

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY PANEL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING of the Education, Children & Young People's Scrutiny Panel on Monday, 29 October 2012 at 7.00 pm in the Executive Meeting Room in the Guildhall, 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
Will Purvis
Alistair Thompson
Matthew Winnington

Also Present

Mike Robson, Charter Academy Parent Governor
Representative
Kate Freeman, Looked After Children Service
Commissioning Manager
Mary Brimson, Safeguarding Monitoring
Commissioning Manager
Debbie Price, Fostering Team Manager
SM, Foster Carer
TP, Foster Carer
SP, Foster Carer
Teresa Deasy, Local Democracy Officer

51 Declaration of Members' Interests (AI 1)

There were no declarations of interest.

52 Apologies for Absence (AI 2)

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Helen Reeder, Teachers' Liaison Panel.

53 Fostering Recruitment and Investment

Debbie Price introduced this item by explaining that there were two fostering teams in Portsmouth. One team deals with fostering support and the other dealt with fostering recruitment. A total of 240 children are currently in foster care. One hundred and seventy six of these are with Portsmouth foster carers and 76 are with independent foster carers. Forty four new fostering households have been approved since April 2011. There are a number of foster carers who have been de-registered; but this may be because foster carers have retired from the duty or the children in their care have reached adulthood. In the fostering team there is a small group of people who specialise in matching children to carers and they have become very skilled and specialised in this area; this service is provided by the access to

resources team. This team also works on fostering a joined up approach between the neighbouring authorities of Hampshire, Southampton, Surrey and a number of other local authorities involved in fostering. This has helped to keep costs down.

The foster carers were then invited to explain their experiences and to answer questions from the panel. TP explained that she used to be a child minder and then when her own children went to university she decided that it would be an opportunity to foster, as she felt she needed something to do. She had been fostering for six years and cared for newborns in the pre-adoption period. TP felt she had been very successful in this role but sometimes it was hard handing over the infants to their adoptive parent. On the other hand, she was very pleased to see infants being adopted by caring parents and that they would have a secure future. She was often in touch with adoptive parents and was godmother to two of the children who had been in her care.

TP expressed satisfaction with the training given by the foster caring service, adding that training was ongoing. In reply to a question from a panel member, she explained that the time period between application to become a foster carer and approval in her case was about nine months, but she understood that since then the period from application to approval had been fast tracked. TP added that she only cared for one child at a time normally. Regarding payment, she explained that, as she was a level two carer she was happy with the money earned. However, she understood that some level one carers were not so happy with the payment given. TP explained that level one carers are less experienced new recruits and are allocated less complex cases.

SP explained that she was a level three carer. She had been fostering for 11 years and this included five years with Portsmouth City Council. She was currently fostering a 17 year old boy, who had been with her since the age of 11, and a 12 year old girl who had been with her for six months. She was very pleased with the progress made by the 17 year old boy. SP reported, in reply to a question, support from the Education Service had been available to her when she had needed it as was support from the foster caring service. As a level three carer one parent has to be at home full time.

SM explained that she lived on the Isle of Wight and had been fostering for six years, but she had only been with Portsmouth City Council since September. She had transferred from a fostering agency due to the matching issues. She was currently supporting two boys, one aged 13 and one aged 15. SM commented that the training and support with Portsmouth City Council was much better than the support she had received from the fostering agency previously. She added that the fact that she lived on the Isle of Wight is not a problem. In reply to questions regarding contact with birth parents, SM explained that one of her foster children she was very fortunate in having contact with his parents and the extended family and the child had considerable contact. However, the other child has no contact with his family.

SP reported that next year training would be available on dealing with birth parents. However, there was always the facility to phone the fostering service for advice. Foster carers commented that the information they received about the children was excellent and if any problems arose, the foster caring service was available to address them very quickly and as carers they always felt well supported.

Members asked what would happen if a child were to run away from their foster carer. Kate Freeman explained that looked after children were always monitored and that the service had to complete annual returns to the government regarding children who go missing. There were also multi-agency plans for children who have come to the attention of the police. At this point, members asked the clerk to note that there was a need to ask the police for information about how they deal with looked after children who abscond.

In reply to question from a panel member regarding whether fostering service listens to carers' issues and concerns in dealing with parents, TP replied that she had a good relationship with the parents of the child that she was fostering. She explained that foster carers have a contact book in which they are required to write down their concerns. She explained that when a child moves on to become adopted the process normally works very well and she is always very keen to know how the adoption has proceeded.

As SM had indicated that, in the past she had fostered children from asylum seeker families. Members asked whether she had received support in relation to dealing with cultural and religious issues. SM explained that she had not received a lot of support from the agency on the Isle of Wight but she had kept the two boys concerned for about three and a half years, had done her best to deal with these issues and she believed that the fostering had worked well. At this point members noted that they wished to explore the issue regarding how we deal with ethnic minorities and religious and cultural issues.

54 Permanency and Care Planning

Mary Brimson introduced this item explaining that all children have a care plan based on a child's individual needs. There is a presumption that contact with birth parents will take place unless there are good reasons for it not to happen. She gave a presentation including handouts.

(TAKE IN PRESENTATION)

In reply to a question from a panel member regarding if a child has special educational needs, Mary explained that all children have a personal education plan (PEP) and this has to specify any additional needs, equipment, learning and transport to school (if appropriate). All children also have an allowance of £500 to enable them to pursue educational interests.

In reply to a question from panel members regarding temporary foster caring Mary explained that sometimes children needed to be fostered when a parent was temporarily incapacitated or the mother had an abusive partner. When returning to families there was a need to ensure that sufficient change had taken place to ensure the safety of the child. After a child returns to its family the social worker maintains regular contact with the family for a minimum of six months to a year depending on the situation. Care proceedings can go on for a considerable time and in some cases many years depending on the issues involved.

The chair asked for figures on children who had returned to parents and then returned to care at a later date.

Mike Robson asked how many children nowadays were allowed back to a single father. Kate Freeman explained that, prior to returning a child to the family home, a rigorous assessment of the parent was carried out, irrespective of whether it was a mother or a father or both and there were very clear systems in place to safeguard children. The independent reviewing officer also has a relationship with the child and knows the family.

Members asked whether assessments prior to a child returning to parents were always done by a qualified social worker. Kate Freeman explained that assessments regarding looked after children prior to their return to their birth family were always overseen by an experienced social worker, if they were carried out by a non-qualified social worker. Team managers would allocate the work and the head of service would scrutinise all work carried out by social workers. All non-qualified social workers have protected caseloads and all are supervised.

Panel members asked why residence orders applied up to the age of 16 and special guardianship orders could apply up to age 18. Mary Brimson explained the reason was due to different legislation. Kate Freeman further explained that a child can leave school at 16 and become independent. However, if they go on to pursue full time further education, a residential order can be extended to allow them to remain with their foster family.

Members also asked about the length of the adoption process. Mary Brimson commented that often it was too long and could take up to three years. However, the government was keen to reduce the time to within one year. She explained that, in the case of babies with no medical or special educational needs, the process can be much shorter and can be less than a year. However, for sibling groups or children with medical or educational needs, the process can be more difficult and take much longer. There was also the fact that the older the child the more difficult it was to arrange adoption. There were also still some delays in court procedures in assessing whether a child needs a permanent adoption.

In reply to a question from a panel member regarding improvements in the process of matching children to parents, Kate Freeman explained that Portsmouth's history in avoiding adoption breakdown had been very good. However, there was a history of children not being placed for adoption when they should have been. Each looked after child has a social worker and an independent reviewing officer. Reviews are carried out at least every six

months and can be more often if necessary. The independent reviewing officer meets with the child before the review to ensure that the child's views are taken into account. The number of independent reviewing officers is 6.5 full time equivalent.

At this point Mary Brimson left the meeting.

55 Development of Residential Provision

Kate Freeman introduced this item and explained that there were three residential units currently operating independently. However, the new Ofsted framework came into force in April with a more outcomes focussed emphasis. The units were inspected under the new framework and there were aspects of good practice but two of the units inspected were recorded as needing some improvement. The Ofsted inspections had highlighted the need to look at how we measure improvement.

As a result of the inspection it had been decided to reduce the managers from three to two. Kate referred to a recent report entitled the health of looked after children which had been circulated this month by the looked after children's health group. The report proposed that the very skilled residential staff could be employed differently and this was the reason for moving to a hub approach or a whole team approach and to prevent children from becoming looked after.

The units maintained good relationships with the schools and many looked after children attend the Harbour School. There are also arrangements with the youth services and many of the young people had bespoke packages in to provide positive activities.

Members requested information about the schools which children in residential units attended. At this point, the chairman asked for information about looked after children who have statements relating to behavioural rather than learning issues. It was agreed that this information could be provided when looking at education.

Members enquired as to how Portsmouth looked after children fared compared to other educational areas. Kate explained that the education steering group for looked after children was in place and was able to track children through their education. Kate added that one of the challenges is that half of the children are educated outside Portsmouth and some of the academies are not willing to provide information about the achievement of looked after children.

At this point members had a number of questions regarding timetables for adoption including the best and worst case scenarios and more information about social work caseloads and how they were handled with regard to the supervision of the non-qualified social workers. It was agreed that members would send their questions into the Local Democracy Officer and she would forward them to Kate Freeman.

Kate Freeman went on to report that the Ofsted inspection had found that leadership and management at the residential units was outstanding. The quality of care was good to outstanding. The Skye Close and Tangier Road homes were recorded as adequate but this judgement had been based on the cohort of pupils that was being dealt with at the time. Fifty per cent of those children had only been there for six months therefore it was felt that the inspection did not really meet the statement of purpose.

Kate Freeman explained that residential units were for children from age 13 upwards but the average age was 15 years.

Mike Robson reported that Kingston Prison Service was doing some work with some of the children at Admiral Lord Nelson and Charter Schools. He wondered whether the looked after children service was using this service sufficiently. He agreed to supply information to Teresa Deasy for onward transmission to Kate Freeman.

At this point at 8.30 pm Kate Freeman left the meeting.

56 Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 October 2012 (AI 3)

(TAKE IN MINUTES)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Education, Children & Young People's Scrutiny Panel held on 8 October 2012 be confirmed as a correct record.

57 Actions to be Undertaken before the next Meeting

- (1) The clerk was requested to find out more about the arrangements for children's home visits.
- (2) The following questions to be covered during members' visits to children's homes were agreed:
 - (i) Resources – activities outside of the school or home for example clubs, extracurricular activities, sporting activities
 - (ii) Emotional support – how do you get on with the staff? Do you feel able to ask for help with problems?
 - (iii) Questions for staff – how do you think things have moved on during the last 12 months? Do you feel you are being listened to?
 - (iv) It was also agreed that it would be important to obtain information from the courts regarding the treatment of looked after children and adoption etc. It was agreed that this could be done in January and the clerk was requested to make the necessary arrangements.

The meeting concluded at 8.45 pm.

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