

Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report

PREFACE

By Councillor Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Chairman of the Corporate Parenting Panel

The role of 'Corporate Parent' is a collective responsibility of the Council, therefore all Councillors have a basic level of responsibility for Children in Care.

The Panel:

- provides a forum for Elected Members to champion the needs of Essex's Children in Care and Young People Leaving Care;
- challenges and monitors the performance of the Council and its partner agencies in caring for and supporting Children in Care and Young People Leaving Care, in Essex;
- supports the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, to deliver the statutory responsibilities;
- receives quarterly performance management outcomes for services to Children in Care and Young People Leaving Care, including Management Information and Performance Indicators, as well as quarterly reports from the Independent Reviewing Service and Independent Advocacy Service; and
- meets with the Children in Care Council to improve Corporate Parenting in Essex and ensure that the Children and Young People's voices are heard.

I commend this first Report to the Council.

1. Panel Membership (7: 2: 1)

- i) Ten Members of the County Council, appointed in proportion to the political representation of the Council; and
- ii) Two Essex Foster Carers Association (EFCA) Members representing Foster Carers.

Councillors: R Gooding, Cabinet Member for Children's Services (Chairman)
C Riley (Vice-Chairman)

S Candy

T Chapman

J Deakin

M Fisher

D Madden

R Pearson

J Pike

J Young

Mr J Bond, Chair of Essex Foster Care Association

Mr A Keeble, Vice Chair of Essex Foster Care Association

2. The Work of the Panel

The Panel meets four times a year to monitor and challenge services provided for Children in Care and Young People Leaving Care. Over the last year the number of Children in Care has reduced from 1,483 (April 2012) to 1,335 (October 2012). The downward trend evidences the continued impact of the County's work with partners to improve the range of services offered to support parents, families and vulnerable children. When children are considered to be at risk swift targeted assessments and interventions should be provided within the Community. The newly-formed Divisional-Based Intervention Teams (DBIT) are working with teenagers to manage their behaviour. The Children in Care numbers per 10,000 has reduced from 53 (2010/11) to 50 (2011/12) which is lower than the national figures at 59 but higher than the Statistical Neighbouring Authorities at 47.

Stay Safe Data

The Panel reviews quarterly performance management outcomes for and services to Children in Care and Young People Leaving Care, including Management Information and Performance Indicators monitoring all aspects of Children in Care. The data details the following:

- the number and age range of Children in Care;
- Health and Dental Checks;
- the distance children are placed from their home address;
- Education Attainment and attendance;
- Personal Education Plan compliance;
- the number of Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET);
- the number of statutory visits completed within the timeframe;
- the number of caseloads on average a Social Worker holds.

Independent Reviewing Service

The Service has provided Annual reports since the Children's Act 2002. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) monitor the quality of the Child in Care reviews and become a critical friend for the child/young person. The (IROs) chair the regular review meetings monitoring the children's progress and commenting on any challenges throughout the year. Each IRO has a case load of less than 69 children (November 2012). The IROs build relationships with the children, which is different to the child/Social Worker relationship as they monitor the children's care and challenge and solve any problems. The service no longer reviews Children with Disabilities attending short respite breaks. The IRO service reviewed 97.7 percent within the statutory timeframe in 2011/12. Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that the Health Assessments and the child's Care Plan are in order. The Service is monitored through quarterly reports on the Council's performance as a corporate parent. The team is now permanently staffed. Specialist Independent Reviewing Officers review the care plans for Children with Disabilities. All children over four years old are given the opportunity to participate in their own reviews.

Foster Carers Recruitment and Retention

The County has highlighted the need to recruit and retain Foster Carer placements for sibling groups, older children or children with complex needs. More Foster Carers have been trained to take Parent and Child placements. National Foster Care Fortnight takes place every May when Essex has an intensive period of recruitment activity. From April 2012 to the end of September 2012 a net increase of 24 Foster Care beds was achieved. The conversion rate of enquiries to approved fostering households dropped from 8% to 6.8% as improved management information meant that the Service took up applications only in the areas and for the groups of children which had been prioritised.

Views and Experiences of Children in Care

Members met the young people at their Activity Day in August whilst taking part in the activities where Members discussed and acknowledged the young people's views and experiences of being taken into care. Young people are able to take training opportunities to take part in the Social Worker interview process.

Sufficiency and Commissioning for Children in Care

A Member Task and Finish Group met three times in June and July to consider the proposed Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy in detail. All Local Authorities are required to produce a Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children in Care by 1 April 2012. The suite of documents will be available on the website and will form part of the suite of documents inspected by Ofsted. The strategy provides information on the gaps in placement provision. The statistical analysis provides population trends, children's needs and gaps in services to provide the County and any prospective company with all the information for the County's Children in Care. Providers will expect to see the detailed analysis before investing in specialist provision in Essex. Children with Disabilities are more likely to continue to be placed across the UK as they have complex needs, sometimes with very rare conditions with limited specialist placements as there may only be one home providing this care.

Social Care now identifies younger children who are at significant risk of harm and brings them into care more quickly than in 2009. There are lesser numbers of older children coming into care as it is recognised that the impact of being in care gives them poorer life chances. The Service is committed to provide extra services to enable young people to stay with their families which will therefore reduce the number of young people coming into care. The children and young people who will be taken into care in the future, will in the main, have more complex needs. There is no expectation that children who have already been placed in care across the UK will be brought back to Essex if their placement is a good match for them. The Panel will receive regular updates on the strategy.

Local Delivery Quadrant Report

The Panel receives a report from one of the quadrants at each meeting. The reports focus on the different achievements and needs at a local level.

Adoption Annual Report 2011/12

National Adoption Week takes place in November and this year the Adoption Service featured the stories of children successfully placed for adoption in the last year. In the year 2011/12 70 children were placed for adoption and Adoption Orders were made in respect of 93 children. The Service provides careful preparation for children and for adoptive families to enable the new family to understand and meet the complex needs of these children. Investment in skilled support after adoption is necessary as the County places more children and young people with complex needs. The Service supervised 56 face-to-face meetings between adopted children, their adoptive families and birth relatives. They also managed 2,032 exchanges of letters which allow adopted children to have indirect contact with their birth families.

There is a current Government consultation on Adoption and Fostering Services.

Earlier in the year Essex Adoption Service received an overall "Good" rating from the Ofsted inspection with outstanding in the category of "helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do". Ofsted also highlighted the excellent post adoption support to children and adults affected by adoption; the good assessments the service undertakes for prospective adopters to prepare them to look after children; and the passion that County employees have about their work on behalf of those children who need safe, caring adoptive homes.

Regulation 33 Update

The Panel receives a Regulation 33 update at each meeting detailing the Member and officer visits and the Ofsted reports.

Achievement Service for Children in Care

The Service has produced a Tracker System for Children in Care to track their educational attainment and progress. Schools enter their assessment data termly. Both Essex and non-Essex schools log onto this system and can access the Social Worker details and can view the child's Personal Education Plans. The service also monitors the compliance of Personal Education Plans (PEPs). PEPs are assessed on their detail and quality to ensure that every child in care has an aspirational and meaningful plan. All Children in Care between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 have access to one-to-one tuition for English or Maths. There is a statutory requirement for all schools to prioritise children in care for one-to-one tuition.

The Service provided Designated Teacher Training: four sessions took place throughout the Spring Term 2012 including a Tracker System training session. A good mix of primary, secondary and special needs schools and Academies attended. Councillor Riley addressed the teachers and the Lively Trainers provided a session which the teachers found interesting. Anti-bullying was covered in the programme as significant numbers of Children in Care report bullying as an issue. Four School Governor sessions on school's responsibilities for Children in Care and the use of the Tracker System take place in the Autumn Term.

3. Conclusion

Over the last year the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel has seen the implementation of significant innovative programmes and amongst these the Divisional Based Intervention Teams (Dbit) has proved to be extremely successful in providing solutions to families with children and young people on the edge of care. In addition to this we are now about to proceed with the Multi-Systemic Therapy programme that is being funded by the ground breaking Social Impact Bond that has received much credit recently.

The decrease in the numbers of looked after children that is detailed within this report has been achieved by the implementation of a number of these measures and it is to be hoped that, given the challenges that face looked after children both in their educational achievement and their life chances, this can continue into the future.

However, Corporate Parents should not lose sight of the difficulties that have seriously affected children in care in the recent past and to that end the Panel is currently considering measures by which Elected Members can, in conjunction with Officers, retain an oversight of the whole process that serves the children and young people. We must not forget that as Corporate Parents we all owe a duty of care to these young people and must continue to strive to ensure that they all get the best possible start in life.

Councillor Ray Gooding
Chairman of the Corporate Parenting Panel