee assistance programme and home based risk assessment. The corporate response to promoting diversity, equality and inclusion throughout the pandemic for the families who access our services and the frontline colleagues who deliver the service has been well received.

## **6. Pledge 1 - Being a Good Corporate Parent**

- 6.1 We are proud to appoint Annemarie Parker as permanent Head of Service for Cared for Children and Care Leavers, she starts with us on 1 March 2021, following the successful period of an interim Head of Service covering for the last few months who will now manage the handover to Annemarie.
- 6.2 Cheshire East Council is committed to the pledges of the Corporate Parenting Strategy which were endorsed at full council on the 13 December 2018. We are keen to truly understand the lived experience of our children and young people and like no other time before we must ensure that their views, wishes and feelings are captured and shape the way forward in how we continue to prioritise their needs. We have rolled out the participation and engagement survey in early January 2021 with the intention of truly understanding their lived experiences of the broadest audience of children and young people. We also plan to subsequently shape our participation and engagement offer as we take the very best bits of the pandemic and where alternative ways of working have been helpful for children and young people into new ways of working with our children, young people and care leavers, being led by My Voice.
- 6.3 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, education and training, mental health services and where they are experiencing social isolation. Colleagues across the frontline, and partners agencies, are focused on how we offer services creatively

across the council to ensure that these young people are prioritised as we move through the pandemic.

6.4 Corporate Parenting Committee will be aware of the plans to ensure corporate parenting members have an up to date enhanced DBS, we are pleased that since the last committee, we only have one outstanding DBS to process. We will continue to monitor this and advise on when reviews are due. Elected members are supported to be much closer to frontline colleagues and engaged meaningfully with children and young people and so embraced the challenge of becoming proactive members to a number of unique opportunities. These opportunities include attendance at our corporate parenting subgroups, one-to-one tutoring and virtual visits to our commissioned childrens homes. Feedback from those interactions has already demonstrated impact as members are reporting having a better understanding of the pressures faced by frontlines colleagues as well as a greater understanding of the complexity of need presented across the service. We will continue to use this feedback to develop participation and services.

6.5 We are ambitious corporate parents to our children and young people and care experienced adults and made the commitment in 2017 to embrace the covenant and new statutory duties and the responsibility upon local authorities to extend their support to care experienced adults to 25. The Care Leavers Service 'reach out' to our care experienced adults who have chosen not to continue to access a service, and pre-Covid we saw a relatively low response to our extended offer of support. We have seen however an increase in care experienced adults accepting the support offered during the pandemic and this has seen additional support provided in relation to emotional wellbeing, finances and support with employment. We have written to all care leavers to ensure they understand support, help and advice is available to them. This is evidence of our corporate parenting commitment. We are now considering what the prolonged period of additional demand could mean for capacity with the service as well as potential recovery from the pandemic.

## **7. Pledge 2 – We will improve education, employment and employment outcomes.**

7.1 The educational experience of our cared for children has continued to be a priority as we transitioned back to education. We have established and robust safeguarding measures in place to track and review vulnerable pupils not in education, and those who are electively home educated. Support is made available to children and families in

this situation. We have established a partnership planning meeting to look at any such children and young people and worked closely between the school, Virtual School, and parents/foster carers to ensure education is being provided.

- 7.2 The Virtual School and frontline teams continue to focus on frequency of Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion and quality related to targeted support to ensure that we continue to have high aspirations for our children and young people.
- 7.3 The Virtual School Governing Body was launched in February 2021. The Director of Children's Social Care is the Chair of Governors. Core members include representatives from across all partners including schools and carers. This governing body will allow the Virtual School to have the same level of support, scrutiny and challenge that would exist within mainstream and specialist provision and will provide an additional avenue to challenge our statutory responsibilities and outcomes for children and young people, as well as also monitor and support the longer term consequences of the pandemic.
- 7.4 The service and the broader Council continue to be focused on not in education, employment or training (NEET) for our 16-18 year old cared for children and our care experienced adults. Our NEET figure for 16-18 years olds remains steady at around 4-6% on average. More targeted support is being put into supporting and prioritising our care experienced adults and where opportunities for creative ways of furthering their skills and employment opportunities exist, that we action this for them.
- 7.5 We are looking to actively re-develop our offer to care leavers for apprenticeships and work based placements, working with the Virtual School, Workforce Development and the Commissioning Service, and expect to launch this by the summer.

## **8 Pledge 3 - Achieving Permanence and Keeping Children Safe**

- 8.1 Achieving permanence for cared for children and care leavers is one of our service priorities and we have a clear plan to ensure that the children who do require local authority care receive this in a timely way, that the care they receive is excellent and for children who no longer need to be in care, that their plans are progressed without delay.
- 8.2 Corporate Parenting Committee will be familiar with the impact of Covid-19 in achieving permanence in a timely way and that the initial stages of the pandemic created a significant challenge. However I am pleased to share that we are now seeing those delays reduce, with

children achieving their permanent plans by way of adoption, special guardianship and discharges of care orders. We are faced with a smaller but still significant challenge of the culmulative backlog of Court progression work and continue to work closely with the Local Family Justice Board to progress this.

- 8.3 We have been successful in funding a legal executive to work closely with team managers to address delays and promote permanency for our children and young people, and support rapid work with revocations on orders of cared for children placed at home.
- 8.4 Throughout the pandemic, our commissioned service to children who go missing from care has continued to operate and has seen success in maintaining an offer to children and young people that can respond in a timely way and disrupt this risky behaviour. The number of children missing can vary week by week, however every child who experiences a missing episode will be offered a return home interview where in-depth discussions take place to inform subsequent risk assessments from the social worker who can consider the bigger picture. This is subject to scrutiny and review regarding compliance and effectiveness of existing procedures.
- 8.5 Our children who are living out of borough or 'at a distance' represent around 40% of our cared for population and include children living with Cheshire East foster carers, children placed for adoption, with parents and family members, and also children in independent residential and foster care. Our last inspection offered reassurance that our children who live outside of Cheshire East are at no detriment and our statutory services delivered throughout the pandemic have continued to ensure that our children are seen and plans progress. We have undertaken random dip sampling to assure ourselves of consistent practice and service, irrespective of where our children live.
- 8.6 Our vision for children and young people is focused on children living in the borough where we believe their needs will be best met and we continue to develop a range of sufficiency options including our Bespoke children's homes. Our first Mockingbird constellation was launched in November 2020, this continues to make great progress and have impact with the children and carers directly involved.
- 8.7 Regionally, we have a commitment to ensure that we do not criminalise cared for children in placements. We are actively contributing to a regional group of local authorities that has been established, working with Police and Youth Justice, to develop a protocol and guidance for our care establishments to ensure we support and engage our children

and young people placed in care, with draft report due in the summer of 2021.

- 8.8 Following the request at the last Corporate Parenting Committee, we have developed a quick and easy guide on who can be a foster carer (included in the Appendix), to help support members in responding to queries when promoting our fostering offer.

## **9 Pledge 4 – We will Improve Health and Wellbeing Outcomes**

- 9.1 The previous Corporate Parenting Committee received the annual report on the health of our cared for children.
- 9.2 Overall, performance in relation to requests for initial health assessments, completion of initial health assessments and annual review health assessments continues to deliver timely and robust health assessments for children and young people.
- 9.3 There continue to be challenges in relation to access to routine dental appointments because of the impact of surgery availability and practices not taking new patients, however it is positive that over the Cheshire footprint an additional 4 dental practices are being developed where cared for children will be prioritised. However, we continue to have a low number of children and young people with dental checks up to date, but whilst this is a national feature, as most dental practices are only managing emergencies and many carers have been adverse to routine checks, we will be addressing these outstanding children and young people to ensure improved reporting and performance in future, working closely with Looked After Children Nurses and foster carers to establish this.

## **10 Pledge 5 – We will prepare young people for Adulthood**

- 10.1 The care leavers service continues to be focused on supporting the needs of our care experienced adults in relation to accommodation, NEET, social isolation, emotional wellbeing and relationships.
- 10.2 We are pleased that we have been able to continue dedicated emotional wellbeing support with the CCG, provided by Pure Insight, as we continue to explore with the CCG psychological support to Adoption Services. The fitness and wellbeing provision (RAGE fitness) for care experienced young adults is now launched and we actively continue to engage young people with referrals to participate in this programme, offering therapy, advice, support; an offer that has been well received in different local authorities.

## **12 Implications of the Recommendations**

### **12.1 Policy Implications**

- 12.1.1 Cheshire East is ambitious and committed to ensuring it is a great place to be young. Our priorities are supported and driven through the Council's Corporate Plan, 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.

### **12.2 Legal Implications**

- 12.2.1 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were introduced to provide flexibility in the statutory obligations of local government relating to cared for children, adoption and fostering. The current flexibilities have been agreed to be extended past March 2021 following a public consultation.

### **12.3 Financial Implications**

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

### **12.4 Equality Implications**

- 12.4.1 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.

### **12.5 Human Resources Implications**

- 12.5.1 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.

### **12.6 Risk Management Implications**

- 12.6.1 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.

### **12.7 Rural Communities Implications**

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

## **12.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children**

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

## **12.9 Public Health Implications**

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

## **12.10 Climate Change Implications**

- 12.10.1 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.

## **13 Ward Members Affected**

- 13.1 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.

## **14 Consultation & Engagement**

- 14.1 My Voice, our cared for children council continue to meet virtually on a weekly basis. They provide their views on topics that affect their lives and have been a key stakeholder, sharing their views with the Committee System. This is taking new development to ensure consistent engagement and participation.
- 14.2 The local authority is currently undertaking an annual participation survey that will help the service to continue to understand the needs of our children and young people and align any newly identified needs to the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

## **15 Access to Information**

- 15.1 None.

## **16 Contact Information**

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

Name: Kerry Birtles

Job Title: Director of Children's Social Care  
Email: [Kerry.Birtles@cheshireeast.gov.uk](mailto:Kerry.Birtles@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

## **Appendix**

### **So, who can be a foster carer?**

There is no such thing as the perfect foster carer, and none of us have houses that are perfect either! We are not looking for perfect people, we're looking for down to earth people who are prepared to make a commitment, who like and care about children, want to do the right thing and make a difference.

You can be a foster carer for a child up to the age of 2 years, even if you don't have a spare bedroom, with the child sleeping in your room.

To foster children over the age of 2, you need to have a spare bedroom the child can call their own. It is important that this is the child's own space and so this cannot be the room of one of your children who is at University and may return home during holidays or a room that you use for grandchildren or family and friends for sleepovers, it needs to be a room dedicated to fostering.

You don't need to be a parent, but you will need to be able to have some experience of and knowledge about caring for children.

Everyone in your home needs to be open to the idea of becoming part of a fostering household. This means that if you live with a partner, husband or wife, they will also be part of the fostering assessment. We need to be confident that they are committed to fostering, and that they understand what fostering will mean for them. If you have birth children living with you, talk to them about fostering and explain to them what it means, we will want to talk to them during the assessment to make sure that they do understand and to check that they feel ok about it.

If you're single, then that's fine too, we have lots of single carers. If you have a partner who often comes and stays over with you, then we'll need to involve them in the assessment as they will probably be a frequent visitor to your household. We will also need to do some checks in relation to them as well - with their permission.

If you have a health issue or a disability that's fine if you're confident that you can meet the needs of a child while they are with you.

If you have a job, you don't need to give this up, but you do need to have the flexibility to attend meetings about your placed child, or do school pickups from school, or be at home if the child is unwell.

You need to be 21 years old or over. There is no upper age limit. No matter young or old you are, you need to have the energy and willingness to meet all a child's needs.

You don't need to be able to drive, or to have a car, though being a foster carer is easier if you do have a car. Fostering involves taking to and collecting children from school, and possibly also to other meetings and appointments. If you don't have a car, we would think carefully about which children could be placed with you and try to arrange it so that you can manage the transport commitments by walking or public transport.

We will have to check whether any adult in your household has a criminal conviction. We do this by doing a Disclosure and Barring check or DBS (this used to be called a CRB check). This can only happen once we have your written consent, so don't worry that we will do it without you knowing about it. If you do have some criminal offences, then we'll talk to you about what happened and why it happened and what your reflections are

about it now. We often find that people have an offence that they committed when they were a teenager or young adult, and what matters to us is how you have moved on and developed since that time. Lots of us did things as young adults that we now regret, but we can't change it. People with this in their life story can work well with young people who are beginning to make some bad choices in their lives, because they are able to talk to them about their own life experience. If you have been able to make good choices after making some bad ones, then that tells us about your resilience and determination, which are very valuable qualities in fostering.

There are some serious offences that will need to be talked through in detail with you, and these would generally be offences that involved violence or sexual offending, and sometimes, these offences would mean that you cannot be a foster carer. From our point of view, if you have any history of offences, it's best to tell us about that before we do the checks, and then there are no surprises along the way that need a big conversation before we can move forward.

The DBS process works most quickly when people have lived in the same place for a long time. When people have lived abroad for significant periods as an adult, then we may need to do some checks in the countries where you have lived.

If you are a smoker, you will not be able to care for children aged 5 and under, and we would ask that you, or any visitors who smoke, do so outside the house, so that the house remains a smoke free environment for children. The same applies to e-cigarettes and vaping.

If you have any pets living in your house, we need to be sure that they do not pose a risk or hazard to any child. As part of our assessment of you, we will also assess your pets to make sure that their behaviour is manageable and that they are not aggressive. If a child has an allergy to some pets, then we would not want to place them with you, but there may be other times when the pet's access to some parts of the house will need to be restricted for some children.

Anyone who wants to be a foster carer has to have a medical so that we are sure that there is no medical vulnerability that would make fostering difficult, or that we need to take account of when we are thinking about which children could be placed with you. As with a DBS check, it's best if you tell us about anything that you think may come up in a medical, so that we have plenty of time to talk this through with you.

We don't mind whether you own your home, or you rent it. What's important to us is that you are secure in your tenancy and that you aren't going to be evicted or lose your home.

We will pay you a fee above the National minimum rate for foster carers that reflects your experience and the types of placements that you are approved to take. We will also provide you with an allowance for each child that is placed with you, some local authorities only provide one allowance regardless of how many children or young people you care for.