
Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting:	2 November 2021
Report Title:	Corporate Parenting Progress Report
Report of:	Kerry Birtles, Director of Children's Social Care
Ward(s) Affected:	All

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report advises the Corporate Parenting Committee of how the service is delivering the priorities for cared for children and care leavers which are clearly set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy.
- 1.2. This report provides the seventh 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, as restrictions have been lifted our frontline staff have returned to seeing children and families in person.

2. Recommendations

- 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 Recommendations

- 3.1. The Corporate Parenting Committee is an advisory group to the Children and Families Committee 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.
- 3.2. 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.** This report provides an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the last report which was presented on the 14 September 2021. Frontline services and strategic leadership continue to deliver our statutory duties in line with our Corporate Parenting Strategy and in response to the pandemic.
- 5.2.** The impact of the pandemic continues to be visible service wide. Children's Services, statutory partners and the third sector continue to identify new and repeating demand within ChECS (Cheshire East Consultation Service), which results in an average of 175 (Q1 – Q2 average) new assessments each month to the Children in Need and Child Protection Teams. We have seen a significant increase in children with disabilities and care experienced adults requiring additional support and where children meet a legal threshold of being at risk of significant harm, there are delays due to the Court capacity in achieving timeliness. However, statutory and support services have, and continue to, support our most vulnerable children and young people and success is visible in many areas and monitored by a whole service action plan and robust performance monitoring process.
- 5.3.** We continue to build upon the success of 26 adoptions in 2020/2021 and to date we have achieved permanence via adoption for a further six children. There are 30 children currently with a Court endorsed plan of adoption of which 12 are placed within their prospective adoptive families. Our trajectory for these children is to achieve permanence within these adoptive families, however we are still experiencing significant delays within the Court arena and the availability of hearings is contributing to our performance around timeliness. The Local Authority continues to challenge this through its participation at the Local Family Justice Board. We are also very pleased that we are achieving early permanence for two children through foster to adopt homes. This means that children can be placed with their forever family at the earliest opportunity, avoids unnecessary transitions, and places the child in the care of caregivers where they can form life-long attachments.
- 5.4.** The impact of Court availability continues to cause delay for children during permanency planning in pre and public law proceedings. 16.6% of children conclude care proceedings within the 26 weeks, which is higher than the 12% Cheshire and Merseyside average, however, is still significantly under target. There are currently 87 children in pre proceedings and 127 within care proceedings. Many of these children continue to live within their immediate or extended family where the risk of significant harm is able to be mitigated, however Court intervention is necessary. Q1 performance analysis offers reassurance that following this level of intervention children are more likely to conclude with a permanency plan to remain within their family network, which again is an extremely positive outcome. However, lengthy care proceedings are not best practice for children and young

people and the impact of Court delays is impacting on frontline capacity and overall demand in frontline teams.

- 5.5.** As children have returned to school following the summer holidays, we have seen an increase in Covid cases amongst our school age children and young people. We have also identified that some of our challenges in relation to timeliness in assessments, for example, are due to either frontline colleagues of children and families needing to self-isolate or having been unwell. The service continues to use individual risk assessments to support safe services delivered for children, young people, their parents, carers and family members and also our frontline colleagues. These risk assessments include the physical risk management of alternative ways of working to ensure that we reduce the risk of Covid as much as possible. Over 90% of our frontline staff are now double vaccinated and it is hoped that this will reduce the impact of Covid and ultimately ensure that we continue to deliver a high level of service to our children and young people. 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 them has been well received.
- 5.6.** As the government begins to roll out vaccines for children and young people, we have taken advice from Public Health England (PHE) in respect of our responsibility as Corporate Parents. The advice from PHE is that no child will receive the vaccine unless there is written consent from a parent even if the child wants the vaccine. In respect of cared for children, if there is any dissent between parties who can give consent on behalf of the child (e.g., if the biological parent does not want the child to have the vaccine, but a foster carer or social worker does for example) the child will NOT receive the vaccine as part of the school Covid-19 vaccine programme but arrangements outside of the school system can be made once consent issues have been clarified. These situations will be explored on an individual basis with Head of Service oversight.
- 5.7.** It is entirely necessary to commend the commitment of frontline colleagues for their triumphant efforts over the past 18 months. Cheshire East Council has supported our frontline throughout this period, ensuring that they are prioritised and have the necessary risk mitigation in place to enable them to keep children in Cheshire East safe. Children's Social Care have seen success in recruitment and retention of frontline colleagues with a running position of less than 10% agency social workers in frontline teams and an overall vacancy rate of 5%.

6. Pledge 1 - Being a Good Corporate Parent

- 6.1.** We are currently developing a new Corporate Parenting Strategy ready to launch in 2022. We plan to review and refresh the Corporate Parenting Strategy over the coming months, to be launched alongside the new Children and Young People's Plan in March/ April 2022.

- 6.2.** The Participation Team are now going to visit all children when they enter care. Sophie Cliffe, Participation Worker, will be informed when children become cared for and will then contact children's carers to complete a home visit. This new way of working is aimed at improving awareness about participation events and how children can become involved. We will also ensure that we share information with children about advocacy and the independent visitor service in these meetings.
- 6.3.** In response to the Cared for Children's Survey, further consideration has been given as to how we can provide our children and young people with reassurance that we are listening to what they tell us. We have asked our children to help us to develop our recruitment adverts for frontline colleagues. We want to fully involve our children in our recruitment activity. Work is also planned to develop a 'contract of expectations.' Children and young people will develop a contract about what they expect from their social workers and others that support them. Children and young people will work together to develop this with support from the Participation Team. This will then be shared with all social care staff during practice and performance sessions. Through initial discussions with children and young people it is expected that this contract will contain pledges such as when a change of social worker is needed, each child will receive a visit from their social worker/team manager to explain this.
- 6.4.** There is currently a national drive to ensure that local authorities offer an independent visiting service to cared for children. In Cheshire East, we currently have 18 children matched with independent visitors. We will ensure that we continue to raise awareness of this with children and young people at regular intervals and when new needs arise.
- 6.5.** The Participation Team are busy planning a range of activities to promote November Children's Rights Month. Currently ideas include photo competitions and activity days based around team building and these will be facilitated with Covid secure measures in place.
- 6.6.** The Care Leavers Survey was launched at the start of October 2021, a range of incentives is being offered to encourage participation and ensure that we capture young people's views and experiences and use this feedback to shape the service we offer to them.
- 6.7.** In 2017 we made the commitment to embrace the covenant and new statutory duties and the responsibility upon local authorities to extend their support to care experienced adults to 25. As part of this commitment, two additional Personal Advisors have been employed to ensure we meet our obligations. Indeed, we continue to offer support to a number of young adults over 25 in recognition that 'parenting' doesn't end at 25.

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

- 7.1.** The Virtual School Headteacher Annual Report is to be presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee and will provide the retrospective annual

position, impact of the pandemic, and will demonstrate the resilience that our young people have exhibited with the support of those around them.

- 7.2.** Our not in education, employment or training (NEET) figures are beginning to show some improvement, despite the pandemic, and our current performance is 45% NEET. We have a range of targeted support in place to address this including a specialist role via the Journey First project and a dedicated NEET programme. The next NEET course commences on 5 October 2021. This 12-week internal programme offers young people who are not in education, training or employment the opportunity to build their resilience, confidence, and develop their awareness of local opportunities. Following the last course, seven of the nine participants either found work or entered some form of education/ training. They have also taken part in a camping trip where they achieved their Duke of Edinburgh bronze award. Please see the [online brochure](#)* for an overview of the NEET programme.

**Credit to Andy Sienkiewicz (Andy.Sienkiewicz@cheshireeast.gov.uk) for making the leaflet.*

- 7.3.** During the summer of 2021, 12 of our cared for young people successfully completed their A-Levels or Level 3 Qualifications. Of these 12, nine have been offered places at University.
- 7.4.** The Governing Body for the Virtual School is now up and running and is chaired by the Director of Children's Social Care. The Governing Body is working with the Participation Team on a survey to inform services about the impact of Covid-19 on education, support and experience. This will be taken to the next Governing Board and shared in the workstream group.

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 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. We also have regular liaison with Cafcass to ensure that we are working together so that plans for children are progressed.
- 8.2.** There has been a significant reduction in the number of children placed at home and subject to Care Orders and our current cohort of children is 60. Since the start of the financial year there has been a 13% reduction in the number of children placed at home with their parents and subject to a care order, and overall, in the last six months, there have been 11 individuals who have left care who were placed with their parents. This is due to successful applications to revoke Care Orders, also a reduction in the numbers being granted by the Court at the end of Care Proceedings. For example, in Q1 there were no new Care Orders at home granted by the Court. We are promoting the use of alternative orders that support children to remain within their own families without the intervention of the local authority sharing parental responsibility, such as Supervision Orders or

Child Arrangement Orders. This means that we have the right children in care and this approach is supported by the [Public Law Working Group Publication](#), a priority for the Local Family Justice Board.

- 8.3.** We are committed to ensuring that we do not criminalise cared for children in their care settings and have actively contributed to a regional group of local authorities, working with Police and Youth Justice, to develop a protocol and guidance for our care establishments to reduce the criminalisation of cared for children.
- 8.4.** The number of children and young people who go missing from care continues to vary from month to month. We are currently undertaking some audit work to ensure that the service we commission to offer return home interviews to these children is effective and is reducing the risk and frequency of missing episodes. Data in respect of children who go missing is shared across all services on a daily basis from the allocated social worker to the Director. There are a small number of children who regularly go missing, however we understand their individual circumstances and there is a high level of scrutiny to ensure that we offer a multi-agency response. We continue to work closely with 'We Are With You', our commissioned service that supports children and young people who go missing from home, on the connectedness between their service and the allocated social worker.
- 8.5.** 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 and our Mockingbird constellations. The number of children living within the Cheshire East boundary has steadily increased over the last 12 months. At the end of July 2021, 59% of children lived within Cheshire East, this is the highest this has been since October 2019. We are continuing to develop our recruitment strategy to improve sufficiency of foster carers and will be developing the placement service to align it more closely with the fostering service.
- 8.6.** Members will be aware from the last report that we de-commissioned two of our Bespoke homes as we were not satisfied with the quality of care provided to our children and young people. However, following an accelerated procurement process to re-commission two further homes, one home has successfully been awarded and there are plans to procure the second home. This means that we can provide homes to our most complex children within Cheshire East, and they can be effectively supported by partner agencies.
- 8.7.** There has been a real focus on reducing the number of children who live in residential care. We want to give children and young people the opportunity to live within a family setting wherever possible. Between March 2021 and October 2021, we have been able to 'step-down' eight children from residential placements. We now have 33 children living in residential care, this is the lowest since 2015.

9. Pledge 4 – We will Improve Health and Wellbeing Outcomes

- 9.1.** Performance in relation to requests for initial health assessments, completion of initial health assessments, and annual review health assessments, continues to show that health assessments for children and young people are delivered with a continued focus on timeliness. The number of notifications to health of new children into care within the 48-hour timeframe continues to be good and in Q1 this was over 90%. We monitor this data on a weekly basis to ensure that the timeliness of health assessments for children remains good.
- 9.2.** As a result of multiple escalations made by the Designated Nurse to NHS England related to difficulties in Cheshire children being able to see a dentist, a pilot has now been launched and is being run across Cheshire and Merseyside. This has been set up and run by NHS England's dental team and represents an opportunity for all our children and young people to access a dentist more easily. A number of dental practices across Cheshire and Merseyside were identified and have agreed to see any looked after child referred to them. An electronic referral form was developed and the Designated Nurse acts as a gatekeeper of referrals made within Cheshire East. Currently 44% of cared for children have had a dental check within last 12 months, improved from 38% previously.
- 9.3.** In addition to the pilot described above, the Designated Nurse has requested that the Supervising Social Workers of all foster carers are made aware that dental practices are open, although operating at reduced capacity (60%). The importance of them taking children in their care for dental check-ups will be reinforced and any difficulties encountered are to be escalated to the Designated Nurse for follow up and action.

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 still have a dedicated NEET worker in the Leaving Care Team and a 16-18 NEET specialist within the Virtual School. These two workers meet regularly, identify our young people who are NEET or at risk of NEET, and make plans to engage and support them, which is evidencing some encouraging improvements to overall performance. We are also working hard with colleagues across the Council, and in other agencies, to increase the number of young people who take up Apprenticeships and have a specific action plan in this regard. Our new Apprenticeship Coordinator will commence on 1 November 2021. We have also attended a business breakfast with the Chamber of Commerce and have started to build some useful contacts. Steve Nevitt, Service Manager for Care Leavers, is going to deliver a short presentation at one of the breakfasts so that local

businesses can further understand the benefits of offering a care experienced young person an apprenticeship.

- 10.3.** Pure Insight, who deliver mentoring and wellbeing support to our young people aged 16+, continue to offer a range of support to our care leavers. The staff and volunteers work with our young people on an outreach basis. In April 2021 we increased our funding to Pure Insight in response to demand from our young people. As a result of this additional funding, we were able to ensure that no young person was on a waiting list to access support. We continue to meet monthly to review children and young people's emotional wellbeing. In addition to this, contract review meetings are held quarterly. Feedback from young people around the support they receive from Pure Insight is overwhelmingly positive.
- 10.4.** In response to improving our services in youth homelessness, we met with Jill Boake from the Ministry of Housing on 3 September 2021. The meeting went well, and we have now received feedback from her and 'sign off' that she no longer needs to support us as a Local Authority. She said that she found 'things continue to go from strength to strength, with young people at the heart of your ambitions to prevent youth homelessness'. The feedback identified that there is a clear pathway for Housing and Children's Services, and that we are working closely and collaboratively with shared goals.

11. Consultation and Engagement

- 11.1.** There are a range of surveys currently being drafted. These are aimed at seeking feedback from children and young people about the service they receive.

12. Implications

12.1. Legal

- 12.1.1.** 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. These regulations lapsed on the 30 September 2021 and for local authorities the flexibilities in relation to virtual visiting and changes to fostering and adoption assessments are no longer an option.

12.2. Finance

- 12.2.1.** Financial plans are due to be reviewed to ensure that the service can continue to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in Cheshire East and will be reflected in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy forecast.

12.3. Policy

- 12.3.1.** Cheshire East is ambitious and committed to ensuring it is a great place to be young. This is demonstrated through the Council's core priority that we are a council which empowers and cares about people. These priorities are supported and driven through the Children and Young People's Plan,

Corporate Parenting Strategy 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.

12.4. Equality

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 12.7.1.** All communities are affected by the contents of this report and it is necessary to strategically plan the delivery of services to serve all communities.

12.8. Children and 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

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

12.10. Climate Change

- 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.

Access to Information	
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Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	None