

CORPORATE PARENTING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13 July 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Brain (Chair)

Councillors: Simcox, Robson and Geddes

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Ann Page

CP01 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clelland, S Craig, McNally and Oliphant and co-opted members Julie McCartney and Sasha Ban.

CP02 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2015 were approved as a correct record.

CP03 CONSTITUTION

The Committee agreed the constitution of the Committee and the appointment of the Chair and Vice Chair for the current municipal year.

RESOLVED - That the information be noted.

CP04 ADOPTION ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee received a report outlining the activity of the Adoption Service for the year ending March 2015.

It was reported that during the year 34 children were adopted, 19 of whom were under the age of 2 years old and four were aged between 7 and 8, the oldest to be adopted last year. The number of placement orders reduced over the year, with only 6.7% of looked after children having a placement order granted, this compared to 13.8% at the end of the previous year. It was noted however that this decrease may in part be due to the changes in court proceedings and increased placements with family members.

In terms of recruitment, judging by 2014/15 figures, it was confirmed that adopters for 25 children are needed. To date this year there has been six children adopted and 13 children living with adopters and 15 families have been approved and awaiting placements, four of which will be going to the Adoption Panel this month.

Over the last year, two thirds of the children adopted are placed with Gateshead approved adopters and the remaining one third are placed with externally assessed adopters. When a child is placed in an externally assessed placement a fee is incurred of £27,000, however as of 3 July 2015 this fee will be re-funded for children adopted who are over the age of 5, are in a sibling group, are disabled or are from the BME community.

Two new events were held over the last year, one was held in the Civic Centre and brought together 23 sets of adopters to share the profiles of those children waiting for adoption. Feedback from this event was very positive and 19 expressions of interest were received from adopters. It was reported that all but two of the children profiled at that event have now been placed. An event was also held by the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) at Durham, which brought together adopters and children from across the region. The event was an adoption party, with a princess and pirate theme, and provided an opportunity for adopters to identify any potential matches. The feedback from this event was very positive and all four Gateshead children who attended have now been placed. In addition, three sets of Gateshead adopters who attended the event have been placed with children from outside of Gateshead.

It was reported that Government has invested £19.3 million to a National Adoption Support Fund. This is available to all local authorities to be used towards paying for essential therapy services for adoptive children. So far, Gateshead has had two successful applications, securing approximately £2,000 for a block of therapy sessions. It was acknowledged that there will be a challenge in terms of identifying where therapy will come from.

In terms of recruitment activity it was noted that radio campaigns and bill board advertising have been effective means of advertising.

It was noted that Fostering for Adoption involves a child being placed with his or hers prospective adopters during the assessment process. During the year there have been five placements, three went through to adoption and two are still places with a view to eventual adoption. It was reported that there has been mixed feedback around Fostering for Adoption and additional support has been put in place for those families. It was agreed that a case study on this would be brought back to October's Committee.

In relation to disruption of adoption placements it was reported that there was only one breakdown last year. The child has now been placed in residential care in Cumbria and a meeting has been held to discuss this, it was noted that good lessons have been learnt from this case.

In the coming year the focus will be on recruitment of adopters for older children, sibling groups and disabled children. Also, there will be focus on the regionalisation of adoption services to pool resources, discussions are currently ongoing with regional partners about this.

It was queried whether the £27,000 charge incurred for external placements

was reasonable. It was confirmed that this is reflective of the actual cost and is a reasonable estimate, it was noted that this figure was following regional agreement. The point was made that it would always be preferable to use Gateshead adopters because the assessments have been carried out by Gateshead, however most authorities have an excess of adopters so this is a way of encouraging placements.

It was questioned which event was the best approach. It was noted that both were positive, however it would depend on the individual child as to which would be more beneficial.

It was acknowledged that there is a surplus of adopters for single babies and it was queried whether there is any way to target recruitment to people who are willing to adopt others. It was confirmed that prospective adopters are spoken to at events to look at changing their mindsets, however people cannot be forced.

It was confirmed that there were 6 adopters last year who asked to be assessed as adopters for children they were currently looking after, one of whom was over 8 years old and one who was an 11 year old child with disabilities. It was also confirmed that there were five children externally matched to Gateshead adopters.

RESOLVED - That the Committee was satisfied with the performance of the adoption service in 2014/15 and noted the implications for the service of the adoption reforms as they are implemented.

CP05 EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CARE LEAVERS

The Committee received a report providing an overview of the education, employment and training (EET) support available for LAC and care leavers post 16.

It was confirmed that the local authority has a statutory responsibility to support care leavers up until the age of 21, or up 25 if they are in education or training. Looked after young people are assessed from the age of 16, when they are allocated a personal adviser. The adviser assesses and makes plans to ensure the young person is receiving the necessary support up until they are 21 or 25, depending on their circumstances. The local authority also has a responsibility to ensure a looked after child or care leaver has suitable accommodation. Suitable accommodation can include, staying put, returning to birth family, supported accommodation or taster flats.

A breakdown of the number of young people aged 19-21 in EET was provided. In 2014 in Gateshead this was 58%, which equated to 57 young people from a cohort of 98. It was noted that the North East average was 49% and the overall England average was 45%.

It was reported that in the current cohort, five young people have gone on to University. Young people are also supported by Connexions Careers Advisers who support 13-19 year olds through transition. The Connexions Advisers will record the support and choices made by looked after children in their Personal Education Plan (PEP).

The Committee received a breakdown of progressions of looked after children from year 12 onwards compared to those young people who are not looked after. It was reported that there is a decline of LAC staying in Sixth Form compared to other young people and more are moving onto college. Concerns were noted that not as much support is available to these young people at college compared to the support that can be provided at school sixth forms. NEET figures for LAC are higher in comparison to non LAC, however it was reported that on further investigation the majority of young people in the NEET cohort have been engaged in a positive destination upon leaving school. Therefore, it was acknowledged that more needs to be done in terms of supporting these young people into maintaining such destinations.

It was acknowledged that a lot of work has been carried out to support LAC and care leavers post 16. However it was noted that more needs to be done in terms of using powers to link these young people in to the 'family firm' and ensure better placements can be offered. It was queried what the Council currently does for these young people and it was suggested that there is a need for a Corporate Parent Action Plan. It was noted that this has been addressed previously, for example through Pathways to Work, this issue has been raised with Economic Development to look at generating further activity.

It was queried how many apprenticeships were offered this year. It was confirmed that only two care leavers this year went into apprenticeships, these apprenticeships were out of the area. The Committee felt that if no LAC are going through apprenticeships in Gateshead this needs to be addressed. It was acknowledged that this is currently being looked at with officers in the Council. It was suggested that there are also opportunities to approach consortiums to raise awareness as an authority of the support needed for these young people. It was agreed that figures around apprenticeships would be included in future reports.

The point was made that if there are problems where schools do not have sixth forms and therefore there is a lack of continued support, this should be looked at on entry to secondary schools. It was acknowledged that this is more about young people's choices rather than the sixth forms not being available. It was noted that often young people choose to leave school and there is a challenge in terms of replicating that support in other settings.

It was confirmed that the detail on the budget around grants is not yet known, however it would be expected that there would be an exclusion category for LAC. It was also noted that student loans are potentially a good option for those young people going to university as paying back is dependent on income. Additionally it was noted that discussions are being held with

housing around the impact of changes to housing benefits for under 25 year olds, however the finer detail of these changes are not yet known. It was questioned if there were no LAC going straight into employment from full time education. It was confirmed that there was approximately 0.3% of LAC going straight into employment.

It was also questioned whether there were any care leavers in unsupported tenancies. It was confirmed that at the age of 16 each LAC is appointed a Personal Adviser who will work through pathways on an individual basis, however ultimately the decision rests with the young person. Taster flats are made available to those young people who want to gain independence, this provides support and stops rent arrears accruing, however some young people choose to take their own tenancies. Floating support is offered for those young people who take their own tenancies. It was recognised that recently the trend is for young people to stay put, it is thought that this is due to the staying put arrangements which will see more young people staying in placement until they are 21. It was acknowledged that this provides relief for a lot of young people.

The suggestion was made that Trade Unions should be approached about training their work place representatives around the special circumstances of care leavers and how to support them in the workplace. It was agreed that officers would look into this possibility.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That targets should be set to monitor the number of LAC being able to access apprenticeships within the Council and organisations in the Gateshead Family.
 - (ii) With the addition of the above action, the Committee was satisfied with the proposed future plans to develop support for Care Leavers into training and employment.

CP06 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED - That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the remaining business in accordance with the indicated paragraphs of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

CP07 INSPECTIONS BY OFSTED OF GATESHEAD CHILDREN'S HOMES AND REGULATION 44 VISITS

The Committee received a report on the Ofsted inspection outcomes and regulation 44 independent visits carried out in the Council's children's homes. The reports written as a result of the visits are circulated to the Service Director, Social Work, Children and Families, Service Manager for Looked After Children and the Registered Manager of each Home.

RESOLVED - That the information be noted.