

# **CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES AND DECISION RECORD**

11 November 2014

The meeting commenced at 4.00 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

**Present:**

Councillor: Chris Simmons (In the Chair)

Councillors: Mary Fleet, Sheila Griffin, Ged Hall, John Lauderdale and Geoff Lilley.

Young people's representatives:  
Shay Miah

Officers: Dean Jackson, Assistant Director, Education  
Sally Robinson, Assistant Director, Children's Services  
Jane Young, Business Unit Manager  
Wendy Rudd, Head of Business Unit  
Helen White, Participation Manager  
Angela Armstrong, Principal Democratic Services Officer

## **56. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brenda Loynes, Carl Richardson and co-opted member Michael Lee.

## **57. Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Geoff Lilley and Chris Simmons declared personal interests in minute 63.

## **58. Minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2014**

Received.

## **59. Any Other Items which the Chairman Considers are Urgent**

## **60. Any Other Business – Youth Parliament**

The Chair informed the Committee that Shay Miah, Hartlepool's representative on the Youth Parliament and one of the young people's representatives on the Children's Services Committee, had received a Points of Light award from the Prime Minister for Outstanding Volunteering. Shay was due to attend the House of Commons to represent the young people of Hartlepool on a national stage and make the closing speech at Parliament on Friday 14 November 2014.

The Chair passed on the congratulations of the Committee to Shay who had been a valuable member of the Committee and had represented the views of the young people of Hartlepool on a local and national level excellently. The Chair recognised that everyone was extremely proud of Shay as receiving this award was an outstanding achievement.

### **Decision**

The Committee congratulated Shay for his outstanding achievement and wished him well for his forthcoming visit to the House of Commons.

## **61. Any Other Business – Member Training**

The Chair referred to a recent training event that had been organised for the Children's Services Committee to which all Members had also been invited. The training was on the subject of Children's Social Care concentrating on the responsibilities of Members as Corporate Parents to Looked After Children. Whilst it was acknowledged that this event had been arranged during the October half term week, the Chair was disappointed to note that there were no Members in attendance at the event.

Members had expressed interest in visiting the two children's homes within the Town but unfortunately, without undertaking this specific training, Members were unable to undertake the visits. Members were informed that Officers were exploring alternative ways of delivering this training to Members, including the option of holding training sessions immediately before all the Policy Committees.

The Chair reiterated the importance of all Members attending these training sessions to enable them to be fully informed of their Corporate Parent responsibilities as this could not be done through reports alone.

## **Decision**

It was noted that further training sessions would be scheduled for all Members to attend.

## **62. Adoption Service – 6 Month Interim Report April-September 2014** (*Director of Child and Adult Services*)

### **Type of decision**

For information.

### **Purpose of report**

To provide the Committee with information relating to the work of the Adoption Service from 1 April to 30 September 2014. The adoption service is a regulated service and as such is required to provide the executive side of the Council with regular performance information.

### **Issue(s) for consideration**

The report provided a summary of the adoption activity over the last six months which had continued to benefit from funding allocated through the Adoption Reform Grant. Hartlepool Adoption Service had invested the grant in a number of initiatives designed to strengthen local performance and practice and these were outlined in the report. It was noted that there had been significant changes to the staffing complement of the adoption service and it was confirmed that the service was now fully staffed.

The report outlined the activity undertaken in relation to marketing and publicity as well as recruitment, training and post approval support. Further detail was provided on the activity of the Fostering and Adoption Panel including Family Finding.

In summary, the report highlighted that the period 1 April to 30 September had been a challenging time for the Adoption Team. However, there had been an increased level of positive and productive team work which had ensured that adopters continue to be supported at a high level.

The Business Unit Manager referred to recent differing opinions between politicians and the judiciary on the interpretation of case law in relation to adoption. The Business Unit Manager confirmed that this would result in adoption decisions being questioned more rigorously by the courts but reassured Members that robust processes were in place to ensure evidence would be provided to explain the approach taken for all decisions

relating to potential adoptions.

A discussion ensued on the adoption activity days. The Business Unit Manager informed Members that the children were invited to the adoption activity days along with their foster carers and had previously enjoyed the day as a fun activity day. However, the Business Unit Manager reassured Members that a lot of work was undertaken to ensure the balance was right to enable the prospective adopters to make a real choice about parenting. An update report on the forthcoming activity day would be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

In response to a question from a Member, the Business Unit Manager informed Members that in the majority of cases, prospective adopters chose to adopt children from outside their local area. The Chair questioned the advertising process for prospective adopters. The Business Unit Manager confirmed that local radio was used as one of the tools to recruit prospective foster carers as they tended foster children on a more local level.

The Business Unit Manager reassured Members that whilst there had been a few changes in the staffing compliment over the previous six months within the adoption team, this team was now fully staffed.

### **Decision**

The Adoption Agency Interim Report and Action Plan update for April to September 2014 was noted.

## **63. Fostering Service Interim Report – 1 April-30 September 2014** *(Director of Child and Adult Services)*

### **Type of decision**

For information.

### **Purpose of report**

To provide the Committee with information relating to the activity of the Fostering Service for the first and second quarter 2014/15. The Fostering Service is a regulated service and as such there is a requirement to provide the executive side of the Council with performance information on a quarterly basis.

### **Issue(s) for consideration**

The report provided detail of the staffing arrangements in the service,

training received by both staff and Foster Carers, the constitution of the Fostering and Adoption Panel, activity in relation to recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective Foster Carers and progress in relation to the priorities set out in the Fostering Annual Report. It was noted that there were currently 107 Foster Carers providing placements for 143 children which represented an increase of three foster carers since the previous quarter.

The Business Unit Manager informed Members that the Authority continued to provide financial support to the Hartlepool Foster Carer Association which arranged events and activities for Foster Carers and children looked after. Details of the recommendations made by the Family Placement Panel were also included in the report.

In summary it was noted that the number of children becoming looked after in the last six months had decreased and the approval and recruitment of new carers had continued.

A Member sought clarification on the consistency of social worker support given to Foster Carers. The Business Unit Manager confirmed that when a child became looked after, a change had to be built into their support as they became long term looked with support provided by the through care team into adulthood. The Assistant Director, Children's Services confirmed that ideally a consistent approach to the support provided by a single social worker was best. However, it was in the child's best interest to change this support to a longer term specialist social worker once they became long term looked after rather than the support of a shorter term social worker who also had the responsibilities of court attendances and short term safeguarding issues to deal with.

In response to a question from a Member, the Business Unit Manager confirmed that it was more difficult to place 3 or more siblings together and where they were not placed together, regular contact with each other was always maintained. However, splitting siblings was not undertaken without a lot of careful thought and consideration of what was best for the children.

The Chair informed Members that Headliners UK who were a regional charity had attended the Children's Strategic Partnership and provided a presentation dvd on the SEND reforms. The dvd included interviews with a number of children and young people with special education needs and disabilities along with their parents and carers. The dvd was a very interesting and powerful way of informing Members on how people were affected by the SEND reforms. It was suggested that this dvd should be watched by as wide an audience as possible, including all Members, and would be presented to a future meeting of this Committee. The Assistant Director, Education informed the Committee that this dvd would be played to the Primary and Secondary Headteachers in the next week.

## **Decision**

The report in relation to the work of the Fostering Service in the first and second quarter of 2014/15 was noted.

### **64. Safeguarding Children in Hartlepool** (*Assistant Director, Children's Services*)

#### **Type of decision**

For information.

#### **Purpose of report**

To present to Committee a half yearly activity report on the workload of children's social work teams in providing services to children in need in Hartlepool including those in need of protection and children looked after.

#### **Issue(s) for consideration**

The report confirmed that from 1 April to 30 September 2014, there were 3222 contacts made with the First Contact Support Hub from either members of the public or other professionals. From that, 616 contacts progressed to a referral. It was highlighted that there was a peak in contacts that progressed to referral in July and September with a drop in August. This highlighted the support provided from schools in referring children where there were issues of concern. The report noted that across the region, Hartlepool was third lowest in percentage of re-referrals within the 12 months of 2013/14.

To ensure the best possible structure was in place to support the Children's and Families Assessment, the safeguarding assessment and support unit had been reconfigured into six generic social work teams. It was noted that the teams were currently achieving 91% of all assessments within the prescribed timescale. The report included an outline of the work undertaken in relation to child protection and noted that as at 30 September 2014, there were 140 children subject to a protection plan within Hartlepool.

In relation to looked after children, it was noted that there had been a 16% decrease in the number of children who were looked after in Hartlepool and was at 189 as at September 2014. The highest number of children who were looked after were in the age bracket 10 to 15 years.

It was highlighted that during this reporting period, OFSTED had undertaken a thematic audit regarding Leadership in Children's Social Care.

The feedback from this audit had been positive and acknowledged the good leadership and strong child centred vision throughout the service.

The Head of the Business Unit indicated to Members that within the service, long and short term sickness absence continued to impact on workloads. However, robust and supportive mechanisms were in place to help deal with long and short term sickness and to assist staff to return to work following a period of sickness. The pressure managing sickness absence puts on the managers and other officers was discussed and the Head of Business Unit confirmed that there were regular discussions with the Assistant Director, Children's Services on how to deal with this and support those officers who were on sickness absence.

A Member sought clarification on the use of agency workers. The Head of Business Unit confirmed that the use of agency workers was not cost effective as this cost the Council double that of employed social workers and sometimes had differing working practices which was not always the best support emotionally for the child or young person. The Head of Business Unit informed Members that the current staffing was over establishment level which was an effective way of managing absences and supporting newly qualified social workers. The Assistant Director, Children's Services indicated that caseload was not always to issue in some of the recent high profile cases in the press. It was more important to look at ways of managing and mitigating risks through the size of the social work teams, regular case reviews, the accessibility of the line manager and the utilisation of the escalation panel where necessary.

In relation to the recruitment of social workers, the Assistant Director, Children's Services confirmed that Hartlepool had a very good reputation within the Tees Valley of taking care of its staff and that it was generally a very good place to work.

The Chair asked for the appreciation of the Committee to be forwarded to all officers involved in children's social care, in particular the safeguarding and protection of the children in the town, for all their hard work and commitment in carrying out their duties.

### **Decision**

That the contents of the report of activity within children's social care be noted.

## **65. Pupil Achievement Summary 2014 (Provisional)** (*Director of Child and Adult Services*)

### **Type of decision**

For information.

## **Purpose of report**

To provide a summary of pupil achievement outcomes from public examinations 2013-14 and to indicate any significant trends.

## **Issue(s) for consideration**

The report provided the national benchmarked outcomes for children and young people. Further details were provided of the outcomes summary for Early Years Foundation Stage; Key Stage 1; Key Stage 2 and Key Stages 4 and 5. The Assistant Director, Education indicated that the figures within the report were not validated as yet but in terms of progress made by children aged 7-11 through Key Stage 2, absolutely every indicator had shown a significantly above the national average. In addition, for Key Stage 4, Hartlepool GCSE results were above national average for the first time ever. This showed an enormous improvement over the last 10 years and highlighted that progress made through secondary schools had improved by 7% with rates of progress being the highest in the north east of England. The Assistant Director, Education acknowledged that the support provided from the Council through additional finance, support and challenge had assisted the schools in ensuring youngsters have the best possible start to their education.

The Chair referred to the Council's objective and commitment to improve the educational standards within the town, especially in secondary schools before the end of 2015. It was recognised that through the huge efforts of schools, teachers and the children with financial support from the Council this objective was on target to be achieved. In addition, the establishment of the Education Commission was investigating ways of improving education standards and would feed into the regional drive to achieve this.

A Member expressed concern at an issue with recruitment and retention of staff in one particular primary school and the Assistant Director, Education indicated he would speak to that Member outside of the meeting as he was not aware of any recruitment and retention issues regarding primary schools.

The Chair requested that the Committee's congratulations be forwarded to all schools on their continued improvement in education standards and looked forward to receiving the validated figures at a future meeting of the Committee.

## **Decision**

That the content of the summary report was noted and that a further update of Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 outcomes would be reported to a future



meeting of the Committee once the DfE checking and individual school appeals had been completed.

The meeting concluded at 5.32 pm

**P J DEVLIN**

**CHIEF SOLICITOR**

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