

# Corporate Parenting Panel

**MEETING DATE:** 17 October 2012

**REPORT TITLE:** Annual Report to Council

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## 1.0 BACKGROUND

This report highlights key issues from the mid year performance information in respect of 'looked after' children and the current priorities for the services that support the same. It is set in the context of the inspection of safeguarding & looked after children (Ofsted) that took place for two weeks commencing in April 2012 as well as the more recent inspection of Bury Council's Fostering Service.

## 2.0 WHAT IS WORKING WELL

- Generally, Ofsted found that services for 'looked after' children are 'adequate' with some 'good' and 'outstanding' features; most notably in respect of outcomes for the health and education of children & young people in the care of Bury Council.
- The stability of placements both in the short and long term is a significant measure for 'looked after' children in the context of the security a stable placement is often able to provide, for example in terms of education provision and sustainable friendships. Ofsted found that the vast majority of 'looked after' children in Bury live in stable placements although some work is required to both identify in a timely fashion and support those children & young people who reside in those placements deemed to be less stable.
- When it becomes clear that children & young people cannot return to live with their birth families it is important that an alternative permanent arrangement is identified in a timely fashion. Bury Council continues to achieve high rates of permanence through a combination of adoption, special guardianship and residence although the timeliness in achieving these arrangements was questioned in some cases by Ofsted and has been the subject of further scrutiny via the recent publication of adoption score cards and the review of judicial processes. There are a number of actions set against these issues within the Ofsted Action Plan and primarily concerning the technical aspects of planning for permanence within the Social Care Division.
- One of the most common themes to appear in the annual audit of the views, wishes and feelings of 'looked after' children is the importance of sibling groups being placed together (Children's Rights Director – England). Placing sibling

groups together is always a priority for Bury Council in such circumstance and there have been occasions when an independent fostering placement has been utilised at the expense of internal provision in order that this need can be met. If siblings have to be separated for whatever reason then care plans are formalised that ensure there is extensive contact arrangements in order to maintain sibling relationships if that is what is assessed to be in the sibling group's best interests. Currently there are 31 sibling groups cared for by Bury Council of which 25 remain placed together. Of the 6 remaining groups each group is separated on the basis of an assessment that indicated separation was in the individual child/young person's interests rather than upon a resource led decision.

- Local authorities have a responsibility to place children near to their family home (dependent upon an assessment of need) in order that children & young people in such circumstance can maintain local ties as much as is practicably possible. Local authorities therefore have a duty to procure placements within a certain radius of their borders (sufficiency duty). Bury has a positive track record in this regard; 92.4% of the 'looked after' population resided within a twenty mile radius of Bury.
- **Expansion of foster carers and adopters available for children – approvals have increased this year.**
- The proportion of 'looked after' children placed in foster care/relatives/friends compared with placements within residential care settings continues to be favourable (90+% within foster placements) although there has been a recent increase in the number of young people placed within a residential setting (currently 29) and this is for a number of reasons (e.g. increased awareness of child sexual exploitation, Southwark Judgement, deletion of Supporting People Budget).
- Bury Council continues to be successful in preventing the majority of young people from being discharged from care too early and in supporting them to acquire independence skills. Those who leave care at 16 and 17 are very few and mainly do so at their own behest. There are continued positive levels of engagement in Education, Training and Employment.

### **3.0 WHAT NEEDS TO WORK BETTER AND WHAT ACTION IS IN PLACE TO ADDRESS THIS**

- 3.1** An action plan has been drafted and endorsed by Cabinet which addresses the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted:
- 3.2 There continues to be a high number of 'looked after' children – 340** currently. The number of admissions has risen recently and this is primarily related to young people in residential provision and often related to the issues identified above. The number of legal proceedings continues to also rise (currently 57 sets). Care planning processes which aim to both improve process and timeliness will be implemented in September 2012. This will address both operational and independent reviewing mechanisms.
- 3.3** A quality assurance framework which will test the impact upon outcomes for 'looked after' children will and be implemented in October 2012.

**3.4 The development of the Department's early intervention strategy:** which should both reduce the number of children becoming 'looked after' in the long term but which should also identify those children and young people who will ultimately require care in a more timely and evidence based fashion.

**3.5 The increase in the number of Looked After Children has limited the ability to provide placement choice and has increased the pressure on placements and carers both in terms of the Council's own provision but also in terms of IFA provision.** A marketing strategy with a clear focus upon certain groups of children will be developed from October 2012 with a view to increasing in-house provision over a three year period. A recruitment officer has now been appointed to assist in driving the marketing strategy and in addition the service will benefit from the support of an employee placed upon the Fostering Team as part of the National Graduate Development Programme.

**4.0 Post 16 supported accommodation:** This was identified as an emerging theme within the annual report (2011) particularly in the context of the reductions in Supporting People funding and which was predicted to have an impact upon the availability of supported lodgings and which has now come to fruition. There are currently seven young people in the care of the Local Authority, some with private providers, who may well have benefitted from a supported lodgings scheme. The commissioning team is considering ways in which this unfolding demand may be met more effectively.

## **5.0 HOW HAVE YOU INCLUDED THE VOICE OF THE CHILD/YOUNG PERSON?**

- The recent inspections of Bury Council's Fostering Service identified that the service has a number of impressive methods of eliciting children & young people's voices on a macro level but identified gaps in the voice of the child in terms of their individual records and this will be one of the focuses of the fostering action plan.
- "Madhouse" participation days continue to be provided 7 days per year and offer children a collective opportunity to have their voices heard.
- Whilst participation of children & young people within their statutory reviews remains high it is essential that this is consistently meaningful and the work identified above will be critical in this regard. Some additional focus will be placed upon the participation of those children & young people who consistently struggle to participate and the reasons behind this as well as some additional focus upon independent reviewing officers meeting children & young people between reviews to consider the progress of their individual care plans.
- The Children's Rights Service continues to offer to visit children when they are first placed in the care of the local authority to ensure that they know who to contact if they need advocacy support.
- Political scrutiny of services provided on behalf of 'looked after' children was identified as an area for improvement by Ofsted. As representatives of the citizens of Bury it is essential that the Action Plan addresses this perceived deficit.

## **6.0 IS ANY ACTION REQUIRED FROM CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL**

- The CiCC has recently reported regarding a residential conference in respect of the Council's pledge to children & young people in care and work will commence in this regard shortly.
- Development of Care to Work initiative.
- Focus upon the development of political scrutiny.

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**List of/Link to Background Papers :** Children's Social Care Performance Information Report 2010/11  
<http://intranet.bury.gov.uk/ChildrensServices/PerformanceInformation/default.asp>

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