

## **DECISION REPORT**

### **Corporate Parenting Committee**

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**Date of Meeting:** 14 July 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

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#### **1. Report summary**

- 1.1. This report provides an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee specifically in relation to the impact of Covid-19 for cared for children and care leavers.
- 1.2. Statutory services for cared for children and care leavers were adversely affected by the restrictions imposed by government in response to the national pandemic. This report will outline the impact of those restrictions for children and young people and the service ability and capacity to operate in a business as usual way.
- 1.3. The Corporate Parenting Committee has not met since January 2020 (with March and May being stood down as a direct result of Covid-19), however officers have attended weekly meetings with the Portfolio Holder and have provided bi-weekly update reports for members of the Committee.
- 1.4. The Shadow Committee has not met in person or virtually at this time as a direct result of Covid-19.

## **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.

## **4. Other Options Considered**

4.1. None; this is an update report.

## **5. Background**

5.1. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 the government imposed significant restrictions throughout England where we were tasked as a nation to stay at home in response to the pandemic. This occurred without any real warning and so for statutory services, like those that we deliver to cared for children and care leavers, were required to plan quickly and efficiently to ensure the safety of children and young people and the frontline practitioners who undertake those statutory duties.

5.2. We immediately assessed the level of risk for each individual child and young person across the service and the impact of not having a social worker or other professional visit in a direct face to face capacity. The majority of the contact that we had with children and young people at this time was virtual and Cheshire East were very quickly able to equip frontline staff with the technology they needed to undertake their work virtually. There were a number of children where the risk assessment identified that the risk to the child would be too great if the social worker did not visit in a face to face capacity and so through pre-screening assessments and the allocation of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) this was safely undertaken.

- 5.3. The feedback from children and families has been, in the main, positive, where they have described feeling that the local authority have supported them in a time of national crisis. One of the most significantly affected areas was that of family time between cared for children and their parents, siblings and friends, however, we have worked hard to enable virtual arrangements to happen, and by mid May we were planning for recovery and offering many families safe face to face family time. By the second week of June, all cared for children had the opportunity for a face to face family time session with significant people in their lives.
- 5.4. As Public Health and the Government have shared further information about the national response to the pandemic we have been able to quickly adapt our service response and have been able to make informed decisions about the safety for children, families and frontline practitioners in undertaking our statutory duties in a business as usual way.
- 5.5. At the beginning of June we had enough information and support from public health, with risk assessments available for staff, to be able to resume our face to face visits to cared for children and care leavers. Again each situation has been individually risk assessed and there remain a number of children where a face to face visit would pose a significant risk, for example due to the foster carer shielding. These situations are reducing and kept under regular review by senior leaders.

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

- 6.1 The wellbeing of our cared for children and care leavers has been an absolute priority for officers throughout this pandemic. We have ensured that, wherever a child or young person has been living, that we have remained in regular contact and offered support where needed. We have seen our parents, foster carers and residential children's homes providers support our children and young people tremendously well with a real reduction in placement instability.
- 6.2 Cheshire East recognised early on that our annual celebration event was unlikely to take place this year and so instead set up an 'over the rainbow competition' for our children and young people to keep them engaged and positive about the future. We had some wonderful entries. Certain entries will be chosen to champion our cared for children in Cheshire East and will deliver Tote Bags containing activities for children and young people to keep them busy.

- 6.3 We have been keen to celebrate all of the achievements that our children and young people have been able to make during this time, for example, two young people securing employment and other care leavers securing their own tenancies.
- 6.4 It is essential that as we enter into the recovery phase of our journey that we identify the specific impact Covid-19 has had for our cared for children and care leavers and champion their voice when we are faced with challenges in the borough such as unemployment and the impact of this period on emotional well-being and mental health.

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

- 7.1. The majority of our cared for children have not accessed education since the 23<sup>rd</sup> March. Whilst cared for children were identified by the government as a ‘vulnerable’ group because they have a social worker, under the previous government direction to ‘stay home, stay safe, save the NHS’ the majority of cared for children remained at home with the exception of those where the social worker assessed the level of risk to be greater if the child were to be out of education. At its peak there were 12 cared for children attending their educational setting. As the government moved into recovery and issued new guidance to schools we encouraged all cared for children in transition groups to attend education where safe to do so and this saw a greater number of children gradually see the benefits of this. We continue to monitor this situation very closely and thank our colleagues in the Virtual School and our parents and carers for all the hard work and commitment to caring for our children during this period.
- 7.2. Our care leavers’ experience of not being able to go to work or college, or where young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and not being able to actively search for work has been more problematic with the most significant impact being that of social isolation. Whilst we have seen some positive steps where two care leavers have secured employment during this period we remain concerned about the long term impact for care leavers when faced with the challenges of less employment opportunities because of the volume of people looking for work.
- 7.3. We are working closely with the Ambassador for Care Leavers, Mark Riddell, who had brought together nationally a group of leaders from local authorities to share ideas about how to prioritise care leavers as we enter into recovery. There is no easy answer to this challenge but

as corporate parents we must continue to seek all opportunities to prioritise and ring fence opportunities for our care leavers.

## **8. Pledge 3 - Achieving Permanence and Keeping Children Safe Being a Good Corporate Parent**

- 8.1 One of the most significantly affected areas of the pandemic has been the ability to progress permanency plans for children and young people in a timely way. Children with care plans before the Court have been adversely affected by the impact of Covid-19 and the Courts' capacity to undertake hearings and specific cohorts of children such as those moving onto their adoptive families.
- 8.2 We are very clear in our expectation with our regional colleagues in Adoption Counts that we must ensure that all opportunities for children to find their forever families must be utilised and at the beginning of March we were in a much better position to begin to safely transition children from their foster placement to their adoptive families.
- 8.3 Permanency for children and young people is potentially the most significant thing that we can achieve in their lives once they become cared for and so we have remained focused during this period of continuing to achieve this for children where ever practicably possible.

### Bespoke Childrens' Homes

- 8.4. We have seen some real success since the last committee in January and have three of our four children's homes registered with Ofsted and caring for Cheshire East children and young people who have previously either been living out of borough or in independent residential settings. We plan to have the fourth home fully mobilised by July and this collectively will provide 12 homes for children in Cheshire East with a greater potential to achieve much better outcomes as a result of being back in their communities.

### Fostering

- 8.5. In February, Cheshire East commissioned an independent review of the fostering service which made recommendations service wide but specifically in relation to our engagement in the fostering collaboration, Foster4. It was highlighted that despite attempts to make the collaboration a success, fundamentally this was not achieving its key priority to recruit new foster carers and so the decision was made to exit

from this arrangement and to develop a Cheshire East recruitment and retention strategy. It is pleasing to share that to date there is an increase in enquiries and assessment of potential new foster carers with a provisional date for the permanent exit from Foster4 in September 2020.

#### Foster Care Fortnight

- 8.6. Foster Care Fortnight 2020 was a success in sharing our vision for Cheshire East children to live in Cheshire East. We were able to prepare and record our own fostering advert for a local radio station with lots of presence on social media. Foster Care Fortnight is not only about generating enquiries to become Cheshire East foster carers but in the time of a national pandemic, was an opportunity to pay credit to all the hard work our foster carers do for our children on a daily basis.

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

- 9.1 Committee will be aware from the data previously provided that the timeliness and completion of our initial health assessments (IHAs) for our cared for children can be a challenge. We have a specific focus on this in the Help me to be Healthy corporate parenting subgroup and the designated nurse for cared for children returned to work in April which will greatly assist in this task.
- 9.2 Health services when faced with this national crisis were able to be clear with the Local Authority at the beginning of the pandemic that whilst virtual, there would be no detriment to the availability to complete IHAs for cared for children.
- 9.3 Other health outcomes for children have seen some compromise as a result of the pressure on the NHS and the way they have been able to work and so routine dental examinations for cared for children and care leavers have been delayed as a direct result of Covid-19.

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

- 10.1 Our care experienced adults are one of the cohorts of young people who have experienced the pandemic most severely because of social isolation and subsequent emotional well-being challenges. Frontline staff have worked hard to continue to keep in contact with young adults and we have seen positive examples of where this has worked well, for example two care leavers who were previously of no fixed abode sought support and accessed emergency housing and are now safer as a result of this.

10.2 There have been challenges corporately around housing for care experienced adults being able to transition into social housing, the spontaneous arrivals of UASC young people and the sheer restrictions of lockdown for young people in supported accommodation. However we have had a clear sufficiency plan in place from the point at which we went into lockdown and identified ring fenced offers for care leavers within our current supported accommodation offer to ensure that they were not placed at any greater risk during this period and essentially had a home if they needed it in a crisis.

10.3 Care leavers have been provided with additional support in many ways such as agreeing extended staying put arrangements to enable them to remain in their family homes post 21, additional financial support on a weekly basis, and access to technology and data so that they can stay connected.

10.4 The Committee will be aware that we had planned to review the local offer for care leavers this year however have postponed this to January 2021 along with the 16+ supported accommodation recommission to ensure that we deliver this at a time when we can engage the market and make the offer to care leaver clear and consistent.

## **11. National or legislative changes**

11.1 On the 6<sup>th</sup> April, the Government issued guidance for local authorities in direct response to the adverse impact of the lockdown restrictions. This guidance outlined amendments to 10 specific regulatory frameworks for adoption, fostering and care planning to support local authorities to undertake their duties.

11.2 Officers considered the benefits of the relaxation of these regulatory amendments however continued to pursue our duties in line with statutory frameworks, albeit with a short period where virtual working dominated in the initial stages of lockdown.

## **12. Implications of the Recommendations**

### **12.1. Legal Implications**

12.1.1 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 came into force on 24th April 2020 and will remain in force until 25th September 2020.

12.1.2 The regulations are intended to assist local authorities in relation to the operation of their duties under normal statute and regulations.

12.1.3 We have liaised carefully with Legal Services about the effect of the Amendment Regulations and we are clear that any operations that do not adhere to normal legislation and regulation should be the subject of a clearly recorded rationale.

12.3.4 This is particularly important because the Amendment Regulations themselves are the subject of a pending legal challenge to the Government's introduction of the Regulations, by those concerned about the diminution of local authority duties at this time and the adverse impact that would have on children.

12.3.5 Accordingly, whilst we have been challenged by the new ways in which we have had to support our cared for children, we have been quick to enact a recovery plan and are able to evidence where usual standards have been not 'reasonably practicable' only in a small number of cases.

## **12.2. Financial Implications**

12.2.1 The impact of the resource pressures relating directly to Covid-19 need to be clearly evidenced and we will be able to collectively monitor the impact of this for cared for children and care leavers in the coming months.

12.2.2 The Council will include such costs in monthly returns to the Government.

12.2.3 The Covid-19 funding received by the Council to date is over-subscribed so these costs may form pressures against the Council's budget.

## **12.3. Equality Implications**

12.3.1 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.

## **12.4. Human Resources Implications**

12.4.1 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.

## **12.5. Risk Management Implications**

12.5.1 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.

## **12.6. Rural Communities Implications**

12.6.1 There are no direct rural communities implications of this report.

## **12.7. Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children**

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

## **12.8. Public Health Implications**

12.8.1 The impact of Covid-19 is well documented within this report. Public Health advice has been sought and followed in relation to service changes.

## **12.9. Climate Change Implications**

12.9.1 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. Our cared for children 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 shadow committee.

**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:

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