

Staffordshire Corporate Parenting Panel

Annual Report 2020-21

Chairman's Forward

This is the third year that the Corporate Parenting Panel has produced an annual report and this is the fifth year that I've had the pleasure to have chaired the panel.

For the whole of the year we have been battling with the COVID pandemic and thus the year has been even more of a challenge both for the children in our care and their carers and for those who have left care whom we continue to support.

The panel has continued to develop how it carries out its role in improving the lives of our Children. We are ensuring the views of children and carers are taken fully into account and the way meetings are held in the future will also adapt with more involvement from our Children.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have been members of the panel for the past four years and in particular who are no longer panel members following the May 2021 elections.

Over the next four years we will have some new panel members and I'd like to welcome them and hope you find the work both interesting and worthwhile



County Councillor Mark Sutton

Chairman of Corporate Parenting Panel
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Purpose of Corporate Parenting Panel

1. The Corporate Parenting Panel is the means by which the Council discharges its responsibility as a corporate parent and brings together councillors, senior officers in children's social care and partner agencies to consider key issues which affect looked after children and care leavers.
2. The Panel actively engages with and challenges key partners to provide good support and is ambitious for the children in its care.
3. The Panel works closely with our Children in Care Council and Care Leaver forums to ensure all our looked after children have the best possible care, are safe, healthy, happy and achieve. In order to achieve this, we have an annual thematic work programme in which all partners are called to account.

Governance and membership

4. The Panel provides a key role in supporting members to play their role in ensuring accountability for our looked after children. Whilst all members of the County Council are corporate parents, members of the Corporate Parenting Panel champion and challenge on behalf of looked after children and Care Leavers. The panel is proactive in challenging service delivery and advocates for children in our care and for strong governance principles.
5. The Panel looks to see that the voice of the child is imbedded in all bodies and informs decisions making.
6. The Work Programme is a working document and as such the Panel have requested supplementary reports in order to further explore any areas of concern or challenge.
7. The Panel comprises of 15 elected members of the County Council, including the Chair who is the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the Chairman of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee. Members are appointed annually at the Council meeting in May.

The 2020-21 members and their attendance are:

Gill Burnett (9/9)	Keith Flunders (6/7)
Janet Eagland (9/9)	Natasha Pullen (0/1)
Ann Edgeller (9/9)	Paul Snape (8/9)
John Francis (9/9)	Mark Sutton (chairman) (9/9)
Gill Heath (2/2)	Carolyn Trowbridge (8/9)
Phil Hewitt (9/9)	Ron Clarke (9/9)
Bryan Jones (vice chairman) (9/9)	Maureen Compton (4/9)
Jill Hood (7/9)	Richard Ford (5/9)
	Victoria Wilson (7/7)

8. Members of Staffordshire's District/ Borough Councils are co-opted onto the Panel as champions for looked after children particularly in areas of housing and leisure facilities.

Alan Pearson (8/9) Wendy Sutton (5/9) Janice Silvester-Hall (9/9)	Barbara Hughes (1/9) Jill Waring (0/9) Jeremy Oates (5/6)
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9. Representing Foster Carers, Alan Hudson was appointed to the Panel in November 2020 (5/5).
10. The Panel is supported by the Assistant Director, Looked after Children and Disability Services and the Assistant Director, Commissioning (Families and Communities). The Partnership and Engagement Manager attends every meeting to ensure the voice of the child feeds into the Panels agendas.
11. The Panel calls on professional advice and assistance/ holds to account:
- The Head teacher of the Virtual School
 - Designated nurse for Looked After Children
 - County Managers for Leaving Care and Adoption
 - Independent Reviewing Officers
 - Senior practitioner colleagues
12. The Panel calls for witness accounts as appropriate, from:
- Looked after children and Care Leavers
 - Care Leaver Ambassadors
 - Foster carers
13. The Panel's Terms of reference were approved by the Panel in 2017.
14. Despite the pandemic, the Panel has continued to meet virtually (9 meetings) both formally and in informal workshops to debate key aspects of the service.
15. All panel members are required to complete Level 1 Child Protection Training as a minimum.
16. Due to the pandemic, we have not accompanied the 'independent visitor' in Regulation 44 visits to our in-house children's homes. These management visits continued to be carried out under the Children's Homes Regulations 2015 by independent visitors alone to provide an opportunity for independent scrutiny of a home.

Corporate Parenting Strategy 2016-19

17. The challenge and scrutiny role of the Panel is focussed on driving the overarching Looked After Children Strategy 2016-19. The Strategy will be refreshed in the new administration. The key objectives remain relevant:
- Keeping You Safe
 - Where I live

- Your Education and learning
- Your wishes, views and feelings
- Becoming a Care Leaver
- Your Health and Wellbeing

The Impact of Covid-19

18. The impact of Covid-19 across all service areas has been the significant feature of the last year. We have been regularly updated on the specific impact on the Looked After Children's service and their response to it.
19. During periods of lockdown all looked after children and their carers' were reviewed and contact maintained. Many housing providers did not allocate properties during lockdown and so children reaching 18 had to remain in their supported accommodation, creating both cost and capacity implications.
20. The Virtual School worked closely with Education colleagues to support continued learning. Communication increased with young people placed out of county who felt isolated. We supported the establishment of an overarching County Council post Covid-19 corporate recovery group which maintains a focus on Families and Communities.
21. Whilst the number of children in care is now higher than forecast in the 'invest to save' business case to Cabinet, it is recognised that the planned ways to reduce numbers was to have discharged care orders for children; for children with Family and Friends to achieve Special Guardianship Orders and through direct work with families for reunification and through permanent adoption. The closure of courts created huge delays in the courts system and all plans to reduce the number of children looked after were impacted. When courts resumed hearing new cases, more children were entering the system but not able to exit in the usual way. Furthermore, the number of young people remanded into our care increased due to the courts backlog, and this resulted in an increase in the length of time a young person is remanded.
22. The situation reported to us in September was worse than during lockdown in terms of pressure across the service: unplanned school class closures; track and trace; and parents, carers and service workforce self-isolating when necessary (during lockdown 80% of staff had been able to work). Generally, performance remained good despite these significant challenges and uncertain times and we commend the service for their dedication, creativity, and hard work.
23. The service maintained a good working relationship with the courts throughout the year and worked pro-actively with the Designated Family Judge who shared our concerns about the impact of the limited court capacity. Children looking for placement orders or to be adopted have encountered significant delay and the reality is that some children may have missed their window of opportunity to be adopted.

24. We are reassured that the judge has been equally concerned and had been escalating problems of capacity nationally even before the added impact of the pandemic. The problem has been raised locally and nationally.
25. Concerns were shared around mental health and wellbeing, particularly in light of reduced social contact resulting from pandemic restrictions.
26. Significant investment into Children's Services in 2019 had started to show results just before Covid. Since then the numbers of children in care increased before stabilising and by April, the numbers in care are starting to reduce. Delays in the courts continue to be challenging and we know that for some children the negative impact of Covid will remain with them for many years.
27. We recognise the greater challenge in the 10-16 year age group some of whom were likely to spend several years in care and are reassured by the additional resource in specialist teams to focus on their specific needs and vulnerabilities.
28. In January, we took time to reflect on the impact the pandemic has had on our children; on carers and placement; families; on courts; and on Children's Services and Staff. The third lockdown had been particularly hard and winter had not allowed easy meeting opportunities in outdoor venues.
29. Children in care had reduced access to their families and this has often been virtual rather than face to face which had slowed down reunification for some children and their families. Whilst children in care were entitled as a vulnerable group to go into school, many had not wanted to be treated differently to their peers.
30. More generally, looked after children's mental health is poorer, there has been a negative impact on educational attainment and social isolation from peer groups.
31. Carers had been anxious over family time and the risks that it could inadvertently bring Covid into their homes and there had been instances of placement breakdown when older children had broken lockdown rules. Opportunities for building relationships and engaging family experiences had been diminished. Home schooling had been challenging and additional pressure brought to bear through the lack of activities/out of home respite.
32. Some families had felt isolated from their children with less contact or reliance on virtual contact. The extension in care proceedings extended the period of uncertainty and anxiety. There were backlogs for Adoptions; Care Order Discharges; SGO applications and criminal proceedings.
33. Capacity within the system has been stretched to unmanageable levels due to the increased numbers active in the system and it will take time to return to normal.
34. Children's Services' staff have been challenged by rising numbers of looked after children, isolation from colleagues and having to adapt to working virtually. However, staff had been creative and innovative in managing the challenges.

Developing a Restorative Practice Corporate Parenting Panel

35. Restorative practice has been a focus of our work this year and in July we held a workshop to better understand the concept. It is a whole system approach which enables children to be happy, healthy and safe. It is a set of beliefs, values and behaviours that focusses on building and repairing relationships on the basis that outcomes are improved when those who support people work with and alongside them, instead of making decisions for them or doing things to them.
36. There is good evidence to suggest that an environment that uses restorative practice develops a sense of shared responsibility and accountability, is resilient and builds strong relationships. Restorative communities are self-sustaining and supportive.
37. As corporate parents we have challenged our values, beliefs, attitudes and customs and we hope that through the Quality Assurance framework and through auditing children's files we will be able to identify positive change. Social worker case files have been simplified to free up time to focus on restorative practice and ultimately there will be a reduction in the need for higher tier intervention.
38. We have spent some time reflecting on the language we use around looked after children and watched a DVD made by them: 'I am not a case...' which challenges the terminology.
39. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy explains how the panels purpose is to support the Children in Care Council and the Children's Services in delivering the Staffordshire Pledge - a series of commitments to children and young people in care in Staffordshire and related to every aspect of their lives. We promise to do everything expected of a good parent and to try and minimise barriers preventing children from achieving their best outcomes.
40. We are tasked with providing strategic leadership and holding partners to account. We are advocates for children, act as champions to raise awareness and encourage a sense of corporate parenting responsibility in all elected members. Young people have articulated the qualities they want from their corporate parents.
41. In November we held a workshop to develop a Restorative Practice Corporate Parenting Panel. Feedback from the session has informed a robust and restorative work programme and will assist with a revised Strategy for the Corporate Parenting panel. A summary of our feedback included more focussed meetings; greater engagement between children, young people, carers and corporate parents; an intent to measure our performance against feedback from young people and carers; and, a multi-agency approach to supporting children.

Listening to the Children's Voice

42. We have learned that still too many looked after children and young people and foster carers do not know anything about the panel. The Children's Voice Project undertakes consultation and the views shared are insightful and include suggestions from children for more regular contact with us; for us to be aspirational; understanding and supportive. Foster carers ask for continuity and consistency to be applied in our approach and place importance on transparency, engagement and partnership.
44. We welcome the voice of young people which increasingly influences our work. Young people have supported the development of new resources to help other young people when, for example, their social workers change. They have contributed alongside carers on developing staff training and working on incorporating their feedback into regular practices. Their report on restorative language will be incorporated into all future training and they work regionally with other participation leads to find common ground, share best practice and benchmark. They have contributed via Facebook to consultation on themes including SEND and on mental health across South Staffordshire.
47. We understand that language matters to young people and that it requires sensitivity and we have committed to amend our use of it.
48. The Big Vote 2019 conducted by the Children's Voice Project had asked children and young people in care in Staffordshire to identify their top two issues. Four consistent themes emerged across all the age ranges:
- Identity
 - Relationships
 - Education, attainment and employment
 - Mental health
49. In terms of identity, young people expressed the importance of maintaining connections with their birth families; for greater information sharing and to feel listened to. Within the theme of relationships, young people want more family time, help navigating relationships with peers and they resent frequent social worker changes.
50. Young people identified support needs in school and in accessing HE/FE, they want awareness of the impact of being looked after on education and they want help to find employment. Looked after young people generally experience poor mental health and asked for access to mental health support in a timely manner.
51. In terms of access to jobs, the Virtual School has been working to ensure all young people from Year 9 receive good quality, independent careers advice and are encouraged with age related aspirations. The VS shares our concern for the

post 16 cohort in the current post covid-19 economic climate and hope that work experience opportunities can be made available to help young people become work ready.

52. We were challenged to make one promise to the CiCC to support these recommendations and we agreed to do our best to support their clearly defined recommendations around Identity; Relationships; Educational Attainment and Employment; and Mental Health.
53. We know that in terms of CSE, CCE, CE and Missing YP, young people want to be able to reach out for support in a way that they feel is at their speed and safe for them – choice is important. Young people consider IAG to be vital and are looking for consistent messages, support/service information and self help resources. Emotional support for children, young people and their families continues to be important to them.
54. The Children's Voice Project have surveyed Staffordshire's looked after children and young people directly to assess their experience of coping with the pandemic and to take forward learning from it. In future, the CVP will always offer an online meeting platform for those who prefer it – especially those who are placed out of county.
55. We have been concerned about children's mental health needs and were reassured by the range of support across all tiers from advice and guidance through to intensive support. The service is working with the CCGs to ensure that those with the greatest need are identified early and matched with appropriate support in a timely manner. We recognise that children who are taken into care have always encountered trauma and loss and their mental health must be a priority.
56. Consultation with children and young people at risk of being involved in CSE or becoming missing has extended to parents and carers and insight will be used to develop and plan future services.
57. The CVP has been actively involved in supporting workstreams ongoing by the West Midlands regional participation leads network on Apprenticeships; Measuring Impact; and Regional Strategy.
58. We have nominated the Children in Care Council and the Care Leavers Forum to receive the recently launched STARS award which recognises achievement, for their ongoing work with the panel.

Time for Family and Relationships

59. Relationships were identified by young people as a priority and so in September we invited Family Support Workers (FSWs) to Panel to better understand their role. Working across 3 teams, FSWs focus on the long-term plans of children in care in Staffordshire and they have adopted a restorative practice across all their

services. Their service provides support for parenting; for maintaining relationships between children/birth parents/siblings; facilitates opportunities for reunification; and enables permanency for children. Their relationship is close enough for FSWs to notice slight nuances in the mood and dynamics of family life and take early action as required.

60. Young people have identified maintaining a relationship with birth family as important. FSWs help children to understand their past through life story work. We agreed to identify suitable venues for family time in our wards as they can be hard to find so that a resource list could be compiled.

Service Annual Reports

61. In October, we received annual reports for each service area. **The Adoptions Agency** which is focussed on pooling resources regionally to recruit more adopters and identify adopters earlier; improving timeliness performance; learning from disruptions and research; and working collaboratively with T4C.
62. **Together4Children**, the partnership between the four local authorities (Staffordshire, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and Stoke-on-Trent) went live in September 2020 and aims to collaboratively improve outcomes for children in care – permanency and stability are key factors in children achieving good outcomes and life chances. Services will be delivered via a hub and spoke model enabling authorities to benefit from core central functions and networked regional delivery.
63. The **Complaints Team** shared learning from the previous year. A total of 73 complaints had been received for the Looked after children and disability team – an increase of 16% on the previous year. Only 2 of the total complaints were wholly upheld. Case management remained the consistent theme for complaints. 127 compliments had been received.
64. **Independent Reviewing Officers** explained how a Hub model helped spread their workload. The service was transitioning to a digital practice and championed Restorative Practice throughout. The service planned to grow children's participation in their looked after reviews and Child Protection Conferences as a priority.
65. **Virtual School** Head teacher reflected how the Virtual School had used learning from national data to think about how they support children in care, particularly high attainers and the importance of emotional wellbeing on attainment and progress. They would prioritise Covid-19 recovery planning to minimise any gaps in learning.
66. **Fostering Service** reported good recruitment activity, good retention, supervision and support and training. A wrap around out of hours service now supplemented the wrap around stability support to maintain struggling families.

67. The service has had concerns about the welfare of children and carers during lockdown periods but through the resilience and capability of carers, service performance and outcomes had been maintained in all areas.

The Throughcare Service

68. In March we focussed on the Staffordshire throughcare service. There were then 465 Care Leavers of which approximately one third lived outside of the county. A Local Offer provided by the authority offers support and guidance for care leavers up to the age of 25. We know that suitable accommodation is key to successful outcomes and we are reassured that 90% of Staffordshire care leavers are deemed to be in suitable accommodation. 60% are in education, employment or training which is above the national average but much lower than for non care leavers. 53 young people were at university but it is likely that the rise in youth unemployment will present significant challenges to care leavers.

69. In January 2021, the service was in touch with 95% of care leavers. Throughout the pandemic PAs continued to support young people and individual risk assessments were completed. Specialist Housing PAs worked closely with Housing Providers to ensure that young people remained a priority when providers were able to offer tenancies and tenancy support continues to recognise the vulnerability of care leavers.

70. The Care Leavers Forum moved to a virtual platform and in so doing attracted many more care leavers particularly those living out of the county. Lockdown restrictions had proved difficult for some young people resulting in some Staying Put arrangements breaking down and mental health support needs increased impacted by social isolation.

71. Two young people from the Care Leavers Forum described their recent experiences of leaving care to us.

72. We acknowledge the important role of District and Borough co-opted members in championing the cause of care leavers ensuring they attract priority status in seeking suitable accommodation.

73. One young person said that the impact of Covid had been to reduce her income due to being furloughed and that she had found it difficult being on her own for so much of the time. Her relationship with her mum had deteriorated and she had missed the company of her friends. We accept that one of the greatest challenges for care leavers over the next year will be finding employment and we must do all we can to help them into education, training or employment. Members have a breadth of experience, local knowledge and contacts and we must open doors.

Self Appraisal and the new Corporate Parenting Panel

74. We have spent some considerable time this year on self appraisal, reflecting on the last four years and considering new ways of working. We have agreed key features of the panel post election which will include a more interactive approach

informed by workshop sessions on topics pertinent to the young people attending; a strengthened role for District and Borough representatives in supporting transition of young people leaving care and ways to celebrate children's successes and achievements as we know this is important to them. We recognise the importance of regular attendance and commitment from Panel members.

75. We recognise that the voice of the child and of the carer is often missing from our meetings and we welcome opportunities to engage with children and young people, to understand their lives better and to listen. We will facilitate this and place more emphasis on partnership working in scrutinising services and planning.

76. We plan to facilitate wider engagement through a better balance of workshop/informal/discursive style meetings. We recognise the need to raise awareness of corporate parenting around all members of the County Council and staff. We acknowledge the value and insight of co-opted members of District and Borough Councils who have a particular role in championing looked after children and care leavers.

77. We will get better at communicating our role to other councillors. We will listen and try to understand and influence change and we will establish a corporate parent job description. We will listen to young people who have left care to learn what they think has gone well and what could have been done differently.

78. Feeding back positive stories can help dismiss some of the negative connotations associated with looked after young people and we will find a mechanism to do this.

79. Mr Hudson has brought valuable insight to the panel as a co-opted foster carer and we hope to forge closer links with foster carers.

80. Feedback from our Self-appraisal identified the importance of consistency of panel membership and for members who are passionate about the subject – have empathy, care and commitment. We must raise awareness of corporate parenting, be able to articulate the role and celebrate it - all members of the County Council are corporate parents and we should encourage them to embrace their role. Closer integration with children, young people and carers is to be welcomed and we must be able to evidence that we have listened and effected change. Finally, we concluded that Corporate parenting panel is the most challenging and the most rewarding committee to serve on.

Key achievements

81. The Corporate Parenting Panel plays a key role in promoting, monitoring and challenging service improvement and achievements.

82. The Staffordshire Pledge reflects what matters to young people in care and all Corporate Parenting Panel Members are committed to upholding the Pledge and supporting young people to improve outcomes for them.
83. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the Panel has maintained a watching brief, raised concerns and continued to be ambitious about looked after children's futures. In our Work Programme going forward, the Panel will support Staffordshire children and young people in our care and leaving it through the post-Covid recovery period.

**County Councillor Mark Sutton
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
Chairman of the Corporate Parenting Panel**

Implications

1. Resources and Value for Money - There are no direct financial implications arising from this annual report. Financial performance, namely resources, budget and spend in relation to discharging the Panel's responsibilities is regularly reported through the Council's budgetary procedures.
2. Equalities and Legalities – it will be an ongoing responsibility for the panel to promote, support and respect the identity of looked after children and care leavers. There are no specific legal implications to the report.
3. Risk - The key issue facing the Panel in its oversight and challenge function is the capacity and financial pressures posed by the increase in looked after children population on all service areas supporting looked after children, and ensuring that as effective corporate parents, this does not hinder the care, support, aspirations or continued improvement in outcomes for our children in care.
4. Climate Change - There are no implications for the local environment.

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List of Appendices/Background Papers

Corporate Parenting Panel Terms of Reference

Corporate Parenting Strategy 2016-19

Minutes from meetings of Corporate Parenting Panel May 2020 - April 2021