

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON THURSDAY, 10TH DECEMBER, 2020

MEMBERS: Councillors Birsen Demirel, Achilleas Georgiou, James Hockney, Bernadette Lappage, Derek Levy and Ahmet Oyken

Officers: Tony Theodoulou (Executive Director People), Anne Stoker (Director children & Family Services), Debbie Michael (Service Manager Fostering & Permanence), Luis Herrero (Service Manager, Leaving Care Team), Peter Nathan (Director of Education), Clare Bryant (Senior Governance Officer) and Susan O'Connell (Governance & Scrutiny)

1. WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies had been received from Cllrs Vince and Ergin Erbil.

The Chair advised that agenda item number 4 has been moved to the meeting on the 18 January 2021.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. FOSTERING

Debbie Michael, Fostering & Permanence Manager presented her report.

NOTED:

1. This is an update since a report was last presented to scrutiny in September 2019.
2. The Fostering and Permanence teams remain a stable staff group of experienced practitioners and managers.
3. The Fostering Service is divided into 2 areas; the recruitment and assessment of foster carers; and the support and development of foster carers.
4. Enfield is part of North London Fostering & Permanence consortium (NLFPC) made up of Enfield, Barnet, Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington. The boroughs work together and look at improving practice areas, training, recruitment activities and share foster placements wherever possible.
5. All Enfield's approved foster carers have a named supervising social worker who will remain with them throughout their fostering careers and the children placed with the foster carers have their own looked after children social workers as well.

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6. Fostering is one of the most heavily regulated services within social care. There is an independent fostering panel that continues to play an important role in monitoring compliance with all the statutory requirements under the fostering regulations and the Quality Assurance to ensure that the quality of foster carers that we have coming through the system are of the expected quality.
7. There are ongoing recruitment processes in place, the coronavirus pandemic has proved to be a challenging time to recruit foster carers. In the first few months of the pandemic recruitment was slow, this has now picked up again. Enfield is very competitive in comparison with the consortium boroughs. In the last financial year Enfield was top of the 6 boroughs in approving our target of 15 approvals.
8. Currently there are 141 foster families (including friends and families) within the service recruited and approved by Enfield and 171 looked after children placed with foster carers, 45% of all looked after children are placed with in-house foster carers. There are more children placed with in house carers than independent fostering agencies, the remainder of the children are in independent settings, including some in independent living.
9. Until October 2019 Enfield held responsibility for Adoption Services. Following a phased approach, the six consortium boroughs have joined together to form a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), called Adopt London North (ALN). The recruitment and assessment of adopters and the matching of children with approved adopters on behalf of member boroughs is completed by ALN, who are based in Islington.
10. Links are still maintained with the RAA, regular meetings are held, and progress is monitored. Enfield still has responsibility for our own children and look at how services are being delivered to ensure that our children are placed with potential adopters in a timely manner. There is an Early Permanence Manager in Enfield in addition to Debbie Michael that maintain very close links to ensure that the children in Enfield are not disadvantaged in any way. The Executive Director, People and the Director of Children & Family Services are involved in strategic meetings with the respective Directors from the other 5 local authorities. The Agency Decision Maker, Anne Stoker still has a role in looking at matches of children that are placed with RAA adopters and will consider whether this is the right placement for the child once this has been to the RAA Adoption Panel and will agree the match if felt that this is a suitable match.
11. Page 3 of the agenda report includes some statistics on adoption and page 4 includes figures relating to Special Guardianship Orders.
12. One of the key factors in Enfield attracting foster carers is the quality of training and the supervision and support they receive from in house social workers.
13. The service always looks for internal fosters carers and would only go to external carers if a match cannot be found.
14. Strategically, the Fostering & Permanence service is one of the most important services, because carers have been assessed and trained by Enfield' there is a level of quality of these carers and matching of their skills to those children needed placements. Both in terms of quality and controlling costs this is a very important service to every council.

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15. The significant issue in the Annual Adoption Report is the mover to the consortium arrangements. The Adoption Panel in Enfield remained in place until February 2020 as there were still some children in the process of getting through to panel. The Director of Children & Families recorded formal thanks to Wendy the Chair of the Adoption Panel and to all colleagues and members who were part of the Adoption Panel.
16. Enfield is now pushing for an audit to be undertaken as the RAA now been in operation for a year.

Questions, comments and queries raised:

- How do the figures on page 3 compare with previous years? Officers advised that over the last few years Special Guardianship plans for children have taken over plans of adoption. In the last 2-3 years the figures have been similar. Enfield has children that are currently in adoptive placements where we are waiting for court hearings, this is due delays to court delays caused by Covid. It is hoped that there will be court dates for the 6 children for Adoption Orders by the end of the financial year. It is anticipated by the end of the financial year there will be 8 Adoption Orders last year there were around 9-10. Until the last 2 years there were more Adoption Orders this decrease is due to the increase in Special Guardianship Orders.
- How has it been since joining the agency? Officers advised that initially there were some teething problems, however good progress had been made and there is good movement in progressing adoptive placements.
- How much do we pay Independent Foster Agency and how much do we pay internal foster carers? Officers advise that fostering is a very competitive market foster carers can go anywhere in the country to foster. Independent Foster agencies do pay their foster carers more than the national local authorities do. There are different rates; one for children aged 0-10 and another rate for children aged 11-18. On average Enfield pays approximately £450 per week. This is comparable with other local authorities and our consortium counterparts. Independent Foster Agencies charge placing authorities on average approximately £800 per week although it is not known what is passed onto the foster carers. The rates that foster carers receive vary from agency to agency, some placements provide therapeutic support or enhanced services or if looking after a sibling group or a disabled child they may receive more. If the service was completely externalised the local authority would not have the staff overheads, so the difference is approximately 30%. If a child has additional needs may consider paying the foster carer an enhanced rate to recognise additional needs
- Members were impressed with the dedication, commitment and hard work of the service. Are the foster families resilient during these difficult times? Officers advised that families can only be as resilient as the support offered to them. Throughout this period, there has been regular communications acknowledging tough times and regular thank you emails for continuing to give a good level of care and regular newsletters.

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- It was queried whether the Cabinet Member and Associate Cabinet Members should be present at each meeting. Action Clare Bryant and Tony Theodoulou. Post meeting note: Under Chapter 4.2 of the Council's constitution, OSC and its Panels can request a Cabinet member or ACM's attendance at its meetings through the Director of Law and Governance ten working days prior to the meeting.
- What help is there to support the child and family if for example the child is struggling to settle in. Officers advised that there is a service from CAMHS in Enfield who offer support to both children and carers and they run regular projects dedicated to looked after children. The counselling service available to Enfield Staff is now also available to foster carers.
- Following a query on the comparison on adoption figures and what this means members were directed to page 42 of the agenda papers. For current financial year there have been 8 new approvals so far and there are 12 families in assessment at present. The target is 15 families. As a service manager this shows how we compare with other local authorities. This is a small part of how Enfield is performing. It was thought that Enfield has more families due to the experienced stable staff group and good management structure in place.
- It was queried why the staff in Triangle House have moved to Charles Babbage House, and are they still moving to Dugdale Centre. Will this location not be more difficult for residents to access and what are the costs? Officers confirmed that the plan is still to move to the Dugdale Centre. The service moved out of Triangle House due to high rents and conditions of building. The experience has been that families do not struggle to get to Charles Babbage House. There is no exact date to move into the Dugdale Centre. It is hoped to move in early 2022. The Dugdale is potentially going to be used as a vaccination centre have been asked to keep all potential vaccination centre free till August. Officers did not have any cost information. Members requested that costs are provided of the work to the Dugdale.
- Following a query as to whether the 141 approved foster carers live in Enfield, members were advised that the majority do around 90% with the rest in neighbouring boroughs.
- Following a query on inter country adoption it was explained that this is families who want to adopt children from overseas. There is a process originating from the Child originating country. Whilst this process is going through if the child is living in Enfield with the potential adopter the Local authority has a duty and responsibility to carry out welfare checks until the child is adopted.
- Why is there a disproportionately low number of white UK applicants coming forward? Often word of mouth encourages adopters. When looking at recruitment, an analysis is undertaken of children coming forward where requests for placements have been made. There were a couple of years where there were lots of placements requests for Black and minority ethnic children, so there was a focus of recruitment of carers that can meet the ethnic and cultural need of the demographic of the children. When this demographic changes the recruitment will be

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targeted towards this change. Wherever possible children will be placed with carers that can meet their ethnic and cultural needs.

Officers were thanked for their presentation. The Chair reiterated that the Panel acknowledged the great work undertaken in this area.

4. EXCLUSIONS

This item has been deferred to January's meeting.

5. COVID19 (OPENING OF SCHOOLS & WORKING IN A COVID19 ENVIRONMENT)

Peter Nathan, Director of Education introduced his report.

NOTED:

1. Schools have been impacted since March 2020; schools have never really closed throughout this period. Initially it was the children of key workers and vulnerable children going into schools and then this was expanded in June to certain year groups. However, a lot of children did not go to school from, March until the beginning of term in September.
2. There has been a lot of work undertaken in this time including: meeting with schools and trade unions, the introduction of home learning and work on risk assessments.
3. From September 2020 all children came back to school. Many schools had staggered starts for the first couple of weeks of term reintroducing children back into school. Prior to this Headteachers had undertaken lots of work such as undertaking risk assessments covering every aspect of school life. The risk assessment is a live document with learning all the time. An example was given of mock exams undertaken in a hall, pupils were 2 metres apart and all wearing masks. However due to inadequate ventilation as an older school hall there were a number of cases of Covid.
4. The Director of Education and the Executive Director, People meet with headteachers weekly and with unions fortnightly to discuss the issues arising.
5. Schools now use 'bubbles' to prevent the whole school being sent home if there is a case. This is a complicated system for schools and there are a range of issues that need to be considered. If there has been a positive case the bubble has to isolate for 14 days.
6. There were not too many cases to start with, then there was a spate of cases in schools. The DFE helpline that was set up struggled to cope with the volumes. Schools contact the local authority if they have cases, if they have multiple cases, they contact the London coronavirus response cell. These issues also occur out of school hours meaning headteachers have lots to do in the evenings.
7. There have been issues of some schools closing for one or two weeks this is usually in collaboration with the education department and public health.
8. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services receives a weekly report on the key issues.

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9. Currently as we approach the end of term there is quite a high level of cases being seen in schools. Children are generally asymptomatic with very few cases of children getting ill. This is also generally the same with teachers and support staff. The reason some schools close is because there is not enough staff to manage the school effectively or safely.
10. Four schools were off at the beginning of this week and there are a number of schools on the brink and several have moved to home learning. Secondary schools are more affected than primary schools at present.

Comments, questions and queries:

- The work being undertaken in challenging circumstances was acknowledged. Is the support that is needed from the DfE being received? Officers advised there is a weekly meeting with the DfE and issues from discussion with schools are reported directly back to the DfE. A huge range of issues have been raised with the DfE such as IT, finance, seeking clarification on guidance. The local authority does not cover for the DfE financially
- Parental responsibility, an example was provided of a parent sending a child to school when they had a positive Covid test. How do we prevent this happening in the future? Officers advised that with the Director of Public Health, letters have been sent for the school's website to remind parents of their responsibilities and provide data on the numbers of cases. If a parent is contacted by Track and Trace, Track and Trace has a legal authority to insist that you self-isolate. Schools do not have this legal authority.
- Disrupted education, this is unpredictable and varies between schools. Can local authorities take a view of exams should Enfield schools suffer disproportionately? Officers advise that this is a political question currently there are due to be exams in England. Whilst the local authority can have a view they cannot act unilaterally. Many secondary schools are academies and schools have their own power on what they choose to do. Many headteachers feel that the exams should go ahead. It is recognised that there is unfairness, with remote learning certain disadvantaged young people are not engaging as much. Enfield is currently awaiting guidance on the exams in the summer to see what will be provided in terms of help. This is guidance and not mandatory. If there are exams schools will have to do them.
- Looking at infection rates across North London are there flexible plans for the end of term? Officers advised that there was an announcement from government suggesting that Friday is used as an inset day. Some schools are using this, some other schools are closing early due to staffing reasons. Quite a few secondary schools have had a lot of cases recently so have moved to remote learning. A variety of approaches are being taken.
- Remote working:- How difficult is this for disadvantaged families. What support has the government and the council provided and what are we seeing as a result of this? Officers advise that the disadvantaged have become more disadvantaged this has been evidenced by Ofsted. The government set up a system in the summer to provide Chromebooks to vulnerable young people and those disadvantaged children who schools

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had identified as not having access to a device. There was a small supply of dongles. The Chromebook offer was extended, unfortunately there has been shortages. Schools can request Chromebooks, although they often do not get the amount they requested, there are specific rules and key criteria around this. A further issue is that good access to the internet is needed and many families do not have this. Another issue is motivation and the ability of a family to support a child. Live lessons are useful.

- Responsibility and duty of care by the Council. When Covid first hit the unions said that a lot of staff did not want to go to schools over worries on Covid. What is current position and what duty of care do we have to local authority-maintained schools? Officers advised that many staff want to be in school. As a duty of care if vulnerable staff want to return an individual risk assessment will be undertaken. If a member of staff is very concerned the headteacher will talk this through with them. There have not been many issues since September, the key thing is communication with trade unions, staff members and the HR in schools to resolve any issues. The council follows the guidance from government and have developed stringent risk assessments covering every aspect of school life and constantly remind headteachers and staff that they must follow these rules, if there are any lessons to be learned these will be shared with schools through hubs and headteacher briefings
- Page 53, if a Covid positive within the bubble the whole group must isolate. Clarification was provided if a positive test then must self-isolate but if a negative test the bubble won't have to self-isolate. The person with symptoms must arrange a test as soon as possible.
- Free school meals, what is the current position with regards to the Christmas period? Officers advised that families entitled to free school meals will be receiving vouchers for the Christmas period of £15 per week per child. This will also be the case for February half term. This is from the Winter Hardship fund provided by the government. Families will be receiving their money very shortly.
- Following a query, it was clarified that a letter was sent to families from the Leader of the council on the Friday before October half term.

Officers were thanked for their report

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It has now been confirmed that the next meeting will take place on Monday 18 January 2021. This meeting will cover education finances (as suggested by the Cabinet Member) and exclusions.

Following a query on what is required on the item on Schools budget. The Chair clarified that he would like to look at the whole education budget to see what are the other challenges that the council does face around education and Children's Services.

On exclusions it was clarified that in response to the specific questions raised these should be dealt with in a report. The Chair does not want to lose the valuable work of the workstream and there are some other issues that are not

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captured such as data on BAME exclusions. This needs to be captured with some analysis on this.

Officers had provided lots of support of this valuable work of the workstream. The report for January needs to be contextualised with the updates. The report was requested for the 4 January so that members can look at in advance of the meeting.