

North Somerset Council

Report to the Children & Young People Policy & Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: 11 March 2021

Subject of Report: Scrutiny of Corporate Parenting

Town or Parish: All

**Officer/Member Presenting: Carolann James – Assistant Director,
Children's Services**

Key Decision: No

Recommendations

The Panel is recommended to:

- i. Note the updated information presented in this report
- ii. To offer comment on both areas for improvement and areas of good performance
- iii. To raise the profile of corporate parenting responsibilities among their colleague elected members

1. Summary of Report

This report is intended to inform the Children and Young People's Services Policy and Scrutiny Panel of the key current issues pertaining to children who are looked after, young people leaving our care and the fostering service. This will enable the panel to evaluate how effectively the whole council is discharging our Corporate Parenting Responsibilities and Duties, particularly in determining how effectively the council and its partners are achieving key plans and objectives for children and young people's services, and to provide appropriate challenge and suggestions to improve performance.

The report outlines key updates and describes how we continue to deliver our services despite the global pandemic and a third National Lockdown. Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, Children's Services have continued to deliver face-to-face support wherever safe to do so, and when necessary undertaken more creative practice to support our children looked after, our young people leaving our care and our foster/kinship carers. Such creativity has seen a greater use of digital technology to support our visits and interactions with children, young people and their carers. As well as presenting significant challenge it has also opened opportunities to consider new ways of working with children and families that had not been tried or tested previously. We have found a great deal of resilience within our young people, foster carers and staff members during this time. This has been positive to see.

2. Policy

The Corporate Parenting principles are outlined in the Children and Social Work Act 2017:

- To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people;
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;
- To consider the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;
- To help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
- To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
- For those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work;
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

3. Details

3.1 About the children in our care

We have 221 children in care at the end of Q3 which equates to a rate of 51 per 10,000. This is **lower** than our statistical neighbours (53) and England (67).

The reasons for fluctuations in numbers of looked after children are complex. Scrutiny of the potential causation of entry into care is undertaken by our Independent Reviewing Officers, with strategic oversight from the senior leadership team and the Children's Improvement Board.

At the end of Q3 of 2021:

- 15 Children in our care were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- The main primary need (reason for a child becoming looked after) in the first three quarters of 2020/21 was Abuse or Neglect.
- Three quarters (74% at the end of Q3 2020/21) of North Somerset's children in care live with foster carers. This is slightly higher than the latest figure nationally (72%).
- The percentage of children in care that live in North Somerset is up by 8% when compared to this period last year (65% up from 58% in this period last year)
- As at the end of Q3 2020/21, 59% of looked after children had a completed Health Assessment. Children accessing Dental checks was also low at only 27% compared to 83% same time last year. To reassure the scrutiny panel, we are confident the actual number is significantly higher and having identified some delay in the recording system we would assure that once resolved, these figures will significantly increase. The impact and ability to access appointments during the pandemic may have implications for our performance, particularly in accessing dental services.

- Since the start of the current reporting year in North Somerset a total of 10 children were adopted from care.
- In 2020, 16 children secured permanence through Special Guardianship orders. This is a significant increase from 2019 and 2018. Will we continue in our robust drive to keep children with their families wherever possible and explore and seek out all family options when care planning for children's futures as a priority.
- The percentage of 19-21 year-old care leavers who were in education, employment and/or training (EET) in North Somerset at the end of Q3 2020/21 was 44%. This is lower than the same time last year at 53 and this continue to be a clear focused area for improvement.
- 89% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation which is better than the same time last year at 86% and above both the England average of 85% and statistical neighbours 85%.

3.2 Highlight report for Children in our Care

3.2.1 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

A number of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children have reached 18 and have therefore transferred to our Leaving Care team. We have not had any missing episodes from care for this cohort of young people, which is really good news. With regard to education, College attendance is currently over 90% This is exceptional, especially during the pandemic when we know young people generally have struggled emotionally.

All of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have passed Maths and English exams. Three of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have taken up offers of counselling at college and the outcomes for their emotional wellbeing are good. Those who have not taken this offer are doing well and did not feel that they required additional support at this time. All of our unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have accessed the extra Maths and English support offered by the colleges which is outstanding. In regards to moving forward we are looking at introducing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses at different times of the year to the usual September start. This will mean that our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children will be able to join the course throughout the academic year and not just in September.

3.2.2 Permanency and Long Term Matching

We are making steady progress with regard to this targeted area of improvement, ensuring that all our children in care who are in our care are robustly matched to their carers. It is vital that all of our children feel a sense of psychological permanence, belonging and have legal permanence until adulthood. For this reason we know we need to do more to secure the right carers for children, in particular sibling groups and older children with complex medical, psychological or emotional needs that may arise from their early trauma.

3.2.3 Missing Episodes for Children in Our Care

The cumulative percentage of Children in our Care who had a missing episode during the first three quarters of 2020/21 is 9% which compares to 12% of our statistical neighbours and 11% national average.

During Quarter 3 2020/21, there were 103 episodes of children going missing relating to 56 children. Of these, 18 were children in care. This compares to 20 children in care who went missing during the same time last year.

3.2.4 Children's Emotional Wellbeing

As part of our continued drive to improve our children's well-being, in addition to our CONSULT service, partnership with CAMHS and therapeutic training for foster carers so they can respond appropriately to the impact of trauma, we are pleased to report that we have been contacted by The Painted Horse, a Somerset based company who provide equine therapy for children and young people. The charity has received a grant to provide equine therapy for 30 children who are looked after. A total of 10 sessions will be provided to each child. North Somerset have been offered a minimum of the 20 of the 30 places with the possibility that this may increase if the need is there. This is a wonderful opportunity and will be offered to all children who are looked after across North Somerset aged 5-17. We hope to seek an improvement in our children's wellbeing and stability through their Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores and results of our Bright's Spots Survey's in 2021.

3.2.5 Our Awards Ceremony for Children who are Looked After

This wonderful event successfully took place on 31st January, due to the Covid 19 pandemic the award ceremony was virtual this year with most of our children and young people participating and contributing to the events by sending in their video productions. We are excited to acknowledge collaboration with a local theatre company, Theatre Orchard, and note that despite the challenge of a virtual celebration, the event was a great success

3.3 **Highlight Report for Fostering**

3.3.1 Quality and Sufficiency of Foster Care

- A key focus within our Children's Improvement Plan is to ensure we develop our Sufficiency Strategy. This is key to enabling us to meet our objectives for our children, support our carers and met our targets for financial efficiencies.
- As we continue with our focused drive to increase the number of our children with North Somerset foster carers, we now report a reduction from 80 children and young people placed with Independent Fostering Agencies to 55 children (Feb 20).
- By 31/3/21, we will have a growth of 18 new foster families compared with 6 between 2019/2020, 7 from 2018/2019. This growth is critical to ensuring we have placement choice and scope for matching children and sibling groups with carers who are best placed to meet their needs.

3.3.2 Mockingbird

We successfully launched our second Mockingbird Constellation in October 2020, with the third Constellation planned for end of March 2021. The Mockingbird Family Model project has a huge impact in recruiting new foster carers to foster with us, and a major factor in retention of our existing foster carers.

The Mockingbird programme works to meet the need for continuity and support for children and young people in care and for additional support for foster carers. The fostering families within a Mockingbird group or 'constellation' support each other in line with an extended family. This model was evaluated by the Department of Education and a [report regarding this was published in September 2020](#).

We have been able to evaluate the support offered by the Mockingbird Programme within North Somerset from launch in December 2019 to December 2020.

- The number of foster families benefitting, 7 totalling 38 children and 3 care leavers.
- We have analysed 23.5% of the foster families within the programme would have resigned or left if Mockingbird was not there to support them, with the Fostering Network average of 12%.
- Our figures suggest that 12 incidents of home breakdowns for 6 different children have been prevented. This equate to 16% of the placements within the programme, with the Fostering National Network average of 20%.

3.3.3 Supported Independent Provision

We have strengthened our offer to young people aged 16+ whose care plan or wish would indicate that they may need alternative accommodation to a foster family. We have partnered with the YMCA to quality assure and increase our provision of high quality supported accommodation which has resulted in an improved offer to meet the needs of those young people where supported independence is appropriate to their needs and wishes. However, in line with our vision for children we will ensure that most of our children will live a family, the Fostering Service will maintain it's recruitment momentum to be with a clear focus and drive to broaden the scope of placement options and range of skills such as specialist foster carers and carers for older children.

3.4 **Highlight Report for Care Leavers**

- 3.4.1 The delivery model for working with our care leaving young people has changed significantly under Covid 19. Greater use of virtual contact has been used in combination with face to face visiting where safe and appropriate. A significant theme has emerged from the last 6 months with several care leavers struggling with anxiety and low mood as they come to terms with the uncertainty of the pandemic. We have put several measures in place to support our care leaving young people have access to virtual services and we have increased our level of contact. We have

worked creatively to find new ways of alleviating social isolation such as creating a care leaver face book page. Through the support of our charitable partners Quartet we were able to provide our most socially isolated care leavers a laptop to enable them to access digital services and support and laterally accessed funding from the Department of Education to provide laptops for our care leavers. This ensured all our Care Leavers could keep in contact with our young people and they could contact us too when we were unable to connect with them face to face.

- 3.4.2 Our main concern for our young people leaving care currently is the proportion of our young people who are not in education, training or employment. Our current performance in this area is much lower than we would aspire for our young people. This is a key focus within the Children's Improvement Plan. We continue to access additional focus by engaging with Reboot Social Impact Bond project which provides an additional resource to support our young people into education employment and training. This project is funded by the Department for Education, and is delivered in partnership with Bristol, South Gloucestershire and Bath & North East Somerset. One of the key messages from our Care Leaver's Forum was the importance to young people of us setting a mentoring service for both our children who are looked after and our care leaving young people. This is a project we are currently working on with our Head of Inclusion and the Virtual School, Wendy Packer. We look forward to reporting on the progress of this project in future.
- 3.4.3 Our Public Health colleagues have been providing free sports equipment for Children in care and have just extended this to Care Leavers, promoting the benefits of exercise to support physical and emotional wellbeing. We are also developing an Early Help Offer for Care Leavers and hope to have this up and running for Care Leaver Parents and those to be parents by the end of October.
- 3.4.4 As the Council are looking to re-launch our Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme and have created a new Care Leavers Participation post with colleagues in the Economic Development Team. This is to support our work in better understanding the voice of our care leavers with the aim of co-producing our service delivery in the long term with our care leaving young people. We are part of the Employee of Choice Programme and hope to extend this to work experience and traineeships for Care Leavers within the Council. Under the lockdown period young people leaving care were supported to complete their studies in creative ways as college teaching went online. We ensured Care Leavers were supported in accessing their teaching virtually.
- 3.4.5 Care Leavers graduated this summer with a First in Applied Computer Studies and Geology with Geological Engineering respectively and a 2.1 in Drama and Theatre Studies. Two of these Graduates are applying for the Civil Service Internship for Care Leavers and one is now studying to be a Dental Nurse. Care Leavers have returned to their Universities to study Sports Physiotherapy, Business Management, Theatrical Make Up and Theatre Design, Electronics, Psychology and Theatrical Make Up and Drama with Prosthetics

4. Consultation

4.1 Participation

We fulfil our duty to support a Children in Care Council which our young people have named 'Ambitious Voice'. In addition, we have a Care Leavers Forum which the young people have named 'UNITE'. The purpose of these forums is to provide children in care and care leavers with a platform where they can raise and review issues of relevance to them regarding the services they receive from North Somerset Council. Ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon to improve the practice and services they receive. It also provides an opportunity for young people leaving care to meet socially for peer support.

We are making changes to improve our participation work with children and Young People. We have started this by planning a re-launch with children and young people aspiration and goals at the heart. We want our children and young people to re-name our participation service as well as bringing in a recognisable logo and branded incentives. We will be focusing on developing more opportunities and events for our children and young people and re-modelling our newsletter and website.

4.2 What are children's key issues?

The main three key issues that children and young people have told us are important to them over the past 12 months are:

- Mental health and emotional support (How we are helped with how we feel inside)
- Bullying in school and college
- Transitions (being helped to make big life changes, such as moving from being a child in care to a young person leaving care)

Alongside the focused areas above the current projects the group have been working on were:

- Developing a policy for North Somerset foster carers regarding mobile phone use.
- Liaison with the virtual school to educate local schools regarding the importance of highlighting differences in the makeup of the modern family within their curriculum. Particularly noting that not all children lived with their birth family.
- Reviewing a letter, the group had designed and sent to social workers within North Somerset. This was to help social workers understand from their point of view how they could better communicate and support children and young people in care. The review was to understand if the letter had resulted in a positive impact in the services the young people received.

4.3 Young People's Representation

We are delighted to confirm that a member of UNITE attended and took part in the National Young People Benchmarking forum. This is a national event organised by the charity Catch 22 to share good practice for children leaving care nationally, amongst local authorities.

UNITE hosted a tea and cake event for our Elected Members and a Christmas Party for young people leaving care

The recent realignment of the structure of Children's Services workforce and teams will ensure we have a stronger focus on participation across Children's Services and will be recruiting a Young Director.

4.4 Your Life, Your Care Survey and Our Life, Beyond Care Survey

North Somerset has had the amazing opportunity of continuing to participate in the Bright Spots Survey's for 2020 as we have in previous years. The survey is conducted by Coram Voice in partnership with the Rees Centre at Oxford University. The survey provides an in-depth understanding to the collective experience of children who are looked after within North Somerset. It also allows us to compare the experience of our children who are looked after to those in other local authorities who participate in the survey, which has grown in membership every year since its beginning.

We have just concluded the Our Life, Beyond Care survey with a really successful return rate of 52% which is incredible given that this was undertaken during the third National Lockdown. We await the survey conclusions and report and will share these as soon as possible.

We have slightly delayed our Your Life, Your Care Survey due to the pandemic and plan to start the 2021 survey in May.

5. Financial Implications

There are no specific implications relating to this report.

6. Legal Powers and Implications

The council provides services to children in need of help and protection as outlined in The Children Act 1989 and related legislation. This includes the provision of accommodation such as foster care, kinship care or residential placements.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 outlines the duties of local authorities and our partners in terms of Corporate Parenting.

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

None

8. Risk Management

No specific risks arise from the content of this report.

9. Equality Implications

No specific equality implications arise from the content of this report.

10. Corporate Implications

As detailed above, corporate parenting has broad impacts across the work of the council. This includes collaboration with the Economic Development Team, Public Health and the Revenues and Benefits Team among others in order to provide a wide range of support

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Background Papers:

- Children Act 1989 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/introduction>)
- Children and Social Work Act 2017, Part 1
(<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/part/1/chapter/1/crossheading/corporate-parenting-principles-for-english-local-authorities/enacted>)
- Mockingbird Family Evaluation Model, Department for Education, September 2020
(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/560625/DFE-RR528-Mockingbird_family_model_evaluation.pdf)
- North Somerset's Offer for Care Leavers, March 2020 (<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/North%20Somerset%27s%20offer%20for%20our%20care%20leavers.pdf>)