

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Monday 10 September 2012 at 7.00 pm in Conference Room A, Civic Offices, Portsmouth.

(NB These minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda for the meeting.)

Present

Councillors: Darron Phillips (In the Chair)
Ken Ferrett
Lynne Stagg
Steve Wemyss (deputising for Alistair Thompson)
Matthew Winnington
Will Purvis

Also Present

Councillors: Donna Jones
Sandra Stockdale
Rob Wood

Julian Wooster, Strategic Director and Director of Children's Services
Kate Freeman, Looked After Children Service Commissioning Manager
Teresa Deasy, Local Democracy Officer

37 Declaration of Members' Interests (AI 1)

There were no declarations of interest.

38 Apologies for Absence (AI 2)

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Alistair Thompson and Stephen Kitchman, Head of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding.

39 Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 August 2012 (AI 3)

(TAKE IN MINUTES)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 20 August 2012 be confirmed as a correct record.

40 Presentation outlining the structure of the services for looked after children and how services operate. (AI 4)

Kate Freeman, Looked After Children Service Commissioning Manager, gave a presentation on the structure and profile of the services provided for looked after children.

(TAKE IN PRESENTATION HANDOUTS)

In response to questions from the panel, the following points were discussed and clarified.

If there are a high numbers of children in the 6-13 age range then overall numbers of looked after children are likely to be high. Therefore, it is important to monitor the age range of younger children as it becomes more difficult to place children as they get older.

Members noted that 79% of looked after children were classified as White British and requested a break down on the ethnic minority of the remaining 21% for the next meeting.

It was pointed out that some carers of Portsmouth children live outside the city including some that have been recruited on the Isle of Wight.

The percentage of children in care with family and friends at 11% was within the 10-15% national average.

6% of children are in in-house residential care and only 1% are in external residential care, as Portsmouth is fortunate enough to have in-house residential care facilities.

In contrast with other local authorities, Portsmouth has not seen an increase in court activity. Members asked for some suggestions as to why this was the case.

Members pointed out that the percentage of placements shown accounted for only 85% of children and asked about the remaining 15%. It was explained that some young people are asylum seekers and thus they would be counted separately and that others in the age range 16-18 may have returned to live at home but would still be categorised as "in care". It was also pointed out that some looked after children involved in crime were in custody and would therefore not be counted in the placement figures.

As the educational profile of Portsmouth looked after children appears to be significantly worse compared with our statistical neighbours, the figures are being checked.

Many children are looked after by carers in other areas and although it is usually important for children to be looked after near to friends and family, there are sometimes valid reasons why children need to be cared for away from their home area. For this reason some children are cared for out of the area and some children from other areas are placed with Portsmouth carers.

The Looked After Children service works with the Housing Options Manager and the Youth Support Commissioning Manager to provide support to care leavers. Members asked for more information from the Youth Support Commissioning Manager about whether there is special treatment for Looked After Children.

With regard to looked after children involved in crime, it was explained that the service worked with the Youth Offending Manager. The Troubled Families Coordinator also works with these children. Officers commented that looked after children under 18 in custody remained the responsibility of Portsmouth City Council and they were a difficult group to manage.

In reply to a question about supported living for care leavers, it was explained that there was a need for a review of government policy on this matter. As specialists in the field of looked after children believe that it is not always appropriate to move young people out of supported accommodation as soon as they reach the age of 18.

Reference was made to residential accommodation in Portchester for 14-15 year olds upwards. Members were advised that no Portsmouth children were currently accommodated there but that the City Council was building on relationships with the Looked After Children's Services at Hampshire County Council and Southampton City Council.

Members requested details of the percentage of statutory visits made within the timescale required and the percentage of Personal Education Plans completed within the deadline.

It was explained that it was much easier to place younger children under the age of 5 and also children that do not have a disability. Older children tend to have more entrenched behaviours and/or tend to have been exposed to harmful family environments causing emotional damage and these factors may make it more difficult to find them a suitable placement.

In situations where carers and children are happy with a placement, arrangements can be made to stabilise the situation with a permanent care order or even adoption, if appropriate. Officers gave some indicators on the movement of children within the care system: 62% of children have been in the same placement for two years and 19.5% have had three placements within a year. The national averages are 81% and 15% and so in this respect Portsmouth is in the bottom range of performance.

Officers reported that dealing with siblings who ask to be placed together can be difficult. The small size of the housing stock in Portsmouth means that carers very often do not have sufficient bedrooms to accommodate two or more siblings. Sometimes there are situations involving violence or sexual abuse of one or more siblings by another when it is obviously most important to keep siblings apart.

One member pointed out that the City Council had the facility to move foster carers who are council tenants to larger properties so that they can keep siblings together. Another possibility was to provide for properties to be enlarged by building on an extra room or putting in partition walls to create more bedrooms. However, this could be expensive and so it was not the norm. Members asked for details of the percentage of foster carers in public and private sector housing. At this point it was pointed out that the total budget for Children's Social Care was £24m and of this £10m was allocated to looked after children. The point was also made that if a 3-4 year old child coming into care is not adopted it can cost the local authority nearly £1m to care for the child if he/she remains in care up to the age of 16.

At this point Councillor Purvis left the meeting at 8:05pm.

Children coming into care at the age of 8 or 9 tend to be more damaged and sometimes there may be arguments that the local authority should have intervened earlier to take them into care perhaps with a view to eventually getting them adopted. However, it is a difficult and emotional decision to remove a child from its parents. More recently however, there has been a change of attitude in the field of children's social care away from the idea that removing children from the care of the parents is a last resort option towards the direction of earlier intervention. Therefore, the adoption figures have gone up because social workers have intervened earlier.

Members asked whether there was a link looked after children and teenage pregnancies and were advised that the statistics were not very different from those of the general population. Nevertheless, there is evidence that when looked after children go on to become parents at the age of 19-23, they may be poor parents themselves, possibly because their own childhood parenting experiences were not good. The need for education in this area for both girls and boys was highlighted as a possible way to prevent history from repeating itself. The family nurse partnership was being established as a support mechanism for teenage parents to prevent future problems leading to children having to be taken into care.

Referring to the possibility of making adoption easier, it was pointed out that there were risks. The main concern was that an adoption may break down leading to further emotional damage to a child.

In reply to a question about the incidence of cases where foster carers have abused children in their care, officers explained that there was always a risk. However, the regulations were tight: the foster carer has a social worker, the child has a different social worker and the placement is monitored by an Independent Reviewing Officer. Unannounced visits are also carried out.

41 Timetable for Witnesses to attend meetings (AI 5)

Members agreed that it would be appropriate to invite up to three witnesses dealing with the same general theme to attend meetings of the panel at the same time. They agreed on the themes and witnesses as set out below:

1. Care Planning –
 - a. Fostering Recruitment and Investment Leads – Pauline Pearce, Fostering Recruitment & Assessment Team Manager and Stephen Kitchman, Head of Children’s Social Care & Safeguarding
 - b. Permanency/Care Planning Lead- Mary Brimson, Safeguarding Monitoring Commissioning Manager
 - c. Development of Residential Provision Lead – Kate Freeman, Looked After Children Service Commissioning Manager

2. Prevention –
 - a. Prevention Lead- Hayden Ginns, Commissioning & Partnerships Manager
 - b. Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services Lead – Kate Slater, Senior Development Manager and Dawn Saunders, Associate Director Public Health Trust HQ
 - c. Reduce Youth Offending Lead – Jon Gardner, Youth Offending Manager

3. Stability –
 - a. Improve choice and availability of accommodation for care leavers and opportunities for training/employment Leads – Sharon George, Youth Support Commissioning Manager and Elaine Bastable, Housing Options Manager
 - b. Develop virtual school arrangements Leads – Di Mitchell, Head of Education and Tim McGuire, Education Improvement Commissioning Manager
 - c. Improve supervised contract arrangements for looked after children and their families Lead – Sarah Newman, Commissioning Manager Assessment Services

4. Involve Young People –
 - a. Improve involvement of young people in shaping service delivery Lead - Mary Brimson, Safeguarding Monitoring Commissioning Manager
 - b. The Children in Care Council

5. Children’s Home Visit – it was agreed that it would be appropriate for a small group of panel members to visit

RESOLVED:

1. that Looked After Children Service Commissioning Manager and the Local Democracy Officer to arrange for the officers listed above to be invited to attend meetings according to the meeting schedule as set out in minute number 42 below.
2. that Looked After Children Service Commissioning Manager and the Local Democracy Officer to arrange a date for a Children’s Home visit and to email panel members with possible dates with a view to reaching agreement regarding who will attend.

42 Dates of future meetings (AI 6)

RESOLVED that the following schedules of meetings (all to be held at 7:00pm, venue to be arranged)be agreed:

- **Monday, 8 October 2012**
- **Monday, 29 October 2012**
- **Monday, 19 November 2012**
- **Monday, 17 December 2012**
- **A further date in early January 2013 to be scheduled.**

The meeting concluded at 8:40 pm.

TMD
24 September 2012
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