

Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting:	27 January 2022
Report Title:	Corporate Parenting Progress Report
Report of:	Kerry Birtles, Director of Children’s Social Care
Ward(s) Affected:	All

Corporate Plan Priorities	Open	An open and enabling organisation	
	Fair	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	Green	A thriving and sustainable place	

1. Purpose of Report

- 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.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report provides the eighth 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. We have come some considerable distance since this time and have developed hybrid ways of working to mitigate the risk of Covid-19 and enable services to be delivered in line with our statutory responsibilities.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. 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.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. 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.
- 4.2. 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.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1. None; this is an update report.

6. Background

- 6.1. This report provides an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the last report which was presented on the 2 November 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.
- 6.2. 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 our ChECS service (Cheshire East Consultation Service). 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 continuing 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.
- 6.3. 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 nine children. There are 30 children currently with a Court endorsed plan of adoption of which 17 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.
- 6.4. The impact of Court availability continues to cause delay for children during permanency planning in pre and public law proceedings. Q2 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.

- 6.5.** Cheshire East, like other areas across the country, has seen an increase in Covid cases amongst our school age children and young people. Our frontline staff continue to use risk assessments before they visit families to ensure that face to face visiting is safe; 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.
- 6.6.** At the time of writing this report (December 2021) the government is announcing new measures in response to growing cases of a new variant of the Coronavirus. We will continue to monitor the impact and will adjust ways of working to reflect any new measures.
- 6.7.** 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. Children and young people aged 12 to 15 years are beginning to have their vaccinations in schools.
- 6.8.** 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%. Our new Executive Director for Children's Services, Deborah Woodcock joined Cheshire East on 22 November 2021. We are delighted that Deborah has joined us, she has a wealth of experience and knowledge.
- 6.9.** We are pleased to share with you two pieces of good news regarding the outcomes of recent inspections of children's services in Cheshire East. The first is the outcome of our two-day Ofsted inspection visit in November 2021, which focused on our arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. The feedback and [letter from Ofsted](#) recognises the improvements we have made in this area and helpfully supports us in future developments. This is a great foundation for us to continue in our journey for improvement.
- 6.10.** Ofsted summarised that since their last inspection in November 2019 the quality of social work with children and their families has improved and senior leaders are successfully embedding a child-centred culture.
- 6.11.** The letter goes on to say that children in Cheshire East benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with their social workers and they have frequent opportunities to express their wishes and feelings. Social workers also feel supported by managers and leaders, they have a comprehensive training plan, and enjoy working in Cheshire East.
- 6.12.** The council's '@ct team' who provide support for children at risk of exploitation or family breakdown were also praised for the positive impact

they have on these children to ensure that they remain with their families when possible and when it is appropriate.

- 6.13.** The letter also makes some recommendations for further improvements. It says that family networks are often explored to offer immediate support for children and families, but contingency plans could be better for longer term support. It goes on to say that most managers have frequent oversight of social work with children and their families, but this could be more regular for disabled children.
- 6.14.** Additionally, the letter says “caseloads are high in some teams that work with children in need of help and protection. Despite this, the quality of practice continues to be such that, for most children, there is no detrimental impact.”
- 6.15.** All of the feedback from the inspection will be carefully considered and will be incorporated into a development plan and will be presented to Children and Families Committee early in 2022.
- 6.16.** The second piece of good news is that the Cheshire Youth Justice Service has been rated as ‘Good’ following a visit by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation. A number of our frontline colleagues were spoken to as part of this inspection and this demonstrated good practice and joint working across agencies to support some of our most vulnerable young people.
- 6.17.** Committee members will be aware of the ongoing crisis in Kent and other port authorities in the South-East caused by the arrival of small boats crossing the English Channel. This has now had a direct impact on the way in which unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) find their way to Cheshire East. Until early last year, the majority of our UASC were spontaneous arrivals who had crossed over in lorries and vans before being dropped off at service stations on the M6; however, increased security at the French ports has made this route much more difficult and has driven the criminal gangs who run the trade to switch their activities to the boats, sometimes with the tragic consequences that were seen in November.
- 6.18.** In the summer of last year, Kent Council said that it could no longer safely care for any more migrant children and this led to an appeal to local authorities to offer more help; accordingly, we accepted a number of direct transfers from port: one in September 2020, one in December 2020, and two in June 2021. In July of this year, a revised National Transfer Scheme was launched using a voluntary rota and we accepted three more young people: one in July and two in October 2021. Most recently of all, the number of boats crossing the Channel forced the Home Secretary to mandate the transfer of young people from the South East using powers that already existed in the 2016 Immigration Act. We accepted our first mandated transfer as recently as 6 December 2021, who is now safely in the care of a Cheshire East foster family.

- 6.19.** We are currently responsible for 24 UASC as cared for children, and 27 as care leavers. However, we can now expect these numbers to rise significantly given that the ceiling (of 0.07% of our total child population) that the Home Office uses to calculate our allocation represents a total of 54 cared for children (care leavers being excluded from these numbers).
- 6.20.** Mark Riddell, National Advisor for Care Leavers for the DfE, visited Cheshire East and met with the Care Leavers Service and some of our partner agencies on 19 November 2021. This was a really successful visit, and he was impressed with the work that is being undertaken. Mark stated that he regards Cheshire East as one of his top half dozen 'go to' authorities and it was therefore essential that we were able to give a good account of our offer to our young people and our commitment to them as their Corporate Parents. As a result of the visit, Mark has spoken with the Children's Minister and they want to visit Cheshire East in March 2022. This will be another valuable opportunity to showcase our offer to care leavers.

7. Pledge 1 - Being a Good Corporate Parent

- 7.1.** 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 Spring 2022. We have consulted with a small cohort of children and young people and they have told us that the pledges remain current and appropriate. We will however identify new and ambitious priorities within each pledge. We are also mindful of how we truly capture children and young people's views, and we are working with our Participation Team to ensure that this feedback is meaningful and inclusive.
- 7.2.** The Participation Team are now visiting more children in their placements to seek their views and wishes and to promote participation events. We have achieved some success in our young people agreeing to participate in frontline staff recruitment, particularly interviews. We are also giving further consideration as to how we can provide our children and young people with further opportunities to be involved in service development and give them reassurance that we are listening to what they tell us.
- 7.3.** Since the last Committee meeting, the young people attending My Voice have written to a national company called Madlug. Madlug was created under the premise that that no child should carry their life in a bin bag or plastic shopping bag. Madlug operate under a 'buy one, give one' model, which means that with every Madlug bag that is purchased, a pack-away travel bag will be given to a child in care. My Voice applied to Madlug who have now kindly donated 180 packaway bags to be given to children and young people in Cheshire East. We are committed to ensure that our children and young people have appropriate luggage for their belongings.
- 7.4.** Following the presentation at the last Committee by the Children's Society and questions from members, we have further considered how we are promoting advocacy and the Independent Visiting Service. A mandatory question is now being added to cared for statutory review paperwork, this

will generate a discussion for each child and young person and active consideration will be given (at least twice per year) as to whether they would benefit from an advocate or an independent visitor.

7.5. The Participation Team and the Care Leavers' Service were involved in running in several activities for November Children's Rights Month. These included photography competitions, a Crystal Maze activity day and a trip to Alton Towers. These activities were run in conjunction with Pure Insight and Just Drop In. Feedback from young people involved in these activities is positive.

7.6. The Care Leavers' Survey has now closed, and the information gathered from this is now being collated and analysed and will be presented in the next update report. However early indications suggest that we have almost doubled the number of participants from the 2019 survey. A number of young people indicated through the survey that they would be willing to be involved in some focus groups around service development. Our Participation Team are now busy contacting these young people and planning to set up some focus groups in the new year. This will be a great way to engage our young people in the development of services which affect them directly.

8. Pledge 2 – We will improve Education, Employment and Training outcomes

8.1. The Virtual School and the Care Leavers' Service attended an employer event on 18 November 2021 - this was a virtual event with 46 employers attending. The event enabled those employers who have successfully offered employment and apprenticeship opportunities to care leavers to share their experience. The event was very well received by employers with many contacting 'The Pledge' to offer their support to care leavers. From the 48 employers, The Pledge have so far received 15 pledges from employers. A further meeting is taking place on 10 December 2021 to highlight which employers have offered a pledge and the details of those employers will be shared with the relevant local authority to follow up. Three local authorities took part: Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington. 30.8% of employers who attended were from Warrington, 23.1% from Cheshire West and Chester and 15.4% from Cheshire East.

8.2. Our not in education, employment or training (NEET) figures are continuing to show improvement, despite the pandemic, and our current performance for young people aged 16 to 25 is 37% NEET. We are continuing to work to improve this further and 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 NEET course commenced on 5 October 2021 and six young people are fully engaged with the programme. Feedback from the participants is extremely positive and planning in the new year will commence to ensure that the programme can be offered again in the spring.

- 8.3. We currently have 18 young people at University, this is our highest number ever and we are proud and want to ensure that as many of our young people have this opportunity as possible.
- 8.4. We are carefully monitoring the impact of Covid upon children and young people's education and attendance. The Participation Team and the Virtual School have worked together to seek feedback from our cared for children and young people about the impact of Covid upon their education. The results of this survey are currently being analysed and will be shared in subsequent reports. At the beginning of December 2021, the attendance figures for our school-aged children was 91%. It is reassuring that our most vulnerable children are attending school despite the rising numbers of Covid. We would also like to celebrate that we have had no permanent exclusions for the past three years.

9. **Pledge 3 - Achieving Permanence and Keeping Children Safe**

- 9.1. 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.
- 9.2. There has been a significant reduction in the number of children placed at home and subject to Care Orders; our current cohort of children is 56 and is continuing to reduce with further cases before the Court for discharge of Care Orders. Like Q1, Q2 has seen 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.
- 9.3. The number of children and young people who go missing from care continues to vary from month to month. We continue to undertake 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. There are two young people who have been missing following a period of care less than 24 hours. These two children were unaccompanied asylum seeking children and we continue to make multi-agency attempts to locate them and they remain cared for children responsible to Cheshire East. We continue to work closely with 'We Are With You' on the connectedness between their service and the allocated social worker.

- 9.4. We are continuing to see progress in our vision for children and young people 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. Q2 data shows that another ten children have been placed in borough since Q1. We are currently undertaking a review of all children who live out of borough to ensure that they are not disadvantaged because of this.
- 9.5. Members will be aware following an accelerated procurement process to recommission two further homes, one home was successfully awarded to Safe Places. Safe Places are now in the process of registering this home with Ofsted. This means that we can provide homes to our most complex children within Cheshire East, and they can be effectively supported by partner agencies. Flude House, one of our bespoke children's homes has recently been inspected by Ofsted and was judged Good.
- 9.6. We are continuing to focus on reducing the number of children who live in residential care. Our Q2 data shows that a further six children have moved out of residential care. Some children have been able to return to the care of their families. We want to give children and young people the opportunity to live within a family setting wherever possible. For some children, this will mean that we need to commission bespoke packages of support and we are being creative and working with families to ensure that these children have the support they need to ensure that this 'step-down' is successful, and they don't return to care. We currently have two young people who are being provided with creative packages of support by providers who are not yet registered with Ofsted. These arrangements are described as unregulated children's homes and we continue to work with the Court and with transparency with our regulator Ofsted about taking appropriate steps to safeguard these children, promote their outcomes and make provision for registration of these settings.
- 9.7. The number of children placed with our in-house fostering service has reduced. Work is underway with the fostering service to consider how we can improve our offer to children and young people and recruit new foster carers particularly for our older children. There is a national shortage of foster carers currently and we are looking at how our recruitment campaigns target the right people to ensure that our fostering service grows and develops and is able to meet the needs of the children and young people who require foster homes.
- 10. Pledge 4 – We will Improve Health and Wellbeing Outcomes**
- 10.1. 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 improvement in timeliness. We monitor this data on a weekly basis to ensure that the timeliness of health assessments for children remains good.

10.2. Our cared for children and young people aged 12 to 17 years have been receiving Covid vaccinations in line with the national roll out. School nurses have been delivering on this vaccination programme. Where children have not been able to have their vaccine at school, a plan is in place to 'mop up' and ensure that as many children as possible have their vaccine. Latest figures for children within Cheshire East aged 12 to 17 indicates that there has been a 46% take up of the vaccine. We are in the process of gathering data in respect to how many cared for children and young people have had their vaccine and will provide an update within the next report.

11. Pledge 5 – We will Prepare Young People for Adulthood

11.1. 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.

11.2. We are very proud of Cheshire East Council's commitment to our care leavers. The council has covered the £20 cut to Universal Credit for six months from October 2021 for all young adults who receive the benefit and our 16 and 17 year olds in supported accommodation, a total of 125 young people. This has been exceptionally well received by our care leavers and Mark Ridell, National Advisor for Care Leavers.

11.3. 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. Feedback from young people around the support they receive from Pure Insight is overwhelmingly positive. Pure Insight attended the meeting with Mark Riddell.

11.4. Over 97% of our care leavers are in suitable accommodation and we are in touch with these young people. There are four young people who choose not to engage with the service, but we know where they live and they know they can change their mind if they need support. This is a really positive picture.

12. Consultation and Engagement

12.1. 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.

13. Implications

13.1. Legal

13.1.1. 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.

13.2. Finance

- 13.2.1. 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 are reflected in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy forecast.

13.3. Policy

- 13.3.1. 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 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.

13.4. Equality

- 13.4.1. 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.

13.5. Human Resources

- 13.5.1. 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.

13.6. Risk Management

- 13.6.1. 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.

13.7. Rural Communities

- 13.7.1. 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.

13.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

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

13.9. Public Health

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

13.10. Climate Change

13.10.1. There is a commitment to ensure that Cheshire East cared for children live as close to their home community as possible, whenever 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:	Ofsted Inspection Letter December 2021