

CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education held on Thursday, 25 July 2024 at 4.00 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Suzy Horton (in the Chair)

Councillors Hannah Brent
 Tom Coles
 Lee Tindall

13. Apologies

No apologies had been received.

14. Declarations of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

15. Regional Care Co-operative

Sarah Daly, Director of Children's Services, introduced the report and informed members that the government had published Stable Homes, Built on Love in February 2023. In Portsmouth we do an excellent job in supporting children we care for and the local authority has committed to a successful regional bid and are working with 18 other authorities to design and build our Regional Care Co-operative (RCC). RCCs offer the opportunity for a radical shift in the case system and are part of a broader package of measure to transform placements for children we care for. In some areas, placements may cost up to £60,000 per week for a child with significant needs.

This is why the RCC is so important as it will play a key role in shaping future delivery of children's services and aims to provide four new children's homes across the area. This will increase sufficiency and, by pooling budgets and working together, authorities within the RCC will be able to better plan, commission and deliver places in foster care, children's homes and secure children's homes.

The Director of Children's Services added that the RCC represents the best prospect of developing new and innovative ways to secure the placements needed for looked after children. However, she also advised that the funding for the programme is time limited and due to end in June 2025.

Members' questions

In response to members' questions, the Director of Children's Services and Mark Jowett, the Head of Children We Care For, clarified that:

- Compared to other areas, relatively few Portsmouth children are placed outside the city and only 12% are placed more than 20 miles away.
- In many cases children are placed outside the city to ensure that the child is in a placement well matched to meet their specific needs.
- There are however a very small number who are not in the right placement and there are some children with very complex needs who move around more than is desirable.
- The RCC is working on a business case for additional children's homes, and the business cases for these will be signed off by the DfE, although they are within the provision of the project.
- Foster care, supported by the Mockingbird Project, in Portsmouth is excellent and will be further supported by outcomes arising from the RCC.
- There are 6-7 children who would really benefit from the places offered by the new children's homes.
- The overall effect of the RCC will benefit all children we care for as it will increase local placement choice and availability.

Members' comments

The Cabinet Member noted that she was proud that Portsmouth would be playing a key role in shaping the future delivery of this important part of children's services. However, she expressed concerns about the 'cliff edge' facing the authorities within the RCC when the project concludes in June 2025, and she encouraged officers to lobby the new government at the earliest opportunity. She noted further that investing in children's services always takes a long time to show results.

The report, which was for information, was noted.

16. Children Going Home - Reunification Project 2024

Reneé Eddy, Service Lead for Building Your Futures and Adoption, introduced the report. The Service Lead explained that the 'Going Home' work is based on the knowledge that many children and young people in care have a wish to return to their birth families. The project is designed to support looked after children return home to a parent in a planned way, where it is safe to do so. The plan is to continue to review and further develop this model, learning from those with lived experience of the work.

The Cabinet Member expressed her pride in the passion shown by the whole team in supporting the children we care for. Councillor Tom Cole commented that he had enjoyed the reading report, particularly the stories and lived experiences it contained, and he noted that it included the first mention of Paddington Bear he had seen in a Council report.

Members' questions

In response to members' questions, the Service Lead for Building Your Futures and Adoption and the Head of Children We Care For officers clarified that:

- In the past, the rate of children returning to their parents' care was low and failure rates were high.
- The 'Going Home' project aims to support children and their families by understanding areas of need, assessing risk and developing a pathway and plan of support.
- Support includes helping build or restore relationships between children and their parents and working alongside other agencies including Adult Family Safeguarding and Lifelong Links for sustained periods.
- Children's Services benefits from a stable team of social workers although there are always challenges in managing demand and capacity.
- Every 'Going Home' plan is different and reflects the individual needs of the child and their family.
- Once a child and their family are on the pathway, progress is tracked weekly, and the team responds quickly to changing circumstances.
- The aim is to build relationships within families over time so that it is not necessary to bring children back into care.

Members' comments

The Cabinet Member noted that there were always challenges around measuring the success of preventative work. Councillor Hannah Brent commented that it was hard to imagine what many of the children have been through and that the work to support them was outstanding.

Councillor Suzy Horton commented that the report had brought the work to life by telling the stories of children and their families and clearly showed that every case was different and needed a bespoke package of support.

The Director of Children's Services noted that the benefits of bringing adult practitioners into the service has been immense. Better stability within the social work team delivers benefits to children and their families and social workers want to work in a better service, notwithstanding the difficult and hard decisions that need to be made. She commented that the social workers in this team often travel away from home and their own children to support the children we care for and to bring those families back together.

The Cabinet Member commented that Members now had a better understanding of this important work, and she asked that the team to be informed that the report had been very well received. Councillor Suzy Horton and other councillors present also asked that their thanks be conveyed to the team.

The report, which was for information, was noted.

The meeting concluded at 4.36 pm.

Councillor Suzy Horton
Chair