

DEVON CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD SUMMER WALKABOUT

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

For information about corporate parenting in Devon, please see <https://inside.devon.gov.uk/task/corporate-parenting/>

In 2015, Devon's services for children in care were judged 'Requires Improvement to be Good' by the regulator, Ofsted. Services for care leavers were judged 'Inadequate'. A service review in May 2017, noted 'a step change in corporate parenting'. The review commented that many of our current cohort of children in care received services, in the community or in care, during the period that services in Devon were inadequate, with a consequent accumulation of trauma for children and young people. The review noted that in every case reviewed, current practice is stronger than historical practice.

A new council was elected in May 2017, the lead member for children and chair of the Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) was confirmed to continue in role and decided to take the opportunity for a refreshed approach to the Board's work.

THE PROCESS

For 2017, the chair of CPB plans to alternate a usual board meeting with papers, reports, presentations, performance and so on with some kind of 'out and about' activity. This will make better use of the elected member capacity on the Board. The chair decided to kick start the new model with a Summer Walkabout, designed as a fact finding mission.

A sub-group of the Board was established:

- The lead member and chair of CPB

- The co-chair of CPB and other care experienced young people

- Elected members of CPB **some were experienced, others very new*

- The Chief Officer Children's Services

A day was spent in each of the Localities (North, South, Exeter and Mid & East), meeting with frontline staff and managers of all the services with responsibility for

children in care, exploring with them where things are working well and where we might need to double our efforts. We met with the following groups:

Social workers and Personal Advisors in permanence and transition teams and fostering teams

Virtual school (PEPCos and Area Learning Advocates) **We conducted this piece of work during the school holidays to facilitate the involvement of experts by experience; however it meant that designated teachers were excluded.*

Health staff (designated and named doctor/nurses and LAC nurses)

CAMHS staff (those with specific responsibilities for children in care and those with wider responsibilities)

Police and community safety colleagues (focused on missing and CSE vulnerabilities)

The full list of colleagues involved in conducting the walkabout and those we talked with, in carrying out the walkabout, are listed in appendix one and two. **Appendix two might include some inaccuracies; we didn't record attendees or minute meetings, as we wanted to create a culture of informality and candour.*

The framework for our conversations with the frontline was drawn from the lessons from Takeover Day and issues raised by care experienced young people. In summary these are:

- Communication
- Skills to discuss loss
- Preparation for young people's independence
- Signs of self-harm and early intervention
- Child sexual exploitation (CSE)
- Partnership Working

The framework was purposefully loose as we wanted the conversations to follow the narrative threads of the participants rather than being overly prescriptive or rigid.

Concurrently, a care experienced participation apprentice telephone interviewed 8 children in care, two from each Locality, using the same framework to explore their experience.

We road-tested our findings and recommendations with the Independent Reviewing Service who have an independent operational role as well as an independent strategic oversight role.

The experts by experience have prepared a reflective commentary on their experience of the process and this will be appended at appendix three. **Appendix three to follow.*

THE FINDINGS

Participants welcomed very warmly the opportunity to contribute to this piece of work. They appreciated the opportunity to speak directly to members and the chief officer and reflected that the model of a partnership between members, officers and experts by experience, with an open, exploratory agenda was one to emulate. Conversations were informal and open. CPB appreciated the candour of participants and felt that participants had permission to be open and frank about their struggles as well as their achievements.

CPB was powerfully struck by the passion, energy, tenacity and commitment of participants; this was palpable and heart-warming. Asked about the highlights of the job, without exception, everyone responded in the same way; referring to the privilege of working with inspiring children and young people and making a difference to their lives. The CPB was left in doubt that all those involved share a common purpose, to transform the lives of children and young people in care and care leavers.

There is a lot to be proud about in this area of our work. All participants reflected on improved working together and services that, notwithstanding challenges and difficulties, are continuously improving. **Placement stability** was an area of improvement that was referred to by many participants. This has been an area of focus for CPB and is clearly an understood and shared passion and ambition of all the colleagues we met. While there has been improvement, we still heard about multiple placements for children, the complexity of matching, the intense pressure in placement searching and the incredibly difficult decisions that have to be made every day about individual children and young people. **PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY**, with the corollary complexities of matching, quality or provision and breakdown, was identified as the principle preoccupation of almost everyone, with **HOUSING** being

the equivalent priority for care leavers. CPB did not include the placements and resources functions as part of our Summer Walkabout, which was an omission. The national crisis in placement sufficiency was reported in The Municipal Journal 18.7.17 <https://www.themj.co.uk/Exclusive-Councils-face-daily-struggle-to-place-vulnerable-kids/208474>

The **Placement Support Team** which provides bespoke planned and emergency interventions to enable foster carers to manage high levels of risk, need and complexity was very strongly endorsed. Concerns were expressed about whether the recent restructuring in fostering might undermine this resource. Colleagues will need to be vigilant in identifying and responding to any evidence of adverse impact.

The investment in **Personal Advisors** (PA) was also strongly endorsed. One young person said,

‘Post 18 is a lot more improved. The service before Post 18 needs more work.....’

Caseloads were reported to be preventing compliance with Devon’s requirement, based on statutory guidance, to allocate a PA at 16, who would work in partnership with the social worker pending full transfer of responsibility at 18. Upto 50 unallocated (to a PA) young people were reported in the South, with PAs only becoming involved at 17+. Elsewhere, questions were raised, by experts by experience, about why the statutory social worker role needs to continue if an effective relationship is established between PA and young person, and the young person has a clear preference. Simply announcing it as a statutory responsibility and therefore unchangeable doesn’t suggest creativity and innovation. The CPB is mindful that Section Three of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 will see PA allocation to those young people who wish for it up to the age of 25, irrespective of their employment education and training status.

We heard many stories of good and outstanding **social work practice** in the fostering teams and in the Locality teams. Social workers talked to us about balancing the need to protect the precious resource of foster carers while also being demanding of carers to ensure we can meet the needs of as many children as possible in local family placements. Working well with these dilemmas depends upon respectful, professional relationships between foster carers, supervising social workers, Locality social workers and placements. This hasn’t always been consistent in Devon. These relationships can become fractious, mostly because of pressure

and sometimes because of misunderstandings about respective roles and responsibilities. The value of knowing and understanding each other's worlds was emphasised. Contributors affirmed that the somewhat cavalier attitude towards foster carers that prevailed for a period was a thing of the past. It was suggested that some cumbersome financial arrangements could be resolved by reallocating responsibilities; this would reduce the frustrations experienced by foster carers.

Foster carers are excellent value for money; they deliver the best outcomes at lowest cost. Our conversations with foster carers reminded us (if we needed it) of the extraordinary role they play in the lives of children in care. Foster carers are also the best recruiters of foster carers! Sustainable placement sufficiency depends upon a very healthy pool of foster carers. Placement stability depends upon a pool that is sufficient to enable good matching. Contributors reported 96% occupancy. While this is an incredibly efficient use of resources, it also indicates that our pool is not big enough to meet our need.

WORKFORCE CHURN AND CASELOADS were an important area of exploration for us. One young person said,

'I had my social worker longer than I should have, which is fine by me because I've got a good one' another said

'I had two really good ones'

But these were the exceptions. Most young people interviewed reported real difficulties.

'I had about nine social workers which meant I had to go over my life story to all of them.....There was one month where I had four different social workers and they didn't tell each other everything which meant I had to.'

'My social workers constantly changed. I had social worker, after social worker, after social worker. I can't remember the number of social workers I had'

We heard several times of children having five social workers in less than two years. Some Localities reported lower churn and more manageable caseloads for social workers but little resilience; that is, caseloads could easily become unmanageable and churn could easily increase. In some Localities sickness levels are high indicating resilience is over-stretched. The locations of children in care, across the country, means travel time is high and efficiency is a priority. Having access to wifi and touchdown options across the public sector would increase efficiency. Overall the picture is of a system under intense and fairly unremitting pressure. We heard that the capacity to respond to the deeper concerns of children and young people

(loss, self-harm, CSE risk, and so on) became compromised when resilience was over-stretched.

Young people reported mixed experience of staff responding to deeper concerns:

'It ranges from really bad to really good and there's no in-between'

Young people identified stabilising churn and building capacity in the workforce as their principle priority.

Excellent progress is being made in all aspects of our work with children in care. Unchecked, workforce instability and/or elevated caseloads will constitute major vulnerabilities.

We heard about the positive impact of training on attachment, trauma, loss and therapeutic parenting. The fostering service has built an excellent practice model that has transformed the behaviours and parenting approaches of carers. Locality social workers appear to have had a diluted exposure which means that common language, values, culture and approach can't necessarily be guaranteed.

The **EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING** of our children in care is a priority. There are two aspects to this, specialist CAMHS and non-specialist social care capacity. CPB was pleased to learn of investment and developments in CAMHS which means that every child entering care is assessed and where necessary put onto an appropriate care pathway. CAMHS shared with us their thinking about their role in responding to behavioural manifestations of distress and the development of an ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) approach. The recognition of the singular and profound impact of ACE on adult mental health was welcome. The CPB suggested that every child in care would meet an ACE threshold. CPB was heartened to hear about increasingly integrated working together and the potential benefits of deeper integration and co-location (our discussions with the police reflected a similar ambition). We were mindful that the reported experiences of the frontline were more variable than the analysis of more senior clinicians and managers might suggest.

There is very good evidence in Devon of the impact of investing in foster carers' capacity to understand and respond at a much deeper level to the impacts of loss and trauma on the emotional health and well-being of children in care. One young person said,

'I think they have a pretty good understanding of this, especially foster carers. I would score them an 8 out of 10 of how good they are. They're really good at the moment'

The quality of care at Atkinson is clearly linked to similar investment in staff development. Sustained investment in the development of social worker workforce is essential. Coupled with this has to be recognition that reasonable caseloads have to be maintained if quality care for children in care and worker openness to the emotional distress of children and young people is not to be compromised. Caseloads are not at the levels required for good practice to flourish.

The CPB welcomed the progress made by the **Virtual School** and the ownership by schools of the responsibility for the progress of children in care. The overall picture painted was one of strengthening; notwithstanding that practice between schools varies. Advocating for children in care and holding schools to account were clearly held values. More attention needs to be paid to **exclusions and alternative arrangements**. These can put unbearable pressure on foster placements, which often breakdown (or sustain at very high cost to the carers). Wrapping support around a school to sustain a school placement might be a good investment if it avoids a care placement breakdown. Similarly, improvements in health services for children in care were welcomed, though the strategic arrangements for the designated doctor appeared very fragile.

The police and community safety colleagues in the South were pre-occupied about the issues arising from the proliferation of children's homes and 16+ provision in the south of the county. These mostly involve **other LA children in care** rather than Devon children. Nevertheless they are vulnerable children in our area and while the County Council does not have statutory responsibility, we do accept a moral responsibility to exercise our influence, alongside the partners who do have a statutory responsibility, on behalf of these children. Colleagues described poor practice in matching of need to provision and matching young people who should or should not live together. Partners have put a lot of effort into establishing coordinated and effective communication between provisions and the key public sector organisations. Good relationships, with staff in DCC commissioning, were reported. A very different picture emerged in Exeter, where the police have invested in a dedicated team. Early indications are that this has had a very significant and very positive impact on the behaviours of young people and missing episodes. Subject to affordability testing, rolling this pilot out across the patch would make a

very significant difference to risks and vulnerability of children in care. The investment in partnership working and where practicable co-location were seen as the next steps in strengthening practice to improve outcomes for children in care and care leavers

CONCLUSION

This piece of work is evidence of the 'step change in corporate parenting' that the Service Review recognised. The issues raised with CPB were not new but they penetrated in a new way and the concentrated focus on children in care built a greater sense of urgency. The walkabout opened a window into the system and brought into sharper relief the issues and concerns of the frontline.

We have identified the following issues for follow up:

1. WORKFORCE CHURN AND CASELOADS

The timely allocation of PA

We are mindful that Devon remains inadequate in relation to its services for care leavers. This is completely unacceptable for all corporate parents; inadequate Local Authorities are failing to meet the 'good enough for my child?' test.

We want to see an analysis of the data on PA allocations

- % allocated at 15.6
- % allocated at 16.6
- % allocated at 17.6
- % allocated at 18

Where we are non-complaint with minimum statutory requirements in relation to PA allocation, we want an action plan that will remedy any deficit in an appropriately timely way. Where our practice is legally compliant but does not meet expectations of good practice, we want to be assured that the Service Improvement Plan specifies the actions that will be taken to bring practice up to a good standard.

We don't think it is wise to wait until the next Ofsted before satisfying ourselves on our progress since 2015 in relation to care leavers. *We would like to suggest that the service consider a peer review of our services and progress.*

Caseloads of social workers

We are mindful of the need to prevent upward drift in caseloads for social workers, and the importance of ensuring social workers and teams are sufficiently resilient to

respond to the exigencies of operational services. *We want the performance reports to CPB to include data on social worker and PA caseloads*

2. PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY & HOUSING

The CPB is aware that the service is working on a *placement sufficiency strategy and would welcome a report to update on progress*. However the Board's view is that a more urgent response is needed, as the pressures in the national as well as the local system are clearly acute and intense.

CPB would like to see an immediate response plan to what appears to be an emergent crisis in the system.

Celebrating foster care

The CPB would like to propose an event to recognise and celebrate foster carers. Many Local Authorities host this kind of celebration, often funded through corporate sponsorship. Members of CPB could be active in planning and organising.

Developing the role of Member corporate parents

Members are often quite baffled about what they are supposed to do to execute their CP duty. We think members could play an important role in promoting and encouraging fostering in their divisions. We would like to have deeper discussions at CPB to explore how this role could be developed. We also think members who are twin hatters, sitting on district councils as well as the County Council could play a more purposeful role in relation to care leavers and housing and we would like to explore this idea further at CPB.

3. EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Much of what was raised with us at Takeover Day was about the capacity, competence and confidence of frontline staff to engage with children and young people. Children and young people don't always want to be referred on to 'an expert' they want to be able to talk with someone they trust about the things that really matter to them and that are troubling them. Staff therefore need to be skilled up and supported. We know from Atkinson and from foster carers the transformational impact this upskilling can have.

We want the service to consider how it can strengthen a child mental health perspective on practice. We know in some Local Authorities a mental health practitioner is located in every team or locality to upskill and build capacity as well as co-working on complex cases and providing a conduit into specialist provision where

that is needed. We think there may also be co-location options to be explored further.