

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 10 January 2024

Present:

Councillor Reid – in the Chair
Councillors N Ali, Amin, Fletcher, Gartside, Hewitson, Judge, Lovecy, Ludford, McHale, Marsh, Muse, Nunney, Sadler and Sharif Mahamed

Co-opted Voting Members:

Mr G Cleworth, Parent Governor Representative
Mr Y Yonis, Parent Governor Representative

Also present:

Councillor Bridges, Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People
Alice Taylor, Adoption Counts

Apologies:

Councillor Bell
Canon S Mapledoram, Representative of the Diocese of Manchester
Ms L Smith, Primary Sector Teacher Representative

CYP/24/1 Minute's Silence - Wiktor Daron

A Member paid tribute to Wiktor Daron, the former Head Teacher of St Paul's Catholic High School in Wythenshawe who had passed away. He highlighted some of Mr Daron's many achievements, including improving the school's Ofsted judgement from inadequate to good with outstanding features, securing new sports facilities for the school, improved academic results and becoming one of the best schools in the country for pupil progress, as well as being awarded the Papal Medal for Services to Catholic Education.

The Committee held a minute's silence in his memory.

CYP/24/2 Urgent Business - Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) Serious Youth Violence

The Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) informed Members that this had been considered at the meeting of the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee the previous day and would also be considered by the Executive on 17 January 2024. He reported that, while the action plan was awaiting feedback from Ofsted and would also be adapted in light of Members' comments, the work stemming from this was already being progressed and he suggested that the Committee might want to scrutinise some elements of this work in future.

The Chair reported that she had submitted her comments to the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee, focusing on the need for child-centred, trauma-informed policing and for closer multi-agency working, and that this was likely to be something that the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee would consider at a future meeting.

Decision

To note the verbal update.

CYP/24/3 Minutes

Decisions

1. To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2023.
2. To receive the minutes of the Ofsted Subgroup meeting held on 22 November 2023.

CYP/24/4 Fostering Service Annual Report 2022-2023

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) which set out what the Fostering Service had achieved over the past year and what its priorities were for the coming year.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Background information;
- Successes for 2022-2023;
- Main issues; and
- Priority actions for 2023-24.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that there was an improving picture in relation to fostering and he highlighted the role of Councillors in promoting fostering.

Some of the key points and themes that arose from the Committee's discussions were:

- Whether there were any particular communities where there was a shortage of foster carers;
- That some people were wary about the process to become a foster carer and how long it took;
- The management of allegations against foster carers, including allegations which were found to be unsubstantiated;
- Trauma-informed training;
- Roll-out of the Mockingbird Model;
- Placement stability; and
- Sharing experiences of being a foster carer.

The Service Lead (Fostering) informed Members that at present 18% of children in care were Black (including Black African, Black Caribbean and Black British) and 10% of foster carers (excluding kinship carers) were Black so this was the main group from which more foster carers needed to be recruited. In response to a further

question, she reported that housing was a significant barrier, particularly for kinship carers and people in central Manchester, including many black families, and that her service was looking at ways to address this. She acknowledged that trust of government institutions was also an issue in some communities and reported that her service was working to build relationships with those communities and help them to understand the process. She reported that her service took a trauma-informed approach across its work but also offered specific trauma-informed training. She informed Members that the first Mockingbird Constellation had been launched in south Manchester and that work was taking place to develop the next one in north Manchester, after which one would be developed in central Manchester. In response to a Member's question she reported that a lot of preparatory work had taken place to prepare for the refugees from Ukraine but that, as yet, no children from Ukraine had required fostering services. She informed Members that the process to become a foster carer took on average 12 weeks, stating that the service carried out regular information evenings for people interested in fostering and would be happy to come and speak to any groups that Members suggested. A Member stated that he would speak to officers outside of the meeting to arrange this.

The Assistant Director (Provider Services) advised Members that the process for recruiting foster carers needed to be rigorous to ensure that the people coming forward had the right motivation for fostering.

A Member shared her personal experiences of being in foster care and the impact of this. She emphasised the importance of having a rigorous process to recruit the right people and thanked officers for the work they did to improve the experience of children in foster care. She expressed concern that some of the recruitment advertisements for foster carers could give a false impression of fostering, glossing over the challenges involved.

The Assistant Director (Provider Services) acknowledged the Member's point about advertisements. She drew Members' attention to the Fostering Unfiltered campaign across Greater Manchester which depicted the reality of fostering, although she stated that this had not produced the response that had been wanted and that the Greater Manchester local authorities would be working together further on this campaign. She stated that her service had worked hard on ensuring that foster carers understood how children with significant trauma communicated. She reported that only 8% of the children were in residential care, rather than living in families, which compared favourably to other local authorities.

The Assistant Director (Provider Services) explained the process for managing allegations against foster carers, differentiating between allegations of abuse and practice concerns. She stated that allegations of abuse were referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and that a Strategy Meeting would take place, attended by Greater Manchester Police (GMP). She reported that allegations were investigated to establish whether they were substantiated, that foster carers were provided with independent support during the process and that the safety of the child was central to decision-making, including whether it was safe for them to remain with the foster carer. She acknowledged the impact on foster carers who were subject to unsubstantiated allegations but stated that not many foster care arrangements broke down because of this, as foster carers received training to understand the impact of

trauma on the child they were caring for, and that most foster carers who experienced this felt supported. She reported that a small number of foster carers had been deregistered. She advised that it was important to take seriously anything that a child reported or that another professional raised as a concern and that, from the training they received, foster carers understood that this was a necessary process.

The Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) reported that his service had increased its family group conferencing approach, supporting children in their families and suggested that the Committee might want to consider a report on this at a future meeting. He recognised the importance of placement stability for the well-being of children in foster care and stated that the Mockingbird Model was a key part of this, enabling foster carers to support one another. He also highlighted the importance of family-based care, which provided a better environment for children than the large children's homes which used to be commonplace.

The Assistant Director (Provider Services) reported that the number of children who had had three or more moves was monitored and reported to the Department for Education (DfE) and that this year that figure had decreased from 10.4% to 9.6%.

The Chair informed Members about the improvement journey that Children's Services had been on since 2014, when it had been judged to be inadequate by Ofsted, and she welcomed that the service had significantly improved and was now judged to be good, while advising that there was always more that could be done. She reported that housing was a challenging issue which prevented people from becoming foster carers and advised that, where this was the case, it should be addressed at a ward level so that Ward Councillors could assist with resolving issues and she suggested that this could include moving them into Band 1 for housing priority. She highlighted that MP Andrew Gwynne had been raising issues relating to kinship carers in Parliament. She recognised the work of Alonzi House to keep children out of care. She also commented on the age profile of foster carers and the future implications of this.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that Children's Services now worked closely with Housing in a way which it had not done previously, and which did not happen in a lot of other local authorities. He reported that all Looked After Children were classed as Band 1, as were foster carers, and that discussions were taking place about how some housing could be made available in cases where housing was a barrier to people becoming foster carers. He informed Members that the Council was using guidance from a national lobby group on kinship carers to assess how it was doing and ways it could improve in relation to this group.

Decisions

1. To note the progress and impact being achieved by the Fostering Service in Manchester and the goals set out for 2023-24 with regard to:
 - Recruiting more foster carers, and carers who meet our children's cultural needs.

- Retaining the right foster carers and supporting them to 'stick with' our children and provide them with stable and loving homes.
 - Developing our kinship offer to ensure our families and communities are offered the right support to care for the children in their networks and to provide them with a permanent home.
2. To additionally recognise the importance of ensuring sufficient provision of housing to enable families to care for these children.

CYP/24/5 Adoption Counts Annual Report

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services which outlined the progress in planning and placements for children, assessment, and approval of prospective adoptive parents, and in offering adoption support.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Performance (children);
- Quality of children's reports;
- Marketing recruitment and assessment of adopters;
- Practice developments;
- Adoption Panel; and
- Adoption support.

Alice Taylor from Adoption Counts delivered a presentation which outlined the highlights for Manchester from the Adoption Counts Annual Report. This included children's data, timescales, early permanence, report quality, adopter data, adoption support and achievements in 2023 beyond the service's core work.

Some of the key points and themes that arose from the Committee's discussions were:

- The quality of Child Permanence Reports (CPRs);
- Reasons for delays in adoption and what was being done to expedite the adoption process; and
- Staff retention and supervision.

The Deputy Strategic Director of Children's Services informed Members that the CPR was the profile and story of the child which could assist with the matching of a child for adoption and, although the quality of some CPRs presented at the first stage (Should Be Placed For Adoption – or SHOBA - meeting) needed to improve, this did not indicate that poor decisions were being made in relation to the placement of a child for adoption as there was a lengthy, robust process in place. He reported that there had been delays in the adoption process in 2022 – 2023, partly as a legacy of the pandemic. He outlined some of the other issues which could cause delays, including relatives coming forward late in the process for alternative care arrangements which then had to be explored, lengthy care proceedings and the complexities of individual children and planning for them. He reported that the service was involved in the oversight and governance of the family court to influence

improvements which could be made and in family group conferencing to identify family members at an earlier point in the process.

Alice Taylor reported that the Council and Adoption Counts held regular tracking meetings so Adoption Counts was made aware of any unexpected delays, for example if a family member had put themselves forward to be assessed, but that a lot of the background work would still be taking place so the agency was in a position to progress to matching with a family if it was then decided that adoption was the right path for that child. She outlined work that would be taking place over the next year to streamline the adoption process within the agency to minimise delays, while ensuring the process was robust.

The Chair expressed concern about the delays in the process, including court backlogs. She requested that the next time items on adoption and fostering were considered that adoptive parents and foster carers be invited to the meeting to speak about their experiences. The Strategic Director (Children and Education Services) requested that consideration be given to this outside of the meeting to ensure that the families and children involved were not compromised.

In response to a question from the Chair about Greater Manchester local authorities which were not part of Adoption Counts, the Deputy Strategic Director of Children's Services reported that all local authorities were linked with a regional adoption agency but some Greater Manchester authorities were aligned with a different agency. He highlighted the role of the Workforce Development Strategy and assured Members that the appropriate supervision of and support for staff at the Council and Adoption Counts was of the highest priority. In response to Members' comments about retaining links with birth families after adoption, he highlighted the importance of lifelong letterbox contact and reported that work was taking place to improve the quality and meaningfulness of this contact.

A Member asked if Committee Members could visit the Council's social work frontline service and this was supported by the Chair.

Decision

To arrange a visit to the Council's social work frontline services.

CYP/24/6 Annual Virtual School Head's Report

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Education which provided an overview of the work that had been undertaken during 2022-23 to promote the education, employment and training of the Children and Young People overseen by the Manchester Virtual School. The report stated that this included Children and Young People in the care of Manchester, Manchester Care Leavers, Previously Looked After Children who attended education settings within Manchester, Children and Young People with a Manchester Social Worker and Young People supported by the Youth Justice Service.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- 2022-23 success headlines;
- Virtual School structure, duties, offer and summary of 2022-23;
- Overview of Children and Young People;
- Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion;
- Ofsted judgements of the schools attended by Our Children and Young People;
- The views, wishes and feelings of Our Children and Young People;
- The outcomes achieved by Our Children and Young People;
- The Virtual School work to promote the Education, Employment and Training of the children and young people it oversaw;
- The Virtual School work to promote inclusion;
- School attendance;
- Exclusions and suspensions;
- Workforce development overview; and
- Virtual school priorities for 2023-24.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People highlighted the achievements outlined in the report, including significant improvements in examination results and post-16 participation, and he recognised the positive work of the Virtual School team. He encouraged Members to attend the next Corporate Parenting Panel meeting to consider the new Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Some of the key points and themes that arose from the Committee's discussions were:

- To welcome the overall positive picture, in particular the improvement in GCSE results;
- What was being put in place to support younger children, who were not achieving as well; and
- Variations in PEP forms and processes between different local authorities, noting that schools and colleges often had children from different local authority areas attending their setting and were having to work with different PEPs.

The Executive Member for Early Years, Children and Young People reported that a number of discussions had already taken place at previous Committee meetings about the impact of the pandemic on young children more broadly and that for children with any additional challenges the outcomes diverged further, both from where they had been previously and from the rest of the cohort. He reported that he had written to Government Ministers about this and that the Council was working hard to address this, including setting up a Kickstarter scheme to provide targeted support.

The Chair expressed concern at the impact that the pandemic had had on all babies and young children. She also highlighted the impact of the forthcoming expansion of the free childcare entitlement.

The Virtual School Deputy Head outlined some of the work taking place to support the progress of their younger children who had been disproportionately affected by

the pandemic, working with Early Years and Key Stage 1 providers, closely monitoring progress through the termly PEP process, offering access to Educational Psychologists, ensuring that children were accessing the Kickstarter programme, working with the Speech and Language Team and using Pupil Premium funding for literacy activities. In response to a Member's question on pre-pandemic data on Early Years development, reading, writing and mathematics, she advised that this was available in previous reports but that there was no national data on Good Level of Development (GLD) in Early Years prior to the pandemic.

The second Virtual School Deputy Head recognised the Member's comments about variations in the PEP across different local authorities and reported that this had been raised at a regional level; however, she advised that there were benefits to the secure electronic PEP system used by Manchester and that, while Manchester would be willing to engage in discussions with other Virtual Schools on standardisation of the PEP form, she believed that Manchester's version provided the level of detail that was needed.

The Chair advised that the Committee should consider an item on Early Years development and the progress of the cohort of young children affected by the pandemic, in relation to all children, as part of a future item. She shared her experiences as a Regulation 44 visitor, expressing concern about the young people who were not in education. She highlighted the work that Morgan Sindall had been doing with Care Leavers and advised that other employers could do similar education, employment and training work as part of the Social Value element of Council contracts. She also reported that Manchester Adult Education Services (MAES) could do more work with this group.

Decision

To consider an item on Early Years development and the progress of the cohort of young children affected by the pandemic as part of a future item.

CYP/24/7 Overview Report

A report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit was submitted. The overview report contained key decisions within the Committee's remit, responses to previous recommendations and the Committee's work programme, which the Committee was asked to approve.

The Chair reported that she was discussing with the Chair of the Health Scrutiny Committee an item on children's dental health.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme, subject to the above comment.