

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR D BRAILSFORD (CHAIRMAN)

Councillors A G Hagues, J D Hough (Vice-Chairman), P J O'Connor and L Wootten.

External Members: Mrs Marilyn Graham-Williams (Foster Carer) and Mr Ted Normandale (National Youth Advocacy Service).

Officer/invited guests in attendance: Rebecca Andrews (Principal Lawyer, Legal Services), Dave Clarke (Secure Unit Principal), Sheridan Dodsworth (Head of Service, Children with Disabilities), Judith Gilbert (Democratic Services Officer), John Harris (Joint Head of Regulated Services), Colin Hopkirk (Participation Officer), Tracy Johnson (Scrutiny Officer), Tara Jones (Joint Head of Regulated Services), Nicola Leaning (Lawyer, Legal Services), Kerry Mitchell (Leaving Care Manager, Barnardo's), Jinny Niven (Interim Customer Relations and Complaints Manager) and Janice Spencer (Assistant Director Children's Service).

51. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J R Hicks and R J Hunter-Clarke.

Apologies were also received from Jean Burbidge (Lincolnshire Community Health Services), Polly Coombes (Foster Carer), Samantha Edwards (Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust) and Cassie Hanley-Ball (Chair, V4C The Looked After Children Council).

52. DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations of members' interests were made at this stage of proceedings.

53. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 31 JANUARY 2014

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the previous meeting held on the 31 January 2014 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record. It was, however, noted that Councillor L Wootten had given her apologies to the meeting due to a prior civic engagement.

54. V4C THE LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN COUNCIL QUARTERLY MINUTES

The Panel considered the notes of the V4C (Voices for Choices) Executive Minutes dated 21 January 2014 and 18 February 2014.

It was noted that the FAB! Awards which had taken place on Saturday 8 March 2014 at the Epic Centre, Lincoln, had been very well attended and the day was most successful and enjoyable. The Panel was informed that foster carers who had cared for young people for over thirty-five years received awards. It was also noted that Lincolnshire County Council would write to the foster carers expressing their thanks to them for their dedication over the last thirty-five years.

It was observed that one young person had been sponsored in completing the Three Peaks Challenge with the sponsorship money raised being donated to Help the Heroes which the Panel felt was very commendable.

It was reported that a Residential Adventure Weekend with approximately sixteen young people which included members of the Youth Cabinet and Young Inspectors had been planned for the weekend of 15 and 16 March 2014 at a Youth Hostel in Derbyshire which would be a chance for all who attended to interact together and share their experience with the newly elected Youth Cabinet.

The Panel was informed that Manchester Metro University were holding an assessment event on 27 March 2014 at Loxley House, Nottingham, where three members of V4C Executive Group would be part of an assessment panel for social worker presentations for the "step-up" social work degree course.

It was conveyed that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education's visit held recently had been successful and two young people were invited to meet the group. Feedback from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education was that the young people they met engaged well with the group and gave positive accounts of their life in care.

It was acknowledged that four young people from the V4C Executive had been engaged with the Duke of Edinburgh Awards and all felt this had been a really positive experience. It was expressed that Lincolnshire County Council may need to promote this more widely and more work was needed in this area. It was noted that the Duke of Edinburgh Awards do not as a rule note if a child is Looked After. It was felt that the young people who had been engaged with the Duke of Edinburgh Awards had benefitted from this giving them greater confidence and self-esteem in their lives. It was requested that a further report be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel outlining how many looked after children had benefitted previously and guidance on how this could be promoted further in the future was needed.

The Panel was informed that work was currently being explored with regard to using Skype for future meetings which could save travelling expenses and time in attending meetings for staff and young people as well as making all meetings accessible. The Group was also looking at making more use of a volunteer drivers' scheme.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted and a further report as detailed be submitted to a future Corporate Parenting Panel Meeting.

55. VISITING MEMBERS' QUARTERLY REPORT AND VISITING MEMBER FEEDBACK

(Councillor J D Hough joined the meeting)

The Panel received an updated report outlining Councillors' visits to Children's Homes between April 2013 and March 2014. Some Panel Members expressed concern that the information circulated may need to be updated as some visits made by Councillors had not been recorded on the Visiting Members' Log Sheet received.

It was reported that it had been a difficult time in the main stream residential units over this period with a complex mix of young people but staff had managed behavioural difficulties well. It was noted that Strut House in Lincoln and Haven Cottage in Boston had been graded as outstanding. The Panel was informed that the homes were used for respite care cover for young people with disabilities.

It was agreed that Councillor L Wootten would update the Panel with information relating to her visit at the next Corporate Parenting Panel to be held on 5 June 2014 and the Panel was encouraged to make visits to the Children's Homes.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

56. LEGAL SERVICES LINCOLNSHIRE

The Panel was informed that the Legal Child Care Team currently provided legal advice and support for Lincolnshire County Council. Instructions were received by the Legal Child Care Team from Children's Services and the Team currently had 16 members of staff which comprised of 8 lawyers and 2 senior legal officers plus support staff. It was emphasised that they did not make decisions about the care of children but worked closely with Children's Services staff and the courts in order to support the future outcomes for children. They held regular meetings with the Judge and had a close working relationship in order to determine the most suitable outcome for the child.

The Panel received a report regarding the implementation of legal proceedings between April 2012 and November 2013. It was noted that between April 2012 and March 2013 care proceedings were issued in respect of 222 children consisting of 212 applications for Care Orders and 7 applications for Supervision Orders. There was also 1 application for a Care Order and Secure Accommodation Order. Between April 2013 and November 2013 care proceedings were issued in respect of 101 children, 99 of the applications were for Care Orders and 2 applications for Supervision Orders. It was reported that between April 2012 and March 2013 care proceedings were concluded in respect of 206 children and between April 2013 and November 2013 care proceedings were concluded in respect of 155 children.

It was reported that from April 2014 all Court cases should be completed by twenty six weeks although it was noted currently that the average court case was concluded after 22 weeks and that Lincolnshire County Council was the top performing organisation in England with regard to concluding court cases. Social Workers were seeing a large increase in the amount of cases now being dealt with and a recruitment exercise was currently being undertaken to recruit additional social workers. It was observed that legal aid arrangements had changed from April 2013 and the fees of those who provided legal aid had decreased considerably and timescales reduced.

It was noted that from 1 July 2013 a new Public Law Outline came into force and since this date 38 cases had been issued in respect of 58 children.

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services (CAFCASS) Plus Initiative had received 34 cases before court proceedings were issued. Of these 34 cases, 3 cases had been diverted from CAFCASS with children remaining in the care of their parents. Currently 23 cases had been issued, 8 of which were for unborn babies. Referrals at 20 weeks pregnancy may be made in order that social workers may work with the parents and families prior to the baby being born.

The Panel was informed that the number of children proceeding into foster care was gradually reducing and Children's Services were now looking into other alternative methods to place children other than adoption.

Concern was expressed that there may be children who were being abused which Lincolnshire County Council was unaware of. It was confirmed that Lincolnshire County Council received little criticism at the way children were currently protected.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

57. PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Panel received a report from Quarter 3 2013/2014 which showed:

(a) The percentage of Looked After Children with an up-to-date health check

It was noted that the performance in Quarter 3 was 4.5% below target of which 1.72% of young people who exercised their right to refuse a health assessment. It was noted that possibly there was a shortage of Doctors who were able to complete this assessment.

(b) The percentage of Looked After Children with an up-to-date dental check

It was reported that again performance was below target and this could possibly be due to inputting errors. It was noted also that possibly there were a number of young people who refused to attend a dental appointment. It was hoped that this target would improve in the next quarter.

(c) The percentage of Looked After Children with up-to-date routine immunisations

Performance was below target but it was felt that a substantial proportion of young people looked after were within the age range where they did not require immunisations every year. This target was reported on because it was felt important that no immunisations were missed.

(d) Timeliness and stability of Looked After Children

It was reported that although this target had improved, the set target may never be reached as it was imperative that the best interests for the child were always considered a priority. It was confirmed that a letter had been sent to the Education Secretary regarding this set target.

(e) Stability of Placements of Looked After Child

It was noted that there had been a marked deterioration in the past quarter in the number of home moves children had endured. Therefore some placements had not been as effectively matched upon entry into care. It was observed that 9 of the group of 38 children had been successfully placed for adoption, 4 of whom had previously been placed as a first placement in a parent and child foster placement.

The Panel expressed concern that children were having to be moved around foster homes and received reassurance that much thought goes into placing children with the most suitable foster families available and there was inevitably going to be some changes as some children did not settle in foster families and were much more suited to residential care. The Panel expressed concern at what support was offered to the child and it was noted that this was very much tailored to the individual needs of a particular child.

(f) Adoptions of Looked After Children

It was reported that the performance of the above target had exceeded expectations. This was due to the effective management of timescales, links and timely adoption orders being granted.

(g) Looked After Children per 10,000 population aged under 18

It was confirmed that 587 children were in the care of the Local Authority at the end of last year.

The Panel referred to missing data in the report and it was agreed that this data would be presented to a future meeting.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

58. COMPLIMENTS, COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS RECEIVED FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The Panel received a report outlining two complaints which had been received between 1 July 2013 and 31 December 2013.

The Panel noted a complaint had been received from a 16 year old girl who had complained that her Social Worker would not allow her to sleep over at her 23 year old boyfriend's house. It was noted that the Social Worker felt this inappropriate as the boyfriend did not have his own bedroom and was sleeping on a settee in the communal area of the house.

A second complaint had been received from a 15 year old boy who was unhappy he was not able to go on holiday with his foster carers as he did not have a passport and his father would not agree to this being issued to him to allow him to go on holiday. The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) supported the boy with regard to making representation to the boy's Social Worker to try and resolve this situation. Unfortunately a solution was unforthcoming and NYAS gave him the necessary support to enable him to make a complaint to Lincolnshire County Council. Although Lincolnshire County Council liaised with the Legal Section the problem remained unresolved. It was noted that NYAS Legal Section supported the boy with assistance to apply for a specific issue resolution from the Court. The Panel was informed that the Legal Section of Lincolnshire County Council would be contacted with regard to the advice originally submitted.

An update was given to the Panel with regard to a complaint received prior to this quarter. A complaint was received from a young person who had been looked after by Lincolnshire County Council for the last eight years and was made on behalf of herself and her brother. It was noted that the children were removed from the family home due to serious concerns for their safety. The children felt that Lincolnshire County Council had failed on occasions to protect them from violence in the home and Lincolnshire County Council had failed to act in the best interests of the children concerned. The children were also unhappy that Lincolnshire County Council had failed to submit claims on their behalf to the Criminal Injuries Board despite having raised the complaint a number of times. It was observed that the complaint was investigated at Stage 2 and was found to be partly substantiated.

Concern was expressed that children had the opportunity to make a complaint and were aware of the process involved. It was confirmed that NYAS offered support and tried to find a remedy to complaints received and it was felt that if it was not for this service more formal complaints would be received by Lincolnshire County Council. It was noted that complaints were normally resolved at a local level initially although it was acknowledged that improved information for children with regard to making complaints should be progressed. It was, however, noted that children were given the opportunity to make complaints if it was felt necessary and complaint forms were available for use.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

59. LINCOLNSHIRE LEAVING CARE UPDATE

The Panel was informed that to date, Lincolnshire's Leaving Care Service was supporting 320 young people across the County.

It was noted that Barnardo's Leaving Care Service had been a key partner in developing the Youth Homelessness Strategy. They had a clear plan in place for helping young people in unsuitable accommodation although it was emphasised that some young people may be happy staying in unsuitable accommodation but the aim of the Care Service was to give support to the individual. Barnardo's Supported Lodgings Scheme currently offered accommodation and support to care leavers across the County. They currently had 22 providers which offered 32 placements. It was noted that from April 2013 to the present date 44 care leavers had been supported in their lodgings. It was indicated that there were 19 young people currently in supported lodgings and during the next six months plans to extend this provision by recruiting, training and supporting more accommodation providers were to be progressed.

The Panel was informed that two work preparation courses had been completed within the last six months with 27 young people in attendance. It was noted that 11 young people had attended the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme on the 1 June 2013. Five of the young people who attended were now in employment with a host employer and 1 person dropped out of the scheme. It was noted that the other young people remained on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme.

It was reported that three care leavers had been involved in a Countywide participation forum working on anti-bullying strategies with young people.

The Panel was also informed that 20 young people had attended a residential in Derbyshire in order to experience outdoor activities with the aim to increase confidence and self-esteem. Reference was made to a visit of three young people who had met the Queen at the Barnardo's Head Office opening in London recently as well as meeting Girls Aloud. It was noted that many of the young people who travelled had never visited London previously.

The Panel was informed that Barnardos were recruiting two additional workers to work in conjunction with nurses for young people with specific needs. It was also noted that Lincolnshire was providing a good support service to young people in comparison with other areas of the country. The Panel noted that work was currently being undertaken with asylum seekers who were under the age of 21 and employers were being encouraged to employ them.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

60. FOSTERING REPORT QUARTER 3

The Panel was informed that for 2013/2014 fostering within Children's Service had an annual budget of £7,635,000 an increase which had enabled a 1.75% uplift for all registered foster carers. It was noted that the fostering service continued to be largely self-sufficient with the majority of children requiring foster placements being placed within the County. It was noted that there were limited placements for sibling groups available. The Panel was informed that Lincolnshire's self-sufficiency differed considerably from other local authorities where up to 50% of children were placed with Independent Fostering Agencies and in Doncaster where all recruitment for children over the age of eight were delegated to an Independent Fostering Agency.

It was reported that 62 enquiries had been received in the last quarter from members of the public interested in becoming foster carers. This was a diminishing figure and had resulted in the service reviewing its approach to the recruitment of foster carers. At the same time the recruitment project with the DfE had continued and a successful event was held in Horncastle to promote carer lead local recruitment. In addition, the Panel was informed that a Foster Carer Forum had been held in Horncastle last November and 70 people attended the event. Foster Care Forums would become regular events in the future to improve communication with foster carers.

It was acknowledged that the Private Fostering – Statement of Purpose 2012/2013 had been circulated to the Panel for information.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

61. REGULATION 33 SUMMARY REPORT – SEPTEMBER 2013 TO JANUARY 2014

The Panel was informed that in keeping with Regulation 33 of the Children's Homes Regulations 2001, the County Council arranged monthly visits to be undertaken by the Regulation 33 Officer to children's homes. The nominated officer then had an opportunity to meet and talk to children and a range of the staff at the home to ascertain their views, comments and any complaints relating to the running of the home.

It was noted that there were currently staffing vacancies at the following Residential Care establishments – Albion Street, The Beacon, Eastgate, Strutt House and the Haven which were currently being filled by using existing temporary and relief workers. It was also noted that some relief panel staff were on a zero hours contract which meant they only worked as and when required. It was felt that advertising vacancies would give temporary and relief workers an opportunity to apply for vacant positions whilst being familiar with the demands of the role. The Panel felt it important that when advertising vacant posts as much information as possible be provided from the outset as possible in order that prospective applicants were aware of the demands of the post. The Panel was informed that some staff working in children's disability homes may have left positions due to the young people's challenging behaviour. Some staff were involved in working in different homes as part of their professional and team building development.

It was observed that the views of young people were actively sought concerning their care arrangements and they were encouraged to be involved in their future. It was noted that all the young people had key workers whom they worked closely with and all the young people were in education, undertaking work experience or involved in apprenticeships.

The Panel thanked the staff for all their hard work, patience and commitment into striving for the best outcomes for the young people in their care.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

62. NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY SERVICE (NYAS) - LINCOLNSHIRE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS SERVICE – SIX MONTHLY UPDATE – APRIL 2013 - DECEMBER 2013

It was reported that NYAS provided a Children's Rights Service to all children and young people aged 0 - 18 living in Lincolnshire, which included children looked after in out of County placements. Their main aim was to support children and young people to achieve the vision that every child should achieve their potential and to enable children and young people to participate in decisions which affected them.

The Panel was informed that at the end of the last financial year Lincolnshire County Council and NYAS agreed to implement an "opt out" service for supporting children and young people from the age of 10 years in Child Protection Conferences with effect from 1 April 2013. In previous years this support had been available on an "opt in" basis which resulted in comparatively low numbers of referrals. During the year of 2012 – 2013 NYAS supported 17 young people who had been subject to Child Protection proceedings. It was noted that 77 referrals had been received for Child Protection Conferences between April 2013 and December 2013. The Panel was informed that in addition there had been a marked increase in referrals related to other issues, due primarily to the increased profile of the service which resulted from the increased child protection cases. Such an increase had impacted on the current resources available. It was explained that one additional sessional advocate had been recruited and trained and another candidate had completed training and would be available for advocacy work shortly. The Panel noted that NYAS staff made contact very quickly with young people after they were referred to them for support and often made contact the same day.

It was noted that 34 non child protection referrals had been received by NYAS over the last six months and their target was 20. NYAS had received 27 child protection referrals and again their target was set at 20.

It was observed that NYAS had received no complaints with regard to their service but a number of compliments had been received from parents, professionals and young people.

The Chairman thanked NYAS for all their hard work and commitment to young people and it was evident that the staff at NYAS were very professional, hard-working and dedicated into improving the lives of young people.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

63. CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME 2014

The Scrutiny Officer introduced this item and it was agreed that the Corporate Parenting Strategy scheduled to be discussed in June be circulated prior to the next meeting so that other Panel members would be able to input into the Strategy. It was noted that this would be a working document and may be subject to some change.

It was reported that young people from leaving care would like to come to a future meeting of the Panel to show members their new website. It was agreed that this would be raised at the next pre-meeting for the Panel.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme presented be amended accordingly.

The meeting finished at 12.50 pm.