

BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (CSSC)
5th MAY 2015

28. Present:

Councillors Worton (Chair), Rusby, Saunders, G. Carr, C. Wraith together with co-opted member Ms K. Morritt.

No apologies for absence were received in accordance with Regulation 7 (6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001.

29. Declarations of pecuniary and non pecuniary interest

There were no declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest.

30. Minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2015

Minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2015 were approved as a true and accurate record.

The Chair highlighted that following the CSSC's comments being sent to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) regarding amendments to the 'redirect letters' they send out, CAMHS advised that the suggestions will be looked at by a group of staff currently working on access issues. The Chair also highlighted that the CSSC will invite CAMHS back to the committee to review their progress in 12 months.

31. Fostering and Adoption in Barnsley

The Chair welcomed the following witness to the meeting, which included:

- Rachel Dickinson, Executive Director, People Directorate, BMBC
- Mel John – Ross, Service Director, Children's Social Care and Safeguarding, BMBC
- Vicky Schofield, Head of Service, Children in Care, BMBC
- Stephanie Evans, Service and Strategy Manager, Integrated Family Services, BMBC
- Richard Lynch, Strategy and Service Manager, Joint Commissioning, BMBC
- Councillor Margaret Bruff, Cabinet Spokesperson – People (Safeguarding)
- Wayne Jones, Barnsley Foster Carer
- Paul Jones, Barnsley Foster Carer
- Ann Murphy, Barnsley Foster Carer

Members proceeded to ask the following questions:

- (i) Are our policies and processes effective in ensuring sufficient accommodation for our children in care and for those aged 16+ presenting as homeless?

Members were advised there are clear policies and processes in place, along with a placement strategy and the availability of varied and good quality accommodation, which is regularly reviewed to ensure standards are met. Members were assured that measures are in place to ensure the policies and

procedures are being followed by using relevant systems, including holding supervision meetings with staff and reviewing case files.

- (ii) In respect of the improvements in safeguarding is the Forge accommodation still being used?

It was explained that a manager has been seconded to the Forge who is overseeing improvements to both safeguarding and support to staff that is needed. There is a review of the work being done and depending on the improvements that are made, will determine whether the accommodation is once again used. Currently, there is no person under the age of eighteen using the Forge. This accommodation is only used in exceptional circumstances, due to vulnerable adults being resident, and Senior Managers are involved with any placement.

Members were advised the Forge is a seven bedroom building that is managed by South Yorkshire Housing Association which provides accommodation for vulnerable adults and as such is unsuitable for children. No confirmation could be given to the Members if other local authorities are currently using this accommodation.

- (iii) To what extent are our partners engaged in assisting with our Fostering and Adoption agenda and ensuring the wellbeing of children and young people looked after?

The committee was informed that the service has recently undergone a review of their partnership working by the Department of Education who advised that there was good partnership working between agencies, including joint commissioning arrangements. Barnsley Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) also underwent an inspection at the end of 2014 which showed there was good joint working between agencies, particularly with regards to Looked After Children (LAC) and safeguarding.

- (iv) What is in place to ensure we keep abreast of our placement and sufficiency needs analysis and how are we making sure we keep this on track?

It was advised there is a statutory requirement to complete a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) with our partner agencies. We also undertake audits, share intelligence and undertake comparisons of our numbers of LAC with our statistical neighbours and we constantly question this as our numbers are significantly lower in comparison. Last year the service took on significantly more children than previously, however we have been efficient in moving children to permanent placements. Within Barnsley we have a number of special guardianship orders and we continue to be curious with regards to the number of children we take into care.

- (v) Have the changing demographics affected the use of 'Kinship Placements' as it is recognised that Barnsley residents have strong family ties?

It was highlighted even though there has been an increase in the population the number of these placements has remained constant.

- (vi) Is it possible to obtain the number of children who are being placed in Children's Homes, and the numbers of this type of accommodation? Also, can Members be provided with a list of Children's Homes in their Wards?

It was explained that it is an Ofsted requirement to report the number of children within the Barnsley area who are resident in this type of accommodation; however, we are unable to intervene in respect of children from neighbouring authorities who are placed in these homes. Currently if a private setting has 3 children or less placed in a home, then they are not required to notify the local authority that they are operating as a children's home, therefore the service works proactively with local providers including schools to identify where such private homes may be. The service asked that Members keep them informed of any private homes they become aware of in their Wards and advised they will provide them with a list of the ones they are aware of for each Ward.

The service also advised they work closely with the Planning Department, particularly when new applications are received for Care Homes, to ensure appropriate local assessments are undertaken, for example to ensure there are enough school placements in the local area.

Cllr Wraith queried a response from the department regarding an enquiry he had made which the service advised they would follow up and get back to him on.

- (vii) What opportunities will be made available for our Foster Carers to undertake training and develop their skills?

The group were advised there is the opportunity to progress through the 'Payment for Skills' scheme, by Foster Carers being involved in training and development activities. The service is currently pulling together a training plan to enable Foster Carers to access a variety of training.

- (viii) Is the training accessible and are the expectations required of Foster Carers realistic as detailed in 'Copy D'?

It was explained to the committee that the convenience of the training can vary, with some being more suitable to people who work a more traditional '9 to 5' routine. On occasions, Foster Carers have completed almost a full day of training, but due to having to leave slightly early to collect their children, they have not been given their certificate of completion.

Foster Carers advised that they jointly devised the payment scheme, therefore are aware of the expectations and highlighted that it is important to note that being a Foster Carer requires more than just being a parent. For example daily logs have to be completed for the protection of both Foster Carers and LAC. The policy states what is required, however it does not mean that attaining this is not challenging.

Foster Carers are responsible for LAC and are able to provide a good standard of care, which is done in conjunction with other carers. It was acknowledged that in some cases, it is important to seek the support of CAMHS however there are difficulties in accessing this service in a timely way due to the long waiting lists.

Due to the Foster Carers' involvement with CAMHS, the Chair requested that they are invited to attend the Scrutiny meeting which will review the CAMHS service in 12 months.

- (ix) The requirements of Foster Carers is very comprehensive, does the service find that this puts people off? Also, at what stage in the process of applying to be a Foster Carer are potential carers made aware of what is expected from them?

The group was advised it is through choice that a person decides to be a Foster Carer, and the service look to recruit high quality carers to ensure the best outcomes for our children, particularly due to the complexity of some of the children who are in need of care.

Existing Foster Carers take part in the inductions and training of new carers and make sure that their expectations are clear to ensure the correct people are recruited. 'Copy C' is introduced to Foster Cares through a series of training events, however it is important that they are clear about what the role will entail, otherwise this could result in the breakdown of a placement which can be detrimental for our LAC.

Members reiterated their appreciation of the skilled contribution our Foster Carers make and were encouraged to hear that they endorse the high standards outlined and expected by the Council.

- (x) What impact will the loss of the Adoption Reform Grant have on the service and what plans are in place to address this?

It was explained that the loss of this grant involves a significant amount of money and the service will have to utilise their existing budget, which will be challenging.

Following the restructure of Children's Services, there has been the loss of eight posts however some of this work has been transferred to central teams, for example the training function. The service will have to be creative in how they retain the marketing and recruitment activity for Fostering and Adoption services within the broader Council structure e.g. through the Communications Team. It was highlighted that there has also been investment made in children, young people and family services including a new Adolescent Team, Safeguarding Unit as well as other new Social Workers. Work has also been done to realign workloads to ensure they are sustainable.

- (xi) Nationally, a £19 million grant has been made available in support of adoption; will the service receive any of this?

The committee were advised that an application has to be made by individual adopters for financial assistance and if this is successful, the payment is made directly to the carer. The Council will assist in this process but will not be directly in receipt of any of the grant.

- (xii) What has been done to address our comparatively high care costs and how do we ensure the best outcomes for our LAC?

Members were advised the costs of placements are known and it is always the wellbeing of the child that is the priority. The only situation where 'best value'

would be considered is if two providers were offering the same service, then a decision would need to be made based on the cost. Working with regional partners has helped to reduce the unit costs and also to prevent a potential overspend of £4.9 million, which would have been unsustainable. Improved efficiency has been a priority and this has been achieved by using Council Foster Carers.

When the initial needs assessment was undertaken, we were short of carers for babies, however we now have a gap for carers for adolescents. The latest advice for placing adolescents is to keep them in a family unit which we are trying to do. Placing them in the care of their immediate family is not only beneficial to their wellbeing, but is also more economical financially. There has also been a recent campaign to recruit Foster Carers for adolescents which the new 'Payment for Skills' scheme should help with. Through this, we hope to encourage former Social Workers or those who have worked previously in Children's Care Homes, who potentially will have the skills and experience that are required.

In Barnsley, we now have the 'Staying Put Scheme' which is a very positive initiative. Previously, when a child became eighteen they would have left their foster family, however payments can now be continued to be made to carers which means they can continue to support our young people at one of the most vulnerable times of their life.

(xiii) The average age of young people in residential care is 14, is this due to failure to support them in early years?

The committee were advised there has been an increase in this age range presenting for care. Some of these young people are known to us whereas others have previously had no contact with our services. We're currently working with colleagues in the sub-region on cases where there is a risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). We have now also developed a Specialist Adolescent Team to work with young people who are on the edge of care, for example by providing a mediation service to them and their family.

(xiv) What services are in place to prevent entry into care and how effective are these?

It was explained to Members there is an Adolescent Team who work closely with schools, colleges and health professionals to try to resolve any problems as soon as they emerge. These can occur e.g. following a parental breakup or bereavement. We know that adolescence is a difficult time for young people and their families therefore it is important to make sure they have support to help keep young people within their family home.

The Adolescent Team also works with the licensing department, particularly with the issue of licenses to taxi operators. There is now a better understanding of the threats that can affect teenagers, such as CSE, which means there can be more robust procedures in place to minimise the risks.

(xv) What is done to identify what contact we have had with children and young people prior to them being taken into care and whether them being taken into care could have been prevented?

The group were informed the service would be aware if there had been any previous contact with an individual as cases are continually reviewed. The service also undertook an Audit of cases in January 2013 which identified a number of children who had been overlooked, which has resulted in the threshold for care plans now being lowered. There has been an increase in the number of referrals for adolescents and we're looking at understanding the key issues around this and to use this information to base our service plans on.

(xvi) How do our Foster Carers feel about the revised payment scheme?

The group were advised that it was too early to know, but generally, it was considered that the 'Payment for Skills' scheme is a fairer system than the previous one, and progression is down to the individual. Also, it should help to ensure people become Foster Carers and take children for the right reasons, and not for financial gain; similarly it should assist in promoting the service as a more professional one.

(xvii) Has the reduction in the payments that some Foster Carers receive resulted in people leaving the service?

It was explained that this was not something that had happened, as it was felt there is a good relationship between the Council and the Foster Carers as well as there being a financial transition plan. Also, the 'Payment for Skills' scheme is seen as being good, as it rewards carers whilst helping to improve the standard of care.

(xviii) Is there on-going training for Foster Carers?

Members were informed there is both training and support for Foster Carers along with regular supervision and also 'Personal Development' reviews. There is a good recruitment process, which helps with the retention of staff and currently there is an experienced and stable workforce.

(xix) What actions could be taken by Members to assist in improving fostering and adoption services in Barnsley?

It was explained to the group that contact with the local press and also utilising the Councils' website helps to promote the good work being done by Foster Carers. It was suggested that the Foster Carers themselves would perhaps be best placed to help to raise the profile of the service they provide.

It was highlighted that Members have a role in helping to change the perception of the job Foster Carers do and that they are given professional recognition for this. It would also be helpful for the Foster Carers to meet with all Councillors to help them better understand the role of Foster Carers and how they could assist with recruiting new high quality carers. It was highlighted that our LAC are Barnsley's future and as such we are all responsible as Corporate Parents to support them.

It was also noted that it is important that Members continue to provide robust challenge to services through the Scrutiny process.

(xx) How are Foster Carers recruited?

The Members were informed that it is essential for any recruitment to target carers for the age range of children who are most in need of care; for example currently, there is no shortage of Foster Carers for babies.

It was suggested that if Members were able to identify members of the community within their own Ward who could be interested in providing foster care this would help, for example, as currently there are a lack of Foster Carers from ethnic communities.

The Chair thanked the witnesses for attending and their contribution to the meeting.

32. Proposed Changes to the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

The Scrutiny Officer explained that to enable the continued improvement and positive impact of the Council's Scrutiny function, a proposal was going to Cabinet to change the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to a Safeguarding Scrutiny Committee. This reflects the recent changes in legislation which include the statutory requirement for an Adult Safeguarding Board as well as a Children's Safeguarding Board; the Council's new 'People' Directorate structure; and the Louise Casey Report on Rotherham Council which highlights that Safeguarding is the responsibility of all services, therefore any Council Directorate including People, Place, Communities, Public Health, Corporate Services or our partner agencies could be called to the Safeguarding Scrutiny Committee.

To avoid duplication, the report proposes to disband the Member Safeguarding Children Panel, however hold a private Member meeting at the end of the Safeguarding Scrutiny Committee meeting, where Members can consider information of a confidential nature without the danger of this being inappropriately disseminated. It is also proposed the number of Elected Members increases from 6 to 10 to ensure greater representation from across the Borough and to mitigate the dramatic effect the absence one Member has on percentage attendance on the committee.

Members expressed their concern if this new committee would lessen their time spent discussing issues specifically relating to children. Also, whether it could lead to a possible duplication of work and if there will be any training to support any change. In response, Members were assured that the changes were specifically designed to avoid duplication of work, also that training would be provided to them on Adult and Children's safeguarding. Members were also advised that the topics covered by the committee would be carefully identified in conjunction with the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee to cover the key issues for both the Adults and Children's statutory safeguarding functions and that they should make the Scrutiny Officer aware if they had any concerns.

The Chair thanked all those in attendance at the meeting for their contribution, in particular Cllr Rusby who was due to stand down as a Councillor at the forthcoming elections.

ACTIONS:

- a) Members to inform the Service if they become aware of any Children's Homes operating in their Wards.
- b) Service to provide a list of Children's Homes in each Ward to Members.
- c) Service to chase up a response to an enquiry from Cllr Wraith.
- d) Service to consider timings of training to suit Foster Carers also and not just employees to ensure they can complete training in conjunction with their caring commitments.
- e) Foster Carers to be invited to the Scrutiny meeting in 12 months to review the CAMHS service.
- f) Members to help promote the work of Foster Carers, changing the perception of the role and helping to recruit high quality carers.
- g) Foster Carers to meet with all Councillors to help them better understand the role of Foster Carers and how they could assist with recruiting new high quality carers.