

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Cabinet Member for Children and Young People held at
1.00 pm on Monday, 15 January 2024

Present:

Members: Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member)
Councillor J Lepoidevin (Shadow Cabinet Member)

Employees (by Service Area):

Children's Services: M Clayton, H Harper, N McDonald (interim Director of Children's Services), K Robinson, A Whitrick

Law and Governance: U Patel

Apologies: Councillor A Jobbar (Deputy Cabinet Member)

Public Business

6. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

7. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2023 were agreed and signed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

8. Annual Adoption Report

The Cabinet Member considered a report of the Director of Children's Services which presented the City Council's Annual Adoption Report.

Each local authority in England was obliged by National Minimum Standards to formally approve the statement of purpose and children's guides, and to review them at least annually. The Annual Report was presented to meet this obligation. Coventry City Council was currently in a partnership arrangement with Adoption Central England (ACE), a Regional Adoption Agency. This was a shared services arrangement hosted by Warwickshire County Council and ACE was responsible for recruiting and assessing adoptive families. It was also involved in matching children with adopters in partnership with the child's social worker. ACE was also responsible for administering the Adoption Panel. Therefore, the annual report consisted of a report from Coventry City Council regarding children, a report from ACE regarding adopters and a report from ACE written by the Chair of the Adoption Panel.

Over the past 12 months, staffing had stabilised, and overall good progress had been made progressing permanence for children who had a care plan of adoption.

In partnership with ACE, the local authority planned to improve and develop its adoption practice in the following key areas:

- Continue to develop collaborative working across Children's Services for effective pre-birth, pre-proceedings and care proceedings to ensure timely permanence is achieved for all children.
- Continue to reduce the length of time that children wait to be matched following the court granting a Placement Order
- To pilot a new Child Permanence Report that Coventry Children's Services have developed in conjunction with Warwickshire Children's Services and ACE
- Reduce the length of time that children wait between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family
- To further increase and embed fostering for adoption
- Work with ACE and other local authorities in the ACE group towards ACE achieving the Early Permanence Quality Mark, a standard of excellence demonstrating a commitment to delivering early permanence for children where adoption would be in their best interests.

Coventry had continued to have the highest number of children matched with families within the ACE region. Attendance of social workers and the family finder at bimonthly adoption clinics and bimonthly adoption "catch-ups" would ensure that all children where there was a plan of adoption, were kept under review to avoid any drift and delays.

Securing early permanency via foster for adopt had remained a priority, ensuring where possible that children secured permanency at the earliest opportunity, 9 children were successfully placed on this basis.

It was noted that some challenges remained, as there continued to be a national shortage of adopters, some children waited longer than others to be placed and there was an increase in fostering than adopting. However, it was equally important to note that care plans would not be changed if they were right for the children but would continue to ensure that the children were matched to the right family, even if it meant waiting longer.

With regard to the budget overspend, Members acknowledged that there was a pressure on budgets which was felt across all local authorities. The overspend was a mix of inflationary pressures and increased cost of interagency placements.

Work would continue to target certain communities and how they perceive adoption. In addition, open adoptions, which were available in Northern Ireland, were being trialled in England and Wales. This system would allow siblings who had been separated to maintain contact.

Members welcomed the report and paid tribute to the excellent work undertaken by everyone involved. The Cabinet Member indicated that it was important not to lose sight of the child at the centre of everything and to ensure that Coventry's values were maintained.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Member having considered the report and the contributions made at the meeting, endorses the work completed in this area of work.

9. Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2022/23

The Cabinet Member considered a report of the Director of Children's Services which presented the Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2022/23. The report informed the Cabinet Member of the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2022 and March 2023.

The performance of Coventry's Fostering Service was critical to the delivery of high-quality local placements that could meet the diverse needs of Coventry's looked after children.

The report summarised the activity of the service over the past 12 months. It highlighted the work of the service to recruit, assess and support foster carers and the success in retaining foster carers over the past 12 months. In addition, the report detailed the work with connected persons foster carers as part of the Coventry Family Valued Project and the start of the Fostering Excellence Project which would build on the previous success of the Fostering Transformation Project between 2016 and 2021.

The Fostering Service had grown significantly over the last few years. The Fostering Transformation Project which took place between April 2016 and March 2021 was successful in increasing the number of occupied internal mainstream fostering placements from 149 to 266 during that period. The work of the Connected Persons Team had also grown since 2017, initially as a result of improvements in the consistency of practice in supporting connected persons households as foster carers. Since April 2021, these improvements in support to Connected Foster Carers and Special Guardians had been strengthened by becoming a key workstream of the Coventry Family Valued Programme. The aim of Children's Services was that as many children who become looked after as possible, could be supported to live with a connected carer. Around half of all children looked after in Coventry were cared for by a fostering household approved by the Fostering Service.

At the end of March 2023, there were 726 children in the care of Coventry Children's services. Of these, 499 children were placed in foster care, with 362 being placed with Coventry foster carers. This equated to 73% of those children in foster care, an increase from 69% in March 2022. 137 children were placed with independent fostering agencies which was a sharp decrease from the 163 in these placements on 31 March 2022. Of the total number of looked after children 59.8% were placed with Coventry foster carers. This was similar to that at the end of March 2021; although the overall number of looked after children was impacted by the rise of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children placed in supported accommodation in Coventry through the National Transfer Scheme.

It was reported that post covid, recruitment continued to be a challenge locally and nationally and it was considered that the cost of living crisis would probably have an impact on potential foster carers. There had also been a societal shift in that people did not generally stay at home and with both partners working, it made it more difficult.

Members noted that a bid had been made to be part of the regional care cooperative and the outcome was expected by the end of the January 2024.

Work would continue on the newly issued kinship strategy which aimed to enhance overall support for carers. Central to the strategy was a pilot involving 8 areas that would provide some kinship carers, looking after children previously in care, with equivalent allowance to foster carers.

Having considered the report and the representations made at the meeting, the Cabinet Member indicated that whilst it was understandable that the pilots were looking to standardise financial support, it was important to recognise that there was other forms of support that was equally as important such as mental health, trauma, etc.

The Cabinet Member thanked all officers, and everyone involved for all their hard work and dedication into the progress made.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Member accepts the Fostering Service Annual Report 2022/23.

10. **Outstanding Issues Report**

There were no outstanding issues.

11. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of business.

(Meeting closed at 1.45 pm)