



Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)

Time and Date

2.00 pm on Tuesday, 8th April, 2014

Place

Committee Room 2- Council House

Public Business

1. **Apologies**
2. **Declarations of Interests**
3. **Minutes** (Pages 3 - 4)
 - (a) To agree the minutes of the meeting held on 11th March, 2014
 - (b) Matters Arising
4. **Family Placement Service Update Report** (Pages 5 - 16)

Report of the Executive Director, People
5. **Special Guardianship Allowances** (Pages 17 - 24)

Report of the Executive Director, People
6. **The Voice of the Child - Recommendations from Task and Finish Group**
(Pages 25 - 38)

Report of the Task and Finish Group
7. **Outstanding Issues Report** (Pages 39 - 42)

Report of the Executive Director, Resources
8. **Any Other Business**

To consider any other items of business which the Cabinet Member decides to take as a matter of urgency because of the special circumstances involved.

Private Business

Nil

Chris West, Executive Director, Resources, Council House Coventry

Monday, 31 March 2014

Note: The person to contact about the agenda and documents for this meeting is Suzanne Bennett, Governance Services, Tel: 024 7683 306572, E-mail: Suzanne.bennett@coventry.gov.uk

Membership:

Councillor: G Duggins (Cabinet Member) and J Innes (Deputy Cabinet Member)

By invitation:

Councillors S Hanson, J Lepoidevin and R Potter

Please note: a hearing loop is available in the committee rooms

If you require a British Sign Language interpreter for this meeting
OR if you would like this information in another format or
language please contact us.

Suzanne Bennett

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Agenda Item 3

Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) held at 2.00pm on Tuesday, 11th March, 2014

Present:

Cabinet Member: Councillor Duggins

Deputy Cabinet Member: Councillor Innes

Shadow Cabinet Member: Councillor Lepoidevin

Employees (by Directorate):
People: B. Dhummi, M. Godfrey, A. Harley, A. Pepper

Resources: S. Bennett

Public business

30. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

31. Minutes

(a) The minutes of the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) meeting held on 12th November, 2013 were agreed as a true record.

(b) There were no matters arising.

32. Annual Statement of Payments to Coventry City Council Foster Carers

The Cabinet Member considered a report of the Executive Director, People, which detailed proposals for the annual review of fees and maintenance payments paid to foster carers for 2014/15.

Nationally, maintenance payments are set in line with Government guidance and every year the Fostering Network recommend fees for foster carers. Over time, Coventry's fees had fallen behind the recommended rate. The report sought to address this issue and the proposals, which were detailed in an appendix to the report, included a 6.85% increase in maintenance payments and all other child care allowances and the introduction of a skills fee for foster carers at Level 1.

The Cabinet Member and Deputy Cabinet Member referred to the Foster Care Association Conference held on 5th March, 2014 and requested that their sincere thanks be extended to all the staff in the People Directorate who were involved in the Conference and who had contributed to making it such an outstanding success.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) approves the proposed fee increase for carers for 2014/15 as detailed in the appendix to the report.

33. **Progress Report on Route 21 Care Leavers' Service**

The Cabinet Member considered a report of the Executive Director, People that provided an update on progress of the new Route 21 Care Leavers' Service which had brought together the former 15+ Social Work Team and the Shaftesbury Young People Personal Advisor Service in March 2013. This had enabled the Council to move forward with an integrated service for care leavers which was more efficient and effective in fulfilling the Council's responsibilities as a corporate parent, providing a consistent level of care and support, and improving outcomes for care leavers.

The report indicated that there had been some strong improvements in the delivery of the service to care leavers over the last eighteen months and highlighted the key priorities for the service over the next 6 months.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) notes the progress made to date; endorses the next steps regarding the future development of the service as detailed in the report; and requests a further progress report on the service in six months time.

34. **Early Learning for Two Year Olds and Childcare Sufficiency Duty**

The Cabinet Member considered a report of the Executive Director, People, which sought approval for plans to develop sufficient places, increase participation and deliver on the Department for Education (DfE) targets for 40% of all two year olds in the City to access their entitlement to a funded early learning place. The report also detailed how the City Council's Childcare Sufficiency Statutory Duty was being met, including recent assessment information and recommendations relating to how it is intended to secure sufficient childcare regarding the implementation of the Early Learning Programme for two year old.

The Cabinet Member, Deputy Cabinet Member and Shadow Cabinet Member congratulated officers on the quality and content of the information provided in the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2013-2014, which was appended to the report.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) endorses the activity outlined in the report on order to meet the DfE Early Learning two year olds targets and the City Council's Childcare Sufficiency Duty.

35. **Outstanding Issues**

There were no outstanding issues to report.

36. **Any Other Public Business**

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at: 2.30pm)



Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)

8 April 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) - Councillor G Duggins

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Executive Director, People

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title: Family Placement Service update report

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

A key priority for the Council is increasing the number of internal foster carers to meet the needs of the City's 'Looked After' Children. The strategy for the recruitment of foster carers was reviewed last year and a marketing strategy is in place to increase the number of in-house foster carers.

This report updates the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) on progress made in Fostering and Adoption.

There has been an equally robust drive to retain foster carers with specific focus on strengthening the quality of support, bringing foster carer maintenance allowances in line with Fostering Network Rates and re-establishing the Coventry Foster Carers Association.

There has been an increase in the number of children with a plan for adoption. Since April 2013, there has been a significant narrowing of the gap between Coventry's performance with an average of 583 days and the national target (547 days).

The Adoption service was inspected by Ofsted in August 2013 and was judged to be "adequate". A report was presented to Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) in November 2013 in relation to the 13 recommendations arising from the inspection. Of these, 9 recommendations have been completed and 4 are being progressed.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) is requested to note the progress made to date and endorse the next steps regarding the future development of the service.

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Family Placement Service update report

1. Context

Fostering Recruitment Update

- 1.1 A key priority for the Council is increasing the number of internal Foster Carers to meet the needs of the City's 'Looked After' Children. The strategy for the recruitment of foster carers was reviewed last year and a marketing strategy is in place to increase the number of in-house foster carers.
- 1.2 There has been an equally robust drive to retain foster carers with specific focus on strengthening the quality of support, bringing foster carer maintenance allowances in line with Fostering Network Rates and re-establishing the Coventry Foster Carers Association.
- 1.3 The Family Placement Service launched a more co-ordinated marketing campaign in September 2013 to increase the number of enquiries and applications to become a foster carer or adoptive parent through the City Council. The marketing campaign has included a number of different strands and incorporated strong imagery featuring 'Alfie' and then other children, representing the diversity of the children in our care (including sibling groups) and as such the need for foster carers and adopters from different backgrounds. This was informed by national research which explored reasons why people may wish to become a carer, and the perceived barriers to coming forward.
- 1.4 The impact of marketing campaign between October to December 2013 compared with the same period in 2012 indicate that initial enquiries increased by 35%; home visits increased by 150% and the number of assessments increased by 45%. This indicates that current strategy is making an impact.

Table 1			
October - December 2012:		October-December 2013	
Total Initial Enquiries	78	Total Initial Enquiries:	105
Total Home visits:	20	Total Home Visits Undertaken:	50
Total Assessments Started	20	Total Assessments Started:	29

- 1.5 The Pop-up Shop opened on 11 December 2013 and is currently staffed 10am-2pm Monday to Saturday. The shop provides a strong visual presence in the City Centre as well as an opportunity for people to talk to the team about adoption and fostering. The Pop-up Shop accounted for 36% of all enquiries in December, and up until 13 January, 33% of all of January's enquiries.

Comments received from people visiting the shop have included

'I was so excited to see the shop here- I daren't pick up the phone and call you but this is something I'd really like to explore'

'It's great to be able to talk to someone face to face as I didn't want to talk about this on the phone'

'I would never have contacted the Council again about this as last time the service was terrible (from 4 years ago) but you seem really friendly and if I can come into here to chat through it I'll certainly give it some thought'

1.6 **Special Guardianship Orders** - Permanence through the use of Special Guardianship Orders enables children to remain with existing foster carers and relatives. There remains a year on year increase in the number of children diverted from care or where children have been successfully discharged from long term care. These have been growing in number and in 2013/14 over 204 assessments were requested and commenced. 53 Special Guardianship Orders were made and there are over 40 assessments underway in March 2014.

1.7 **Children Placed for Adoption and performance against the Adoption Scorecard** - In 2012, the Government introduced scorecards as part of a new approach to address delays in the adoption system and measure how quickly children are placed for adoption. The Adoption Scorecard focuses on the following three indicators:

For Children who have been adopted in the last three years:

- A1 Average time between a child entering care and moving to an adopter family (days)
- A2 Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days).

For Children who have been adopted or who should be adopted:

- A3 The number and percentage of children who waited (or are waiting) less than 21 months for an adoptive placement before 2012, or 20 months from 2013.

1.8 Coventry's performance over a three year average falls within the bottom 25% of local authorities.

For A1, (the average time between a child entering care and moving to an adopter family) missing the threshold by 276 days.

For A2, (average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family) missing the threshold by 150 days.

1.9 There has been a marked improvement since April 2013 and the scorecard will not yet reflect the improvement in performance. The one year averages show that in 2012/13, it took Coventry 821 days on average between a children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family and this is now 583 days. The national target for 2013/14 is 547 days and this reduces to 487 in 2014/15.

1.10 The scorecard measures the timescales for children achieving their plan for adoption and there has been a year on year increase of children with an adoption plan. Children at various stages of their adoption journey contribute to the measures of the Adoption Scorecard and Table 2 sets out the number children in the respective part of that journey.

Table 2				
	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14 (YTD)
Total number of Children with a decision that Should Be Placed for Adoption (ShoBPA) as 06.03.14	56	50	73	150
Number of SHoBPA decisions since 1 April 2013				88

Number of children with a with a decision that Should Be Placed for Adoption not yet placed (ShoBPA) as at 14 March 2014				70
Children Adopted as at 25.03.14	23	25	40	50
Children placed with their adoptive families	27	48	25	44
No of adoption order applications lodged awaiting a court date as at 25.03.14				20

1. 70 children with a decision that Should Be Placed for Adoption not yet placed (ShoBPA) as at 14 March 2014.
 - a. 36 for who active family finding still on going
 - b. 14 children to be matched at Panel in March/April 2014
 - c. 14 children for whom their foster cares are pursuing adoption or special guardianship
 - d. 6 children with a potential match being explored
2. 20 of the 47 children placed with adopters have lodged their adoption application to the Court. By the end of March 2014, 52 adoption orders will be secured leading to an increase of 30% since 2012/13.

There is a cohort of children where there is a legacy of delay and for a number of those children their foster carers have either lodged applications for adoption or considering Adoption or Special Guardianship Orders.

3. 30 children have had their plans changed to Permanent Fostering or Special Guardianship Orders and their placements have been confirmed with their existing foster carers maintaining continuity for the children. For a small number of children new foster carers have been identified.

1.11 Court processes affect adoption performance and whilst there has been improvement in the timescales for outcomes of hearings, these are not yet being concluded within the recommended 26 weeks.

- January and March 2013, average duration of proceedings was 52.8 weeks
- October and December 2013, average duration of proceedings reduced to 39.9 weeks

1.12 **Adopter recruitment** is good with most of the children placed with Coventry approved adopters. Timeliness of assessments has improved and recruitment of adopters has remained on track with 47 adopters approved in 2013 and a further 51 adopters' assessments are currently in progress. 6 Adoptive families were secured from other local authorities and agencies for 10 children in 2013/14.

1.13 The service actively encourages and is successful in the recruitment of adoptive families from a wide range of backgrounds, including ethnicity and sexual orientation as well as adopters who would consider taking siblings so that where ever possible brothers and sisters are placed together.

1.14 In February 2014, 31 approved adopters were not yet matched with a child, of these 15 will be matched to children in March and April 2014; 16 others are either on hold or exploring possible children or will be offered to other local authorities.

1.15 **Adoption Inspection 2013** - The Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted in August 2013 and was judged to be "adequate". The report made 13 recommendations and a report was presented to the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) in November 2013. Of the 13 recommendations, 9 (69%) have been fully addressed, with the remaining 4 in progress. See appendix 1 for full details.

1.16 Over the last ten months there has been significant focus on improving performance and challenging the culture of delay across the child care system as identified below:

1. The establishment of an integrated Family Placement Service which includes the Permanence and Family Finding Social Work Team.
2. The Adoption Reform Grant has supported the service in strengthening staffing capacity, adoption medicals and improving the quality of profiles for children.
3. Recruitment to vacancies and by November 2014 the service had recruited to a number of management and social work posts.
4. Service Managers have reset standards and tackled poor performance.
5. Plans for children are rigorously tracked across Neighbourhoods and the Family Placement Service
6. The increased use of Special Guardianship and Adoption with foster carers.
7. Family Finding being more targeted and focussed on the needs of the child/ren
8. Good use of inter-agency funding to secure placements for hard to place children particularly siblings and children with emotional/behavioural issues.
9. Ensuring Adoption Panel is compliant with new regulations and rigorous in providing quality assurance. Assessment, Matching and Panel process/decision making is improved and timely
10. Improving the quality of reports and assessments

1.17 The key priorities for the service in 2014/15 are as follows:

1. Recruitment of Foster Carers and Adopters
2. Recruit to management and social work posts
3. Strengthen the support and retention of foster carers
4. Implementation of new Adoption requirements from the Children and Family Act
5. Improve Adoption Scorecard performance
6. Continued focus on small number of children who are hard to place
7. Continued focus on improving quality of practice and support
8. Improve capacity and timeliness of medical assessments
9. Improve Adoption medicals and timeliness of advice from the medical advisor
10. Complete Life Story work in a timely manner
11. Improve Post Adoption Support and Contact

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

2.1 There have been some strong improvements in the delivery of service to achieving adoption over the last 10 months. There is clear ambition to build on the success that has been achieved so far and move closer to national targets.

2.2 The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) is requested to note the progress made to date and endorse the next steps regarding the future development of the service.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

3.1 Feedback from children in Placement, Foster Carers, Foster Carers' own children and the child's Social Worker are sought at every foster home review.

- 3.2 Children and Young People are regularly involved in the recruitment and selection of staff in the Family Placement Service and in the commissioning of services. This involvement includes face to face contact with interviewees and perspective service providers.
- 3.3 Children and Young People have been consulted on and involved in writing the Children and Young Persons Guide to Foster Care, Adoption and Adoption Support.
- 3.4 Prospective and approved Foster Carers and Adopters receive an invitation to attend Fostering and/or Adoption Panels and systems to seeking feedback from carers routinely has been developed and is being embedded.
- 3.5 Further consultation with Foster Carers and Adopters in planned to take place in May 2014 to inform service development.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 There are prescribed targets and timescales for achieving permanence plans for children and these are measured annually through the adoption scorecard. Progress on this and the priority areas identified will be reported in the annual fostering and adoption report to the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People).

5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources

- 5.1 Financial implications

Fostering Financials

- 5.1.1 In-House Fostering Fees - 2013/14 forecast

At period 8, forecast spend for all foster fees (including family and friends and transport costs) was £3,174,000 against a budget of £3,695,000, an underspend of £521,000. This has arisen because the number of carers is significantly lower than expected – actual predicted for 2013/14 is 190 carers based on average bed nights, against a target of 234. For 2013/14 it had been assumed that the base position for 2012/13 would be improved by 23 new carers, however the reality is that numbers have decreased steadily since 2011/12 when the actual number of carers based on average bed nights was 245.

Adoption Financials

- 5.1.2 Adoption Improvement grant (AIG) 2013/14

Coventry received £1.1m for 2013/14 as part of the Government's drive to address the backlog of children awaiting adopters as well as supporting wider improvements in adoption support services. Of this, £420k is ringfenced, and £643k is non-ringfenced. Ring-fenced grant has been utilised to ensure appropriate resources are available to meet the demand for adopters, developing new innovative ways of finding adoptive families improving support and reducing assessment times and developing capacity within the adoption teams.

- 5.1.3 Adoption Support Budget 2013/14 – financial support for adopters

At period 8, forecast spend is £728,000 against a budget of £721,000 – overspend of £7k.

- 5.1.4 Inter-Agency budget

At period 8, forecast spend is £147,000 against a budget of £298,000 – underspend of £151,000. £29,000 of this spend has been resourced through the AIG for inter-agency

adoption fees. Most children have been placed with Coventry approved adopters. There has been robust profiling of children through a range of medians including advertising where internal adopters are not available. The underspend is also due to income generated from the placement of children by other local authorities with Coventry adopters.

5.2 Legal implications

National Minimum Standards stipulate that the executive side of the local authority, receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every 6 months; Monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users; satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration. Regulations require that each local authority compiles a Statement of Purpose that must be kept under review. National minimum standards stipulate that the review must be at least undertaken annually.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

The Family Placement Service contributes to the wellbeing of children through arranging for a fostering, adoption and other permanent placement for a child whose own family is unable to provide care. It supports a key element of Corporate Parenting – that of securing appropriate family placements for 'Looked After Children' (LAC), as an effective means of giving them the best life chances possible.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

Without an effective and timely Fostering and Adoption Service, Coventry's Looked After Children would stay in care longer, and/or potentially be placed further away from the city in costly other agency placements. This risk is being managed through the delivery of the Fundamental Service Review of Fostering and Adoption, which is examining how to increase the number of children adopted each year effectively.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

Increasing the numbers of internal foster carers and children placed in permanent arrangements, such as adoption and Special Guardianship will reduce the need for more costly external placements.

6.4 Equalities/EIA

An Equality Impact Needs Assessment was undertaken as part of the Fundamental Service Review in 2012.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None

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Directorate: People

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Contributors:				
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Michelle Salmon	Governance Services Officer	Resources	28.03.14	28.03.14
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Rachael Sugars	Finance Manager	Resources	16.03.14	25.03.14
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Brian Walsh	Executive Director	People	27.03.14	28.03.14
Councillor G Duggins	Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)	-	27.03.14	28.03.14

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Appendix 1

Summary Recommendations of the Adoption Inspection and Action Taken

1.	<p>Ensure the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopter at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters; and the completed life story book at the latest within ten working days of the adoption ceremony.</p> <p>Action: In progress</p> <p>A monitoring system is place and is robustly tracked by team managers on a monthly basis. Progress against completion of life story work within the required timescales is challenging. Resources have been identified to address the backlog and this will be monitored and reviewed as appropriate.</p> <p>Training for life story work has been provided in 2013 and further training is to be commissioned in 2014. A short working group has been established to strengthen the guidance and toolkit for completing life story work and books which will report in May 2014.</p>
2.	<p>Ensure the agency helps individuals comply with the agreed contact arrangements; with specific reference to ensuring an effective and efficient system is developed.</p> <p>Action: In progress</p> <p>The transferring of the post adoption records from the manual system to Protocol has been explored. At present, this is not possible due to system functionality. This is being progressed with the system supplier. In the interim, a spreadsheet has been produced and a manual audit and transfer of over 150 arrangements is in progress and will be completed by end of April 2014.</p>
3.	<p>Develop a stronger focus, within the recruitment strategy, on the recruitment of adopters, and target people from a wider range of backgrounds than is currently the case.</p> <p>Action: Competed</p> <p>The recruitment strategy has been strengthened to ensure a stronger focus on Adopters. This was signed off by the Recruitment and Retention Steering Group in January 2014. The strategy is updated every quarter to align this with the children requiring adoptive families.</p>
4.	<p>Ensure where these timescales have not been met in relation to cases, the panel records the reasons in the written minutes of the panel meeting.</p> <p>Action: Completed</p> <p>The Chair of the Panel and Panel Advisor have reviewed the recording of panel minutes.</p>
5.	<p>Ensure that the adoption panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to panel and whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met.</p> <p>Action: Completed</p> <p>The newly appointed Chair, Ms Brothwick, has agreed a reporting template and will this will provide a report every six months and the first of these reports was presented at the end of March 2014. Adoption Decision Makers have noted that the quality of reports has improved.</p>

6.	<p>Ensure any advice panel gives, for example about the age range of children the prospective adopter should be considered for, is not recorded on the minutes as a recommendation (The Adoption and Children Act Statutory Guidance 2002 Chapter 1, paragraph 1.20)</p> <p>Action: Completed The Chair of the Panel and Panel Advisor have reviewed the recording of panel minutes and these now comply with the recommendation.</p>
7.	<p>Ensure the child's birth parents are informed orally of the decision-maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working day</p> <p>Action: Completed Social Workers have been briefed and systems have been reviewed to ensure those parents are notified in writing. Compliance with this requirement will be audited in October 2013.</p>
8.	<p>Ensure a guide to adoption support is provided to the child when support is being provided</p> <p>Action: Completed A guide has been developed, amended in the light consultation with young people and practitioners and is now published.</p>
9.	<p>Ensure a full record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for staff are maintained on staff personnel files; with specific reference to ensuring that the record made during interviews regarding any gaps of employment are transferred to the staff member's file before the record is shredded.</p> <p>Action: Completed The process for recording any gaps in employment to the staff member's file for staff recruited by the service are in place.</p>
10.	<p>Ensure that the arrangements for staff to access specialist advice needed to provide a comprehensive service for children are developed through permanent agreement; this is with specific reference to the arrangements with health services.</p> <p>Action: In progress Access to timely specialist advice and timeliness of medicals is compromised by the increase in demand and in August 2013, interim funding was secured. The recommendation was reviewed with the CCG and Local Authority and a report will be presented to the Joint Commissioning Board in May 2014.</p>
11.	<p>Ensure that evaluative monitoring of all records kept by the service takes place; with specific reference to: improving the quality of the data for children and adopters' timescales; complaints; reports to panel; the quality and content of children's and other files relating to adoption.</p> <p>Action: In progress Work has already commenced to transfer recording into the electronic system for all active and new cases. This will ensure better data quality. This work will continue to progress over the next 6 months by which time it is envisaged that the adoption process and monitoring will be on the electronic system.</p>

12.	<p>Ensure the premises are suitable to enable the agency to meet its Statement of Purpose; with specific reference to ensuring suitable rooms are available for panel attendees to wait in and for social workers to carry out therapeutic work with children.</p> <p>Action: Completed Adoption Panel is now booked in council meeting rooms, these rooms provide quality meeting and waiting areas. Family friendly rooms for Social Workers to carry out therapeutic work with children are being made available within Children's Centres.</p>
13.	<p>Ensure Ofsted is notified of any revision of the Statement of Purpose within 28 days. (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 Regulation (4)(a) and (b)).</p> <p>Action: Completed The statement of purpose was approved on 15 October 2013 by the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) and was sent to Ofsted on 22 October 2013.</p>



Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)

8 April 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) - Councillor G Duggins

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Executive Director, People

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Special Guardianship Allowances

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

This report informs Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) of Coventry's policy and practice review for the assessment of Special Guardianship arrangements, particularly focusing on the financial assessment element.

The key elements of the financial policy are:

1. The Policy applies to children subject to Special Guardianship Orders
2. An assessment for support services must be carried out where the child is a relevant looked after child. A financial assessment is always carried out where the Authority considers that financial support may be required for a child who is currently or previously looked after. Other children who may be subject to Special Guardianship Orders should not be disadvantaged and an assessment including financial support may be carried out.
3. Coventry's assessments will be based on child maintenance allowance equal to that payable to internal foster carer/s. A means test will be incorporated which would lead to child benefit being deducted.
4. Payments beyond a child's 18th birthday and additional needs are subject to set limits (with provision for exceptions) and subject to means testing.
5. Conditions of payments are written into the plan and the authority may attach special conditions to any payment it deems relevant, and that carer/s' sign to give their acceptance to these conditions. Any overpayment is subject to full recovery in accordance with the conditions laid out

6. A revised financial assessment calculation process is implemented.
7. Transitional protection arrangements may be considered depending upon individual case circumstances.
8. The policy requires that all support including financial support is subject to an annual review or a review where there is a change of circumstances.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) is asked to:

Approve Coventry's policy and practice for the assessment and award of Special Guardianship allowances with immediate effect for new cases and to be phased in for on-going cases from their annual review or at an earlier stage if changes in the case details require.

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Special Guardianship Allowances

1. Context

- 1.1 Coventry's permanence policy and placement strategy is committed to achieving permanence for looked after children, and this can be achieved through the granting of an Adoption Order, a Special Guardianship Order or currently, a Residence Order.
- An Adoption Order makes an adoption legal and gives the carer/s parental rights and responsibilities for the child.
 - A Special Guardianship Order appoints a "special guardian" to care for the child who has overriding parental responsibility, although shared with parents and anyone else who has parental responsibility.
- 1.2 To prevent a child from becoming looked after and remaining with their family the local authority may assess the support including financial allowances that might be required.
- 1.3 Coventry's policy on assessment of financial support for Special Guardianship Orders has been updated. The review has been prompted by our ambition to increase the numbers of children in achieving permanence and stability through leaving care via Special Guardianship.
- 1.4 Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 set out the circumstances in which financial support is payable and the considerations that a local authority must have regard to when deciding on the amount of that financial support. These regulations have been further clarified by way of case law, in particular the case of R (TT) v London Borough of Merton [2012]. Financial support is payable in accordance with the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 (Regulation 6) in the following circumstances:
- (a) Where the local authority considers it necessary to ensure that the Carer/s or prospective Carer/s can look after the child;
 - (b) Where the local authority considers that the child needs special care which requires a greater expenditure of resources that would otherwise be the case because of illness, disability, emotional or behavioural difficulties or the consequences of his past abuse or neglect;
 - (c) Where the local authority considers that it is appropriate to contribute to any legal costs associated with the making of the care order;
 - (d) Where the local authority consider it appropriate to make a contribution to expenditure necessary for the purpose of maintaining and accommodating the child.
- 1.5 Statutory guidance and case law {R (TT) v London Borough of Merton (2012)} state that the starting level of on-going financial support should have regard to the amount of allowance that would have been payable if the child were fostered and any additional needs (exceptional) of the child.
- 1.6 In Coventry, the allowances payable to carer/s, prior to application of the means test, will be the approved child maintenance allowance for internal foster carer/s and that after the means test has been applied, an amount for child benefit receivable (in respect of the child under assessment) is then deducted. The reason for the deduction of child benefit is that children in care are not eligible for child benefit, but those placed under an Adoption, Residence or Special Guardianship Orders are eligible.

- 1.7 Statutory guidance stipulates that financial support payable under the regulations cannot duplicate any other payment available to the carer/s. In determining the amount of financial support the local authority must take account of any other grant, benefit, allowance or resource which is available to the person in respect of his/her needs as a result of becoming the carer/s. It is important to ensure that carer/s are aware of and taking advantage of all benefits and tax credits available to them.
- 1.8 Coventry's weekly child maintenance allowances payable to foster carers for 2014/15 are as follows

Age of Child	Allowance for 2014/2015 £
0 – 4 years	140.35
5 – 10 years	159.88
11-15 years	199.01
16 + years	242.06

- 1.9 The regulations set out a number of considerations that local authorities must have regard to when undertaking an assessment for support, including financial support that forms the considerations of the means test. Where financial support is to be paid on-going, it is not payable until the carer/s or potential carer/s agrees to a detailed set of conditions as laid out in the legislation. The regulations also provide that the local authority may attach special conditions to any payment they consider appropriate, including the timescale within which and purposes for which any payment of financial support should be utilised.
- 1.10 Such conditions are written into the plan and that carer/s' sign to give their acceptance to these conditions. These also require the carer/s to contact the authority with any changes in their circumstances that would affect the amount payable.
- 1.11 Any overpayment is subject to full recovery. Any debt write-off would be highly exceptional and subject to authorisation in accordance with the Authority's debt write-off policy.
- 1.12 In some cases the proposed revised procedure will result in an increased payment and in other cases a reduction in payment to the carer(s) would be required. Each case is determined based on its individual circumstances; the final decision on the transitional timing and transitional rate(s) will be at the discretion of a joint decision between the Head of Service and the Financial Manager.
- 1.13 Finance support ceases to be payable to the carer/s if the child:
- a) Ceases to have a home with the carer/s
 - b) Ceases full-time education or training and commences employment;
 - c) Qualifies for income support or jobseeker's allowance in his own right; or
 - d) Attains the age of 18 unless s/he continues in full-time education or training, when it may continue until the end of the course or training.
- Financial support beyond the child's 18th birthday is not guaranteed and will be assessed on a case by case basis.

2 Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 This recommendation ensures compliance with the statutory guidance and subsequent case law.

3 Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 The policy is compliant with statutory regulations.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 Subject to approval, it is proposed that the revised policy and practice will be implemented with immediate effect for new cases. For current cases it is proposed that the revised financial assessment including the means test is phased in for on-going cases as part of their annual review. Financial assessment review dates may potentially be brought forwards to enable all cases to be reviewed together during the transitional assessment phase.

5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources

5.1 Financial implications

In 2013/14, Coventry's forecast spends for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's) is £526,000. The expected cost of the new proposals, to be implemented from 1 April 2014 (as Appendix 1), is £709,000, an overall increase of £183,000. Currently 77 families receive allowances for 132 children.

In summary, the new costs result from the following:

- In-house fostering child maintenance rates will be used when any financial assessment is carried out
- Child Tax Credits will be treated as part of disposable income
- 100% of the disposable income figure will be deducted from the maintenance payment
- General living expenses/personal allowances will be based on 20% of the personal allowance

Generally, these proposals will increase allowances, with an average increase of £2,700 – the largest gainer receiving an additional £7,400 per annum. However, there are a small number of cases where allowances will reduce – the largest decrease is £2,800 per annum. In these circumstances, allowances will be reviewed although the expectation is that new allowances should be applied as soon as possible. Any agreement, to phase the new arrangements in over the next year which would only be made in exceptional circumstances, would incur further cost.

5.2 Legal implications

The policy complies with the statutory requirements under the Special Guardianship Regulations of 2005 and takes account of the relevant case law.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

The numbers of children in care are high and securing permanence for children within their family network or with their foster carers is a key strand in reducing the number of children in the care. As a Corporate Parent, securing appropriate family placements is an important means of giving them the best life chances possible.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

The amendments proposed bring policies for Children's Services up to date and ensure that practices are efficient and fully fit for purpose. There is an impact on the children's budget and this will be monitored carefully.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

As Corporate Parents of children who were looked after prior to their Special Guardianship, the Council has a duty to ensure that all these children have a financial assessment carried out on their behalf.

The changes will mean that some families will gain and some families will lose financially. For families where there is a predicated loss this will be carefully reviewed and each case will merit transitional arrangements, particularly those in a situation where their allowance payment will significantly reduce or cease. The financial needs of those families can be fully supported by either benefits for which they are eligible and/or the revised policy for Carer/s.

6.4 Equalities/EIA

A more robust assessment process and assessment recording will ensure that all families are treated equitably and have access to the required resources to look after the children in their care.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

Not applicable

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

Not applicable

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Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)

3 April 2014
8 April 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Children and Young People – Councillor G Duggins

Scrutiny Chair Approving Submission of the report:

Education and Children's Services – Councillor F Abbott

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

The Voice of the Child – Recommendations from Task and Finish Group

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

The issue of the 'voice of the child' refers to the way that a child's opinions and feelings are heard, listened to, and reflected in the decisions made about their life. The voice of the child is an important central theme in Children's Social Care and it is a constant priority of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2). The work carried out by the task and finish group formed part of the Scrutiny Board's ongoing overview of the voice of the child but was also prompted by two specific pieces of work which also highlighted the issue.

The Local Government Association Peer Review found gaps in the approach to the voice of the child and results from a Voices of Care survey found that almost half did not know or weren't sure why they were in care. The results of the survey were discussed at the following Voices of Care meeting and the young people shared their views on the questions asked.

As a direct result of the issues raised at the Voices of Care meeting, the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) agreed (at its meeting of 8 July 2013) to set up a Task and Finish Group to specifically consider the voice of the child

The group met with different areas of the Council that have a role in the voice of the child and, from these discussions, the Task and Finish Group identified a number of recommendations that would contribute to improving the way that the voice of the child is heard in Coventry.

Recommendations:

1. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) is asked to:
 - a) consider and approve the report of the task and finish group included at Appendix 1; and
 - b) to refer the recommendations set out in section 11 of the report to the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) for the appropriate actions to be considered.

2. The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) is asked to:
 - a) note the report of the task and finish group included at Appendix 1;
 - b) consider any additional comments arising from the 3rd April meeting of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board; and
 - c) consider and agree the recommendations set out in section 11 of the report.

List of Appendices included:

Report of the Task and Finish Group – the Voice of the Child

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

Yes - The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) considered the report of the Task and Finish Group on Thursday 3 April 2014.

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title:

Report of the Task and Finish Group – the Voice of the Child

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 Between October 2013 and February 2014, a Task and Finish Group of the Education and Children Services Scrutiny Board (2) explored how the voice of the child is currently heard by the Council and the ways in which it could be improved. This report summarises the outcomes of work and makes recommendations to the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People).

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 The full report of the Task and Finish Group, summarising the issues considered and the background to the recommendations is attached at appendix 1.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 To help inform their deliberations, the task and finish group heard evidence from a small number of stakeholders within the Council. The stakeholders included representatives from training, education, Social Work teams and Independent Reviewing Officers. The emerging outcomes of the review were also discussed at meetings of the Corporate Parenting Board and Voices of Care Council.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 If the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) approves the recommendations, timetables for each area would need to be developed as part of the next stages of work.

5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources

- 5.1 Additional resources have been identified to fund additional social work staffing in the Referral & Assessment Service, and Neighbourhood Teams, and to fund Independent Reviewing Officer staff within the Safeguarding Service. This funding is time limited until March 2015, and will help to alleviate some of the capacity issues. Any further discussions in relation to permanent additional staffing resource will need to form part of the 2015/16 budget setting process.

Training and Life Story work will be delivered within the existing budgetary provisions available.

5.2 Legal implications

There are no specific legal implications in relation to this report, as it forms part of the Council's constitutional process whereby the Council's Scrutiny Boards can make recommendations to Cabinet (including a Cabinet Member exercising decision making functions under section 3.2.6. of the Constitution). Where such recommendations do not constitute a change in policy the Cabinet Member may take such action on the recommendations as the Member deems appropriate (section 4.5.16.2 of the Constitution).

6. Other implications

- 6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?**

One of the Council's corporate priorities is to protect and support the City's most vulnerable people and to keep children safe from harm. The work of this Task and Finish Group and the consequent recommendations will support this priority by helping to embed the voice of the child.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

Should the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) decide to approve the recommendations, any risks and mitigating measures will need to be considered as part of the next stage of detailed work to develop proposals.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

None

6.4 Equalities / EIA

As part of their work, the Task and Finish Group heard evidence from all stakeholders involved about the positive impacts of listening to the voice of the child.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None

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Councillor M Mutton	Chair of Task and Finish Group	-	21.03.14	25.03.14
Councillor G Duggins	Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)	-	24.03.14	25.03.14

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Appendix 1: The Voice of the Child – Recommendations from Task and Finish Group

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) and the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) of the outcomes and recommendations from the work of the Voice of the Child Task and Finish Group.
- 1.2 This report provides some context for the establishment of the group and describes the process that the group undertook. The report identifies a number of issues that were apparent across the different areas and also describes a number of examples of good practice. The final section addresses the outcomes of the discussions and makes recommendations for improvement.

2 Information/Background

- 2.1 The issue of the 'voice of the child' refers to the way that a child's opinions and feelings are heard, listened to, and reflected in the decisions made about their life. The voice of the child is an important central theme in Children's Social Care and it is a constant priority of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2). However, two specific pieces of work also highlighted the issue and therefore triggered this particular piece of work.
- 2.2 In March 2013, Coventry invited the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review team to review safeguarding arrangements and practice within the City Council and its partners. The Peer Review found areas of good practice but also some assessments where "the needs of the children are not clearly identified and are sometimes lost" (p.10).

The full Coventry Safeguarding Peer Review Report, which was considered by the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board on 8th July 2013, can be found at: <http://moderngov.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s11864/Report%20for%20SB2%20on%20Peer%20Review%20Jul%202013%20final.pdf>

- 2.3 In 2013 the **Voices of Care Council** undertook a survey with children in care. In the under 12 age category 88% of those asked said that they did not feel that they are involved in the decisions made about them, and almost half of the respondents did not know or weren't sure why they are in care. The results of the survey were discussed at the following Voices of Care meeting and the young people shared their views on the questions asked.
- 2.4 As a direct result of the issues raised at the Voices of Care meeting, the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) agreed (at its meeting of 8 July 2013) to set up a Task and Finish Group to specifically consider the voice of the child.¹

3 Process

- 3.1 The Task and Finish Group comprised Councillors M. Mutton (Chair), Lepoidevin, Abbott, and Mrs Hanson and Mrs Jones (co-opted members of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board).
- 3.2 The Task and Finish Group held an initial meeting on 16 October 2013 to discuss the issues surrounding the topic and to establish the way that the group would operate.
- 3.3 The original scope of the group's work was to focus on Looked After Children (LAC) and the way their voices are heard during the journey through care. After some of the initial

¹ <http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s12494/02%20-%20Minutes%208th%20July%202013.pdf>

discussions, the group widened the scope to include those children who are at stage 4 of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process (i.e. those on the edge of coming into care). This widening of the scope reflects the focus on early intervention that the Council believes to be imperative in identifying and addressing children's social care issues effectively.

- 3.4 The group agreed that a series of meetings should be arranged, with each meeting focusing on one of the important themes: training, education, social workers, and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). The group met with officer representatives from each of these areas to discuss how the voice of the child is currently heard and what improvements could be made. The Chair also discussed the issue and the headline findings of the Task and Finish Group with the Voices of Care Council to ensure that their views were included in the report.

4 General Issues

- 4.1 Throughout the discussions with various groups, there were a number of themes that were consistently found to be a factor. There are no specific recommendations made about these general issues (as the specific issues are addressed in the relevant sections later in the report) but it is important to acknowledge the overarching themes across the board.

4.1.1 Increased demand and capacity

Due to increased demands on the service, Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers are currently dealing with caseloads that are too high. This has a detrimental effect on the amount of time spent on each case, which could lead to a reduction in proactive and engagement work. The changes in administrative support have also led to changes in the way that Social Care teams operate.

4.1.2 Consistency

One of the most prevalent themes that came from the meetings of the Task and Finish Group was a lack of consistency in practice. There are many examples of good practice but these are not reliably applied across the service. Inconsistency can be found in communicating with children, case recording, training uptake, supervision meetings, and line management. These issues are explored in further detail in sections 7–11 below.

4.1.3 Culture

The Task and Finish Group observed that the voice of the child is often approached as a separate additional stage to be considered as part of any process concerning children, rather than an inherent and integral element to each part of the process. The Group agreed that there needs to be a change in the culture of Children's Social Care so that the voice of the child is placed at the heart of the service. This change needs to occur at all levels of the organisation, among officer and political groups alike.

5 Good practice

- 5.1 The Task and Finish Group found a number of examples of good practice in their discussions with officers and it is important these are recognised so that they can be applied more widely in the service.

5.1.1 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)

The IROs have previously proactively approached the Voices of Care Council to engage with the young people to hear about their experiences in the system and to also ask for their feedback and input into the creation of a child-friendly plan. The practice of involving young people in feedback and service design is key to improving young people's experiences of care and also giving them a voice in the system.

5.1.2 Senior Social Workers

There is work underway to reduce the caseloads of Senior Social Work practitioners so that they have the time to be able to provide support to Social Workers and extend best practice. The voice of the child will be a particular focus in this peer support model.

5.1.3 Social Workers

There are many Social Workers that know the children in their care incredibly well and, when asked, they are able to comprehensively articulate the conversations that they have had with the child and it is clear that the voice of the child is at the forefront of their work. It is important that this is recognised and rewarded so that there is a service-wide focus on the child.

There are many different ways that the Council engages with families and children (e.g. the Children and Family First Teams) and this provides the greatest opportunity for young people to find somebody that they can build rapport with and talk to. The LAC mentoring service is one way that the Council can help to provide a stable mentor in a young person's life as they move through changes. This service provides children and young people with someone to talk to in a more informal situation and relationship.

The development of cluster working in the service is instrumental to progress peer support and sharing of experiences. This also provides greater continuity in instances of Social Worker sickness or absence as each cluster discusses their cases.

5.1.4 Communication tools

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) visited the Coundon Neighbourhood Office on 16 January 2014 and were shown a variety of tools that are available for Social Workers to aide their communication with children of different ages and abilities. The variety and quality of the tools available impressed members of the group and it was felt that tools such as these can help to address the differences in communication needs and abilities in children.

5.1.5 Early intervention

Coventry has a number of early intervention methods that provide good outcomes for those who engage with the services. One example of this work is the Coventry Family Group Conference Service. The service facilitates family meetings where strengths and resources within a network of family and friends can be drawn upon to make a family plan which offers support, care and safety for children and young people. Programmes such as this have improved outcomes for many children and are promoting communication with children as part of the solution.

The following sections of the report (sections 7-11) detail the discussions that were held in each meeting of the Task and Finish Group. These sections will give some context to and the rationale behind the Group's recommendations that are listed in section 12.

6 Training

6.1 In order to explore the training element of the voice of the child, the group met with two practice educators. The main areas of interest in the meeting were:

- Training requirements

Newly Qualified Social Workers have a programme of University training that is mandatory however after completing that there is no mandatory training other than safeguarding training. There is an expectation that Social Workers will complete additional training as and when training needs are identified but this is not mandatory.

Training needs should be identified during supervision sessions with line managers and the relevant actions should be established.

- Voice of the child

The voice of the child should be central to all elements of social work training so there is not one specific training course about the voice of the child. There used to be a lack of courses that dealt with how to communicate effectively with children, which led to the creation of a specific course 'communicating with children'. There was discussion about how the Council could learn from other local authorities and how they embed the voice of the child into practice.

Training currently offered for Social Workers does contain elements of the voice of the child but the application of the training can sometimes become a 'tick-box exercise'.

Training about the importance of the voice of the child must be undertaken by everyone who works with children (including teachers, school governors, youth leaders, and foster carers).

- Consistency

Training is only one part of a number of processes that can increase consistency and raise standards. Effective case auditing, a culture of personal development and constructive feedback are all necessary to embed good practice.

7 Education

7.1 The Task and Finish Group met with the Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) and the discussion covered, among other issues, the following:

- Individual needs

Each young person has different needs and abilities therefore the processes should reflect that. Some young people do not wish to attend some meetings and so it is important to hear their voice in the best way that suits them.

- LACES' relationships with schools

LACES has good relationships with the majority of stakeholders (LAC co-ordinators, head teachers, school staff, teaching assistants). It is the role of the LAC co-ordinator to deal with all stakeholders and LACES is there to oversee the LAC co-ordinator.

- Relationships

It is crucial that young people have the opportunity to build a bond with one particular person so that they feel comfortable in communicating their feelings, wishes and emotions. These young people can have a large number of professionals in their lives and so there can be barriers to forming positive and consistent relationships.

7.2 The Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) has a range of tools that are used during the young person's Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting. These meetings are held twice a year and the form that accompanies the meeting has a section that asks about the young person's views. The tools help the worker to complete this section with the young person. The PEPs (through their forms) are audited to ensure that the young person's voice is heard (in the best way for them). Young people were involved in the redesign process of the forms and the changes that were made to the form have increased the level of satisfactory completions.

8 Social Workers

8.1 Social Work has a clear role in promoting, hearing and listening to the voice of the child. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) visited the Coundon Social Work Neighbourhood Office where they talked to staff members about their work including the voice of the child. The Task and Finish Group also met with three Social Workers from different teams and the two Social Work Service Managers. These two sessions covered the following main aspects of the voice of the child:

- Communication tools

As part of the visit to the Neighbourhood Office, the service shared a number of the tools, guidance, and techniques that are available to help to find ways of communicating with children of different ages, needs, and communication skills.

- Building relationships

It takes time to build rapport with young people to give them a place to discuss their feelings, thoughts and wishes. The current high caseloads and the bureaucratic processes in place mean that there is less time for this proactive, qualitative work. However, there are different types of workers across the Council that spend time with young people and families that give opportunities for this work (e.g. youth clubs, family assistants etc.).

- Training

The differences in training needs mean that there needs to be a range of training opportunities such as formal training courses, online learning materials and peer support learning.

- Life story work

Recording the story of the lives of children in care is a very valuable activity for the child. For children in long term care life story work is just as critical as it is for adopted children. Life story work needs to be continually updated to make it as effective and relevant as possible. There have been some backlogs in this work, and a workshop has been set up about life story work.

8.2 The way that Social Workers listen to the voice of the child is something that is not just self-reported, it is part of their development, their supervision, and IROs also have a role in scrutinising their success. The effectiveness of line management support and supervision must play a role in the inconsistencies in social work practice that we have heard about from children in care.

8.3 The Task and Finish Group felt that the voice of the child is often lost due to changes in personnel during their journey through Social Care. As a result of escalation, it is possible that the child deals with different workers from the Referral and Assessment Service (RAS), the Neighbourhood Teams, the Family First Team and Route 21. This risk can be even greater when Social Worker turnover and sickness absence is considered.

9 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)

9.1 The role of the IRO is crucial to ensuring that the young person's views are heard and taken into account. The group met with members from the IRO team and the Head of Safeguarding and the discussion covered:

- Capacity

Similar to the Social Workers, the IROs currently have more caseloads than the recommended amount and this can influence the type of work they are able to do. It has been approved to increase the number of IROs from 11 to 16 and, once recruited, this will significantly help the service.

- First impressions

The first interactions that the Council has with children and young people are absolutely crucial in determining their level of future interaction and communication. Therefore it is important that these first experiences help to encourage two-way communication.

- Measurement

There was discussion about how it would be possible to know how well the voice of the child is heard, and how to evaluate any changes made to practice on the voice of the child. This is something that would need to be investigated to make sure that the measurement truly represented the voice of the child.

9.2 The IROs are in a good position challenge social work practice and the recent approval to increase IRO numbers from 11 to 16 should strengthen their ability to do so effectively. On

recruiting the extra IRO posts, the service should use the opportunity to refresh current practice and strengthen the importance of the voice of the child.

10 Voices of Care Council

10.1 As a member of the Voices of Care Council with Elected Members, the Chair took an update back to the Voices of Care Council meeting on 19th February. This was an opportunity to talk to the young people in Voices of Care about the work the Task and Finish Group had been doing, what they had found, and to hear about the young people's experiences. The questions asked and a brief summary of the discussions are below:

10.2 *What were your first impressions when you came into care? What could we do differently?*

Some of the young people talked about the confusion that they felt when they came into care and how they weren't told very much about their situation. Others said there were lots of people checking if they were okay and they were able to ask questions and got answers. There were a number of examples where the young people were taken somewhere to wait for a placement to be found (such as the Social Work office or the police station) and, again, some had good experiences while some were confused or scared.

10.3 *What different ways do you tell the Council what you think? Would you like to do it online?*

There were a lot of different people that the young people could talk to about what they think about the Council, such as their foster carer, the participation team or their Social Worker. There are lots of leaflets that are given to young people in care but they aren't always very child-friendly. Children under the age of 14 might not have access to the internet but those over 14 years old might want to use the internet to tell the Council what they think.

10.4 *Is there someone that you know well and can talk to you about what you think? How do you know this person?*

The young people named lots of different people that they can talk to, such as their foster carer, siblings, other members of Voices of Care, and the participation team. When asked about the mentoring scheme, they thought that this shouldn't just be for the people who misbehave (as they tend to be the people who get offered a mentor). The group thought it would be good to have someone with similar interests that they could talk to.

10.5 *Have you got a Life Story book (or box)? What could we do to make Life Story work better?*

Some have life story books and some don't. It should be something that gets started as soon as someone enters care and foster carers should help to put them together. They need to be of a good quality and individual needs should be taken into account.

10.6 *What happens if you start to work with someone new from the Council? Does it happen often?*

Again there was a variety of responses to this topic. Some had only had a few Social Workers and the changeover was well-managed. Others had lots of different Social Workers but the handovers seem to be improving. It is difficult when something happens and you have to deal with the Duty Social Worker as you do not know them, they don't know your situation and you might not want to tell them certain things.

10.7 *There are lots of different meetings that children in care are part of (such as LAC reviews and PEP meetings). What do you like about these different meetings? What would make them better?*

Sometimes these meetings can feel like the people are talking about you, rather than to you. There can also be a lot of people at the meetings so it can feel like a lecture so perhaps three or four people would be better.

11 Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group found a lot of crossover in the different meetings and areas that were considered, and therefore the recommendations have been grouped by theme in this section rather than department.

Social Work practice

- 11.1 All Social Workers should provide evidence at their annual reviews of their practices in terms of the voice of the child.
- 11.2 Managers should monitor the training undertaken by their teams to ensure that every Social Worker has undertaken the training identified in their Personal Development Plan (PDP).
- 11.3 That Senior Social Work Managers review the current supervision process and assess its consistency and effectiveness. This work should involve input from all levels of the social work team structures to ensure that the process provides the best support and constructive challenge possible.

Training

- 11.4 Explore the possibility of shorter, more focused training courses being delivered in the social work offices to save the Social Workers' time.
- 11.5 A training course should be delivered to all staff employed in schools to emphasise the importance of the voice of the child and how it should be embedded in everything. If there are issues with delivery during the normal working week, this could be undertaken during teacher training days.
- 11.6 A voice of the child training course should be included in the School Governor Training Programme. It should be open to all Governors but a mandatory requirement for those Governors who are responsible for safeguarding and Looked After Children (LAC).

Life story work

- 11.7 Although the Children's Social Worker should be responsible for ensuring that life story work starts when a young person becomes looked after, all carers should be aware of the importance of this. Every LAC should be made aware of those persons directly responsible for them and the names and contact details should be included in their 'pack' and most importantly, be reviewed and up dated throughout the child's journey.
- 11.8 A training course on life story work should be included in the Foster Carers training programme.
- 11.9 Every young person should be given a memory box and up to date, age appropriate documentation about procedures and the reasons for those procedures.

Communication

- 11.10 That qualified and appropriate interpreters are used when necessary to ensure that all children understand their situation and have the opportunity to discuss how they feel.

- 11.11 That a dedicated telephone line be created for anyone to raise concerns about a child. The telephone number should be a local number that is easy to remember and widely publicised. This would allow the public to access the correct team in the Council, as many do not currently know who they should contact in such a situation.
- 11.12 That an online solution be established that would allow young people to enter their concerns and worries. There should also be a facility for adults to register their concerns about individual children. The online solution should be child-friendly and should involve children in its development. Once developed, it should be widely advertised and the launch should receive maximum publicity in order to reach the widest audience. This should be monitored regularly to ensure an appropriate response time. The task and finish group looked at various policies and practices from other local authorities and concluded that the Sheff Kids website that Sheffield City Council set up was something that could be explored in Coventry as part of this recommendation (see www.sheffkids.co.uk).
- 11.13 Explore the possibility of expanding the LAC mentoring service so that every child has the opportunity to have a mentor who is matched to them and will remain their mentor throughout their journey through care. Mentors would receive support and training from the Council. Organisations such as Barnardo's have expertise in this area so the Council could approach them for advice and support.
- 11.14 That relationships with other Social Care Departments are strengthened at all levels (both officer and political) to provide a genuine culture of learning, innovation and improvement. Each Council is facing similar issues and therefore it is important that best practice is shared and ideas are discussed in a wider arena. This has the potential to improve services and efficiencies.
- 11.15 That IROs examine the PEP forms before and after the redesign and speak to the service in order to understand the process that they undertook during the redesign and how the service and process integrates the voice of the child. This knowledge of the process could be used to redesign the LAC review processes and questionnaires so that they are a better reflection of the voice of the child.

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8th April, 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) – Councillor G Duggins

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Executive Director, Resources

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title:

Outstanding Issues Report

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

In May 2004 the City Council adopted an Outstanding Minutes System, linked to the Forward Plan, to ensure that follow up reports can be monitored and reported to Members. The attached appendix sets out a table detailing the issues on which further reports have been requested by the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) so he is aware of them and can monitor progress.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) is requested to consider the list of outstanding issues and to ask the Member of the Strategic Management Board or appropriate officer to explain the current position on those which should have been discharged at this meeting or an earlier meeting.

List of Appendices included:

Table of Outstanding Issues.

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it, or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

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Contributor/approver name	Title	Directorate or organisation	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Other members	Not applicable			
Names of approvers: (officers and members)				
Finance: Name	Not applicable			
Legal: Name	Not applicable			

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	Subject	Date for Further Consideration	Responsible Officer	Proposed Amendment to Date for Consideration	Reason for Request to Delay Submission of Report
1	<p>Progress Report on Route 21 Care Leavers' Service</p> <p>Cabinet Member to receive a six month progress report.</p> <p>(CM(CYP) - 11th March, 2014 (Minute 33/13 refers)</p>	September/ October 2014	<p>Executive Director, People</p> <p>Andy Pepper</p>		

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