

# EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 24 April 2017

**PRESENT:** Councillor J.E. Williams (Chair)

**Councillors:**

D.J.R. Bartlett, C.A. Campbell, J.M. Charles, I.W. Davies, W.G. Hopkins, P. Hughes-Griffiths, J.D. James, P.E.M. Jones, M.J.A. Lewis and D.W.H. Richards

Mrs J. Voyle Williams – Church in Wales Representative

**Also in attendance:**

Councillor G.O. Jones, Executive Board Member for Education and Children

**The following Officers were in attendance:**

S. Smith - Head of Children's Services

B. James - Service Manager Corporate Parenting

J. Meredith - Service Manager Fostering and Resources

S. Owen - Looked After Children Education Co-ordinator

Ms. M. James - Personal Advisor

C. Gadd - Democratic Services Officer

**Also in attendance:**

Care Leaver Representatives

**Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen - 10.00 - 11.10 am**

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs. V. Kenny (Roman Catholic Church Representative), Mrs. K. Hill (Parent Governor Member – Dinefwr Area) and Mrs. A. Pickles (Parent Governor Member – Carmarthen Area).

**2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

There were no declarations of personal interest.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS**

There were no declarations of party whips.

**4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)**

No public questions were received.

**5. CORPORATE PARENTING UPDATE**

The Committee considered a Corporate Parenting Annual Update Report, which provided information on Corporate Parenting, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and fostering services. The report outlined the successful outcomes that

had been achieved, the challenges of retaining foster carers and having sufficient staff and resources to meet the increasing demands of care leavers.

Officers highlighted that Corporate Parenting included young people leaving care aged between 16 and 25 years old. The Committee heard from two care leavers about their experiences and the support that they had been provided with. Members were informed that the Council offered traineeships to care leavers, which provided them with an opportunity to develop their skills. Members noted that there were positive comments about how they had been supported and recognised the work undertaken by the Service. The Committee thanked the care leavers for the useful insight they had provided and noted that it was a beneficial for the Committee to hear directly from those receiving such services.

Officers explained that the Local Authority had a Corporate Parenting Strategy that outlined the measures it would take to ensure that outcomes for looked after children and care leavers were positive. The number of looked after children had consistently declined since 2011, with the current number being 210. It was noted that the majority of looked after children were educated in mainstream education with only 11 children accessing alternative education provision. It was highlighted that Carmarthenshire was doing well in comparison to the Welsh average in regards to school attainment of looked after pupils and schools were provided with support from the Corporate Parenting Team.

The Corporate Parenting Services provided access to therapy, counselling and therapeutic interventions for looked after children and their carers. It was highlighted that the services supported a third of the County's looked after children and such services were important to address their emotional health. It was noted that the Hywel Dda Health Board's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) had only seen 3 looked after children in the last year.

Officers reported that the projected number of care leavers would increase over the next few years due to changes in legislation and it would take some time for the numbers to decrease. It was highlighted that the Leaving Care Team provide a range of training opportunities and support for care leavers and planned to continue to reduce the number of care leavers Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs). However, Carmarthenshire was below the Welsh average for care leavers who were NEETs. The Committee requested that comparison figures against other local authorities and national averages to be included in future reports.

Ensuring care leavers live in appropriate accommodation was recognised as a challenge moving forward, especially with the requirements of the 'When I am Ready Scheme', which allowed care leavers to remain with their foster families for longer. It was noted that this was a positive scheme, however, there was no additional funding support from the Welsh Government. It also prevented some foster carers being released for new placements. It was highlighted that no care leaver had been placed in Bed & Breakfast accommodation in the last 12 months.

Members queried the number of looked after children from other counties that attended schools in Carmarthenshire and asked who was responsible for them. The Service Manager for Corporate Parenting explained that the Council was not the Corporate Parents for looked after children from other counties and there were currently 105 placed in the area. It was clarified that the local authority where the

child had become looked after was responsible for them. It was noted that schools now received Pupil Deprivation Grant for children from out of county. Members asked if it was the best system to place children in other areas. The Head of Children's Services commented that there was a national shortage of foster carers and at times the services had to be bought from Independent Foster Agencies, which could result in children being placed out of county. It was highlighted that Carmarthenshire was the best Council in Wales for keeping its own looked after children within its own county.

The Service Manager for Fostering and Resources informed the Committee of the work that was being undertaken in the Fostering Service. It was highlighted that there were fewer looked after children, however they often had more complex needs. It continued to be a challenge to recruit foster carers to meet demand. The Head of Children's Services noted that there was a Welsh Government proposal to develop regional fostering services, similar to the setup of the regional adoption services. It was highlighted that there would be more complexity in regionalising fostering services.

Members raised concerns regarding the number of placement moves for looked after children. Officers recognised that this was a concern and outlined the improvements that were being undertaken. It was explained that the majority of placements moves were for children over the age of 10 and it was difficult to recruit foster carers for teenagers and some of those children had very challenging and complex needs. An action plan had been put in place to address teenage placements, which included a fostering recruitment programme targeting placements for over 10s. There had also been some discussions about shared marketing and media advertising with neighbouring local authorities. Placement stability was monitored through the Permanency Panel and it was planned for additional meetings to be held to review placements requiring additional support. In addition, a senior social worker had a specific role in supporting highly challenging teenage placements. Members queried if foster carers received training on managing challenging and complex placements. Officers confirmed that there was extensive training and Carmarthenshire had been commended for the quality of its training.

Another area highlighted that required further recruitment was for mother and baby placements and it was noted that the Council was one of the few that offered this option. The Committee was informed that a Recruitment and Retention Strategy for foster carers had been developed and was being implemented. It was noted that Carmarthenshire provided one of the lowest reimbursements to foster carers and this had an impact on recruitment. There was a lot of competition from neighbouring local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies. However, it was highlighted that the Service did provide good support services and managed to retain foster carers. It was noted that they had recently managed to recruit some foster carers from independent agencies. Another challenge was the average age of foster carer was 55 years old and strategies for attracting younger foster carers were being considered.

It was noted that during 2014-15 there had been a high number of foster carers deregistering. On further analysis the Service was satisfied that they had not lost foster carers due to dissatisfaction but for other reasons such as changes to personal circumstances and retirement. There was evidence that a good in house service was being provided.

Members queried if the Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) were businesses and it was confirmed that generally they were private organisations, with a few being charitable organisations. It was highlighted that the Independent Agencies charged Local Authorities a lot more for placements. The Head of Children's Services explained that in Scotland there were regulations to prevent IFAs from making a profit, however, in Wales and England there was no regulation on the costs they could charge and some organisations had made a considerable profit. It was highlighted that it had been suggested to Welsh Government that they should follow Scotland's example in developing regulations. The Committee agreed to recommend to Executive Board that the Council writes to the Welsh Government supporting the proposals to develop regulations to restrict Independent Fostering Agencies making a profit from placing looked after children.

The Service Manager for Corporate Parenting provided the Committee with an overview of accommodating child refugees and asylum seekers in Carmarthenshire. It was explained that there were a range of programmes and ways in which child refugees and asylum seekers may re-settle in the UK. It was highlighted that these children would be classed as looked after, however, the costs could be recharged as the Home Office provided an allowance for these children. All local authorities were requested to take a percentage of the child population of their area. However, it was reported that Carmarthenshire Council currently had insufficient foster carer capacity. The proposal was to develop a service to be offered to children over the age of 16 years old.

Members asked if the UK Government changing its policy on Syria would have an impact on these proposals. It was explained that the legislation was changing regularly, however, the Home Office was still requesting local authorities to take a percentage of unaccompanied children.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that:**

- 5.1 the report be received;
- 5.2 to recommend to the Executive Board that the Council writes to the Welsh Government supporting the proposals to develop regulations to restrict Independent Fostering Agencies making a profit from placing looked after children.

**6. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT**

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that the explanation for the non-submission for Behaviour Services Review be noted.

**7. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 15TH MARCH, 2017**

Reference was made to minute 7 (Revenue & Capital Budget Monitoring Report 2016/17) and specifically the seventh paragraph of the issues discussed in relation to the re-organisation of primary provision in the Ammanford town area and it was pointed out that that it should include the statement that "it was noted that £19 million pounds had been set aside for this project".

**RESOLVED that, subject to the inclusion of the above-mentioned**

**amendment, the minutes of the meeting held on the 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 be signed as a correct record.**

Prior to closing the meeting, the Chair and members of the Committee acknowledged the excellent work undertaken on behalf of the Committee by Matthew Hughes, the former Democratic Services Officer. It was requested that a letter of thanks was sent to him on behalf of the Committee and to wish him well in his new post.

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**CHAIR**

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**DATE**