

Minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 24 November 2022

Present: Bob Spencer (Chair)

Attendance

Gill Burnett (Vice-Chair (Overview))
Janet Eagland
Gillian Pardesi

Kath Perry, MBE
Mike Wilcox

Also in attendance: Mark Sutton

Apologies: Richard Ford, Johnny McMahon and Conor Wileman

PART ONE

33. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

34. Minutes of the Safeguarding Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 24 October 2022

Resolved: That the minutes of the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 24 October 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

35. Regional Permanency Partnership and pilot project outcomes

In July 2021 the Committee had considered arrangements for delivery of the new Regional Adoption Agency for Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council, called the Together4Children Permanency Partnership. This had been developed in response to the Government's Regionalising Adoption agenda.

The Partnership vision went beyond the delivery of Adoption Services and focused on a broader range of activities to ensure that children entering care achieved permanency. The Partnership worked together to improve outcomes for those children who entered care and were not able to return to their birth parents, aiming to:

- i) make best use of the collective resources to recruit, assess and support prospective adopters across the region;

- ii) improve the quality and speed of matching for children through better planning and by having a wider choice of adopters;
- iii) provide high quality support to children and their families delivered through a combination of direct provision and effective partnerships; and
- iv) provide all children and their families the right support at the right time through a consistent permanency support offer across the region.

The Committee were aware that the Partnership had been launched in September 2020, with the first key deliverables focusing on the Adoption Service. However, unlike most regional agencies, the Together4children Partnership is delivered via a hub and spoke model. This is a combination of core central functions and networked regional delivery (via a Central Permanency Hub) enabling Partner Councils to retain direct service delivery functions within Locality Permanence Hubs, working within the Together4Children practice framework whilst maintaining clear links to local Children & Families Services.

The Committee received details of the functions, governance, operational structure and legal and financial arrangements for the Partnership. Members were informed that the recruitment of potential adopters had been supported by strong and effective marketing activity. This had led to strong levels of enquiry and referrals through to the 3 assessment teams, with 720 enquiries for people considering adopting a child leading to 140 referrals through to the assessment teams and 83 approvals. Having a good pool of regional adoption families supported positive transition for children and enabled better support for their families moving through the adoption process. During 2021-22 93% of the children placed for adoption had been with families assessed and approved within the Together4Children region. Members were pleased to note that, where families were not identified regionally to meet the specific needs of a child or children within the region, work with agencies across the Midlands and, where necessary, nationally was undertaken to ensure every possibility was explored to find the right adoptive family.

Members considered data comparisons in time taken to place a child, noting that care proceedings through court took six months. Together4Children performed well against national statistics. Members also considered the support for adopter families, and in particular considered developments in the delivery of "TESSA". This initiative had been reviewed and was now offered to families much earlier in the process. The support offered included:

- i) Clinical Psychologist-led assessment and support plans, family support, and core training;

- ii) Innovative group therapy, counselling, coaching, and mentoring, enhanced training, school consultation.; and
- iii) Support in accessing statutory and voluntary provision, specialist and medical support and community groups.

Members heard that since TESSA went live in October 2020 50 families across the Together4Children region had received support through this provision.

The Committee were also informed that Together4Children was the first ever Local Authority Partnership to jointly launch the Mockingbird Fostering Model by working together across the four fostering services. Over two years this innovative fostering model had been successfully delivered across 3 regional pilot sites, with the fourth and final pilot to go live in November 2022. Mockingbird is a successful evidence-based support offer creating a network of foster carers sharing experience, advice and expertise.

Members queried whether the current cost of living pressures would have an impact on families considering adoption. They heard that in general those choosing to adopt were differently motivated, seeking to increase their family. In specific cases some financial support could be offered, for example where a sibling group was placed together, however such decisions were made on a case-by-case basis.

On querying the resource available to the Partnership, Members were informed that adoption was not necessarily the best option for every child or young person. Court decisions around adoption were individual, based on that specific child and family, and therefore the number and pattern of adoptions would not necessarily be changed by additional resource.

Of the 104 adoption orders granted regionally last year, 63 were "priority children", i.e. those children that were more challenging to find the right families for because they were either over five years, needed sibling placements, were from ethnic backgrounds other than "white British" or had a disability. The Committee welcomed the work to improve the diversity of prospective adopters and the wider work across the Midlands to enable broader placement options. Members were reassured when hearing the work undertaken to ensure the right family placement was found, hearing about the family finding team and permanence coordinators. As necessary a national service "linkmaker" was used which looked for suitable placements at a national level.

Members raised concerns around the use of agency staff and were assured that there was a clear vetting process and rigorous recruitment for all staff. They were also pleased to note that almost all adoption agencies were judged by Ofsted as good or outstanding.

The effectiveness of performance data was queried, with Members concerned that nuances of the individualised work involved were lost in flat figures. Benchmarking trends over three years helped give an understanding of performance. However, the priority was always the individual child, with some necessarily taking longer to place successfully and it was important to understand the range of factors involved and not just the blunt average figures.

Members thanked Officers for this work which was making a real difference.

Resolved: That the work of the new Together4Children Permanency Partnership and the development of the TESSA and Mockingbird projects be welcomed and Officers be congratulated for the effectiveness of this work.

36. Young Carers

As part of their work planning in June 2021 the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee included the role of young carers in their 2021/22 work programme. Members wanted to scrutinise the support given to Staffordshire young carers and consider the level of caring roles undertaken, seeking reassurance that these were not at a level that should be provided by social care.

Following a presentation to the Committee a group of four Members, undertook to meet with young carers to hear first-hand about the support they received.

The Members involved were Mrs J Eagland, Mrs G Pardesi, Mrs K Perry and Mr B Spencer. These Members shared their experiences from their meeting with young carers, including the excellent work by some schools. They also noted the support and training offer from the Young Carers Service and the need to raise awareness in schools of this offer and ensure schools take advantage of this support.

The Committee welcomed the report. They considered in more detail the recommendation for Members to become young carers service advocates, agreeing that this would include:

- a) Councillors taking every opportunity to raise the profile of the Young Carers Service
- b) Raising awareness of the Young Carers Service Offer in schools
- c) Where Members are school governors, they:
 - i) Ensure schools have fully considered and taken advantage of the Young Carers offer; and
 - ii) Assure themselves of the support and provision for young carers within school.

Members also suggested that the Chairman discuss with the Cabinet Member for Education ways to raise the profile of the Young Carers Service offer within schools and to extend the Member Young Carers Advocate initiative more broadly across the Council.

Resolved: That:

- a) The sub-group's report be accepted, having particular regard to:
 - i. reassurances that the initial in-house assessment of young carers is robust,
 - ii. performance data development with regard to the young carers service should more accurately evidence the types of care, ages and hours of care given, and
 - iii. more proactive signposting to the broad range of support services for young carers is being developed by the Young Carers Service;
- b) Members become young carers service advocates, raising the profile of the services available within schools and the benefits to both schools and their pupils in taking advantage of these services;
- c) the Chairman write again on behalf of the Committee to inform the young carers of the activity resulting from this work and specifically from their meeting with Members, thanking them again for the part they played;
- d) the Chairman write to Cathryn Rayner at the Young Carers Service thanking her for the excellent work she and her team undertake in supporting young carers; and
- e) the Chairman discuss with the Cabinet Member for Education ways to extend the Member Young Carer Advocate initiative and more generally raise the profile of the Young Carers Service offer in schools.

37. Work Programme

The Committee received an update on their work programme as follows:

- a) the Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board Annual report had been moved back to 5 January meeting to enable the new independent chairman to attend;
- b) Members had received an email explaining the reasons for the cancellation of the Family Improvement Boards, which had been to align with the Family Hub process. Detail on Family Improvement Boards will be included as part of the work programme item on Family Hub development;
- c) a pre-decision scrutiny item on the House Project to be added to the work programme for February; and,
- d) a joint meeting between the Police Fire and Crime Panel (PFCP) and the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been suggested, to consider the outcome of the PEEL inspection and the improvements being made. Following discussions between the Chairmen of the respective committees and the Commissioner it had been agreed that the PFCP will consider this issue, with the Safeguarding O&S Committee Chairman invited to that meeting. Subsequently the Commissioner and Officers will

attend a meeting of this Committee to consider specific issues raised as part of the Committee's crime and disorder role.

Resolved: That the amendments to the work programme be agreed.

Chairman