

Chairman's Overview

Children in care are the responsibility of the whole council. The Corporate Parenting Board takes its lead responsibility for being corporate parents to our looked after children and care leavers very seriously. Our role is also to promote a greater understanding of that responsibility among elected members, officers and partner agencies and to this end we have produced twice-yearly newsletters, hosted an annual seminar and presented our work to the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee. Partner agencies co-operate to provide services and develop strategic plans and we are grateful for the input of our Borough and District, Health and Foster Care Association partners on the Board.

Key to supporting children effectively is listening to and acting on their views. The voice of children in care and care leavers is represented through the Children in Care Council (C2C)'s membership of the Board and their annual report is presented in Annex A. Two joint workshops have enabled us to **co-produce an action plan based on C2C's consultations** with looked after children and care leavers and this has been monitored at Board meetings. **Progress is reported below.** Equally important is to celebrate successes and I was delighted to join 90 children in care last autumn to present them with certificates for achievements ranging from learning to ride a bike to achieving 8 GCSEs.

Good progress has been made in many of our priority areas resulting in improvements in outcomes for looked after children but there is still considerably more to achieve across the whole system. **In particular their educational progress is not good enough and we must continue a relentless focus on improving that.** We need to harness further the collective contributions of our partners in securing the best life chances for our children in the fields of health and well-being, housing, schools, job opportunities and support for employment. Finally I would like to welcome Cllr Stephen Burroughes onto the Board as champion for looked after children.

Developing the effectiveness of the Board

The Board has had a stable membership for the past year although several elected members have moved on to become cabinet members and will take with them their commitment to being corporate parents to our children in care. Joint membership of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, Suffolk Strategic Housing Partnership has enabled LAC issues such as unsuitable accommodation to be raised and pursued resulting in a review of the 16, 17 Homelessness protocol and the offer of 3-4 bed houses by Borough and District Councils for semi-independent accommodation. This will be incorporated in the tender for supported accommodation being prepared by CYP services in the coming year.

The annual seminar with elected members and partner agencies promotes continuing awareness and understanding of the challenges of looking after 732 children and 320 care leavers (March 2015). The seminar provides an opportunity to **monitor the effectiveness of the Corporate Parenting and Sufficiency Strategy** and this year there was a detailed focus on improving educational outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. **Progress against the Strategy's priority actions can be found in Appendix 2 to this report**

The Chair and Board manager met other Chairs to update the protocol between the LSCB, Corporate Parenting Board, Health & Well Being Board and Children's Trust Commissioning Group. This is to ensure clarity in lines of reporting and accountability and to share priorities.

Priorities co-produced with C2C.

*Progress and **challenges**.*

Improving education and reducing changes of care placement and school.

The Board has commissioned the setting up of a Governing Body to the Virtual School to provide termly scrutiny of children's progress and hold schools to account for improving that progress. Care placement stability in Suffolk is improving year-on-year and is better now than statistical neighbours (SN) (Measure is 3 or more moves. 2013 – 13%, 2014 – 11%, 2015 -10%. SN – 12%)

Of the 477 school age children in care in February 15, 413 have remained stable in care and in the same school, with 26 leaving care and 38 changing school.

Control of the Pupil Premium Grant of £1900 per looked after child has enabled the Virtual Head to achieve 100% progression reporting for children in stable placements educated in Suffolk schools

Challenges still remain to achieve progression reporting for children in purchased residential schools.

Children's achievements at Key Stages 2 and 4(GCSE) remain lower than the national average for looked after children and we need to continue reducing the number of changes in school placements.

Knowing their rights and entitlements

An entitlements guide was produced by SCC and Catch22, signed off by the CPB in January 2015.

Making sure children's health needs are known and met.

Progress has been made in children receiving an annual health check (2013, 14 -85%, 2014, 15 – 90%) and C2C has offered to work with health partners to engage with young people who refuse to attend.

CONNECT provides therapeutic services for looked after and adopted children and their carers but there remains significant concern about the whole system's capacity to respond to children's mental health and well-being needs. A comprehensive review is underway with health partners which will respond to the Government's 'Future in Mind' report and which aims to provide a more responsive service along a pathway of low to acute need.

Increasing the amount of suitable accommodation.

Significant work continues by the CPB to progress the Housing Task and Finish action plan and reduce % living in unsuitable accommodation.

(2013, 14 -21%, 2014, 15 – 9%)

C2C continues to hold the CPB to account and the work is supported by Borough and District partners. Procurement of semi-independent accommodation for 16-18 is underway, Housing Pathway for 16-21 in development, including homeless 16, 17s. Staying Put policy reviewed and DfE grant to support additional costs for 3 years. 18 young adults staying put post-18 this year.

There are challenges to educate young people about homelessness, support troubled young people to settle and remain in their accommodation and find training and work and to navigate a complex benefits system.

Reviewing Suffolk's Promise.

C2C has led a major review of the Promise, reported in more detail in Appendix A and will launch the refreshed Promise in the autumn of 2015.

Other areas of scrutiny and activity

Board Meetings are held every two months and have continued to have a themed focus; health, education, employment and training opportunities, sufficiency of suitable placements and accommodation. Much of the work is referred to in the evaluation of progress against the Corporate Parenting and C2C priorities but other areas complement the picture of what is required to provide a comprehensive and safe service.

- **Children missing from care and actions to detect and prevent child sexual exploitation (CSE).** Learning from return interviews with missing children and consultation with children going missing from our children's homes was discussed at the Board, along with processes for dealing with children suspected to be at risk of CSE. The Board recognised the potential links between missing children and their greater vulnerability to sexual exploitation. While accepting audit findings that once aware, individual cases were dealt with appropriately, the Board will be paying further attention to raising awareness of this and dangers of radicalisation over the coming year. A Peer Audit with Essex this summer will provide further scrutiny.
- **E Safety.** The Chair convened a task and finish group to promote awareness among foster carers and LAC. Focus groups to explore children's experiences are being planned and learning will inform staff and carer training as well as promoting individual safety plans for vulnerable children.
- **Annual Children's Homes report and Ofsted action plans.** Ofsted rated the quality of care in all our homes 'Good' with 2 receiving an overall 'Good' judgement while 3 were deemed 'Adequate' with 'Good' features. Detailed improvement action plans were considered and the head of service highlighted the increasing incidence of children coming into the homes with drug habits and involvement with drug sub-cultures. The board sought assurance that the Drug treatment service would provide targeted support to the children's homes and a worker has now been assigned to each home. Each Children's Home has a linked Police Community Support Officer (PCSO).
- **Complaints and advocacy.** SCC receives very few complaints directly from children but where they do, children receive the support of an independent advocate. 7 formal complaints were dealt with during 2014, 4 resulting in compensation being paid and the advocacy services supported a further 65 children to attend meetings and raise issues such as wanting or not wanting to move placement, change contact arrangements with wider family and access to more suitable education.
- **Private Fostering.** The Board noted the continuing good work to safeguard children placed by their parents in private fostering arrangements and contributed to raising awareness of Private Fostering in a recent newsletter.
- **Annual Independent Reviewing Service report.** The report highlighted the challenges of involving more children in their 6-monthly reviews and the service has been working closely with children's groups to improve the quality of that engagement. Improvements in the quality of care plans are being raised by Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) with child care practice managers at regular liaison meetings and the difficulties of obtaining timely health assessments for children were raised and are being monitored closely by the Board.

Participation in national fact-finding visits

- **Visit by the Government Education Scrutiny Committee April 2014.** The committee conducted a fact-finding visit to Suffolk to seek a greater understanding of the challenges of providing suitable accommodation for care leavers in a large, rural, two-tier county and to consult on the challenges and benefits of extending the duty to support young adult care leavers with their accommodation. Cabinet Member and CPB chair Cllr Lisa Chambers and the Director, Sue Cook met the Chair, Graham Stuart, MP and 7 other MPs who then visited a range of provision and met groups of young people and staff to share their experiences and discuss the challenges. The Chair wrote afterwards that he found the visit informative and thought-provoking and Suffolk young people were quoted in the subsequent report 'Into Independence, Not out of Care'. The Board has continued to take a close interest in the development of a wider range of suitable accommodation, as reported elsewhere and maintained a strong oversight of the emergency usage of Bed and Breakfast accommodation which has dropped from 14 young people in March 2014 to 4 in March 2015.
- **Visit by Children's Commissioner December 2014.** Suffolk was again chosen for a national visit, this time by the Children's Commissioner for England. Her focus was the experience of children living away from home and she and her team met children in local authority and private children's homes, residential schools and a group living in foster care. She reported back her findings to the Chair of the CPB, senior officers and representatives of the groups she and her team visited, highlighting the importance of promoting strong relationships for children's emotional well-being and safety, the availability of daily education for children not in mainstream school and the worry care leavers face at 18 when they become adults. Our leaving care service has gone on to engage regularly with the same group of care leavers who helped to develop a Rights and Entitlements Guide for their peers as required by the CPB.

Priorities for 2015 – 2016

- Core priorities - education, suitable placements and housing, health, employment and children particularly vulnerable to exploitation; missing children, those at risk of sexual exploitation or radicalisation and those in secure accommodation or custody.
- Councillors' feedback from Adoption & Fostering panels. The opportunity to see first-hand the experiences of being a foster carer and to hear individual case examples of children in care and those being placed for adoption or under a Special Guardianship Order.
- Improving educational attainment. Virtual School Governing Body -developing its programme of work and focus.
- Suffolk's Promise and Care Leavers' Charter. Monitoring the impact of its relaunch and implementation.