

DECISION REPORT

Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting: 19 January 2021

Report Title: Corporate Parenting Update Report

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

Senior Officer: Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People

1. Report Summary

- 1.1. This report will advise the Corporate Parenting Committee of how the service are delivering the priorities for cared for children and care leavers which are clearly set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy.
- 1.2. This report will provide the fourth 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 10 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 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 17 November 2020. Frontline services, in line with the priorities set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy, continue to deliver our statutory duties and 10 months into the pandemic we are able to see evidence of permanence for children within the Court arena, including children achieving adoption 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 25th 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 have developed 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 regulations are currently in place until the 31st March 2021.
- 5.3. The service continues to use individual risk assessments to support safe service delivery for children, young people, their parents, carers and family members and also our frontline colleagues. These risk assessments include the 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 assessments. 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 Cheshire East Council committed to the pledges of the Corporate Parenting Strategy 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 rolled out a participation and engagement survey in December 2020 with the intention of truly understanding the lived experience of the broadest audience of children and young people. We also plan to subsequently shape our participation and engagement offer learning from the pandemic where alternative ways of working have been helpful for our children and young people.
- 6.2 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 partner 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.
- 6.3 Corporate Parenting Committee will be aware of the plans in place for elected members to be much closer to frontline colleagues, engaging meaningfully with children and young people and embracing 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 children's homes. Feedback from 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.
- 6.4 We are ambitious corporate parents to our children and young people and care experienced adults and made the commitment in 2017 to embrace the 'New Burdens' that placed a statutory responsibility upon Local Authorities to extend their support to care experienced adults to age 25. Every six months, 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 however seen an increase in care experienced adults accepting the support offered during the pandemic and this has seen additional support provided in relation to emotional well-being, finances and support with employment. This is evidence of our corporate parenting commitment and we are now considering what the prolonged period of additional demand could mean for capacity within the service.

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 into the first academic term. Robust safeguarding measures remained in place to track vulnerable pupils not in education and electively home educated, and support made available to children and families in this situation.
- 7.2. The Virtual School and frontline teams continue to focus on frequency of 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 will launch in January 2021 with the Chair of Governors being the Director of Children's Social Care and the governing body featuring the Children in Care Council and foster carer representatives. 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 young people who are 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.

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 cumulative backlog of Court progression work and continue to work closely with the Local Family Justice Board to progress this.
- 8.3 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 interview, where in-depth discussions take place to inform subsequent risk assessments from the social worker who can consider the bigger picture.
- 8.4 Our children who are living out of borough or 'at a distance' represent around 40% of our cared for population and includes children living with Cheshire East foster carers, children placed for adoption, with parent and family members, and 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 service delivery throughout the pandemic has continued to ensure that our children are seen and plans progress. 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 first Mockingbird constellation that launched in November 2020.

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

- 9.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee will receive the Annual Report of the Health of our Cared for Children during the committee meeting.
- 9.2 Overall the 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 continues 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 four dental practices are being developed where cared for children will be prioritised.

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 well-being and relationships.
- 10.2. The sustainability of dedicated emotional well-being support is currently being explored with the CCG. We have been able to introduce a fitness and well-being service (RAGE Fitness – see Appendix 1) to care experienced adults, which we are hopeful will offer an alternative to talk therapy and produce multiple outcomes, an offer that has been well received in different local authorities.

11. National or legislative changes

- 11.1. 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 were reviewed on the 25 September 2020 by government and significantly reduced the flexibilities initially introduced.

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

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. These regulations were reviewed on the 25 September by government and significantly reduced the flexibilities initially introduced.

12.3. Financial Implications

- 12.3.1. There are no financial implications or changes 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.
- 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



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