

THE CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

The Corporate Parenting Panel met on six occasions between May 2023 and May 2024. Once again the Panel had the opportunity to participate in a Children Takeover session that took place in October 2023 with many Looked After Children presenting to Members and officers.

The Panel is in place to provide a focus on the council's legal obligations and responsibilities towards children in care and young people leaving care.

The Panel is in place to ensure and monitor the corporate discharge of the Council's responsibilities as corporate parents. And to scrutinise the quality of services to Children in care and care experienced young people, monitoring adherence to the legislation that governs the work of those services.

The Panel considered the following report as part of the process:

1. The third annual report of the Adopt London East Partnership.

The report provided a summary of the work over the last year that focused on the innovations and improvements within Adopt London East and insights into challenges faced during post-pandemic with increase in demand for all areas of the service.

Members noted the following recommendation for 2022/23:

Identifying, preparing and approving adoptive parents

- 1) To further develop the Black Adoption Project to better understand the needs of Black and mixed Black ethnicity adopters, and to improve services to them for the long term.
- 2) To build Adopt London reach and engagement levels on social media.
- 3) To Re-design stage 1 of the Adoption process for adopters and review preparation training.

Planning for Children

- 4) To increase awareness of Early Permanence in social work teams, to increase the use of EP for adoptive children.

Placing children with adoptive parents

- 5) To continue to focus on the number of children placed for adoption in Adopt London East placements.

Providing support to adoptive families and others

- 6) To increase access to support resources for everyone impacted by adoption through development of the Adopt London website.
- 7) To implement regular monitoring of Adoption Support work so that changes in demand can be reported.
- 8) To launch the ALE Adoption Support Helpline

Working as part of Adopt London

- 9) To Strengthen arrangements through a legal partnership agreement for Adopt London.

The Panel noted the slow recovery from the Pandemic and raised the issue of court decisions with officers. It was stated that the service was looking at the process for long term fostering and special guardianship in order to improve the position for the children who are in care.

The Panel **noted** the annual report 2021/22

2. The Panel received the Corporate Parenting Panel reporting Dataset 2022/23 as at 31 March 2023.

The presentation covered the key performance indicators update, benchmarking against London and Statistical Neighbours.

It was stated that Havering's rate of Children in Care (CIC) has remained below that of both its Stat neighbours and the London average since 2016/2017. Officers explained that following the high contact and referrals into services there was a significant spike in the numbers of children in care of the service in August and September of 2022 with a total of 261 children.

It was noted that changes to the legislation regarding Semi-Independent accommodation will be taking place in 2023/24 when Ofsted will take over the regulation of these services. In Havering, there is a 10% of cohort placed in such type of accommodation.

The Panel noted that the children's services restructure work to develop corporate parenting teams will also ensure that additional oversight is placed on the health needs of our children in care.

Members acknowledged the positive trends from the performance which officers attributed to the Carers.

The Panel **noted** the performance update report.

3. The Panel received the Havering draft Children's Services Sufficiency Strategy.

The document detailed how the service proposes to deliver services, both those delivered in-house and those commissioned externally, to meet current and future needs of the children, young people and their families who are reliant on our support.

The document sets out the Services key priorities including how the authority intends to meet the statutory duties placed on it.

It was stated that the intention was to build on the Statement and to develop a more detailed strategy document and action plan. Members noted that work on the strategy was underway and the intention was for a completed Strategy and Statement by the end of May 2023.

The Panel noted that the statement was a statutory document that OFSTED would inspect during a visit to the council.

The Panel was informed that the Statement would be a strategic document and action plan which reflects local needs and demands and delivery against the action plan. It was mentioned that this would allow for regular reporting to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

The Panel **noted** the draft statement.

4. The Panel received a presentation on Comfort Cases for Children in Care. Comfort Cases UK provides children entering the care system with new, filled rucksacks and large sturdy duffel bags to carry their possessions.

It was stated that Comfort Cases have gained notoriety within the Children's Social Care sector and have support from notable Care Experienced People that are also trying to improve the futures of young people in foster care in the UK.

The Chief Executive of Comfort Cases stated that one of the key initiative of the organisation was to increase its network of Local Authorities and double its first year activities.

The Panel thanked the chief executive of Comfort Cases Uk for taking the time to join the meeting and outline the success of the organisation.

Members **noted** the presentation.

5. The Panel received the dataset for June 2023.

The number of Children in Care (CiC) had fallen from a peak of 261 in September 2022 but had begun to increase again. There were 251 CiC as at 30 June 2023. Additional unaccompanied asylum seeker children were also expected.

The proportion of CiC with friends and family carers had improved and had now reached 50%. Approximately 9% were living in semi-independent accommodation while a few children were based outside of the borough, usually due to the specific needs of the child.

Overall placement stability had improved and access had been established to a Resources Panel. Officers accepted however that the number of suitable local placements remained a challenge.

Numbers of young people not in education, employment or training had begun to improve this financial year. There also remained a high proportion of health

assessments carried out and all school age children in care continued to have personal education plans.

A recent court judgement on Kent Children in Care practice had ruled that it was unlawful to place children in hotels. The judgement meant officers expected to receive around 39 more Children in Care in Havering. It had been agreed to accept two older children from Kent. Across London, there were around 750 spaces for Children in Care and Havering had the 5th lowest number of placements in London.

6. Officers advised that it was a legal requirement under the Fostering Standards to make the Corporate Parenting Panel aware of the new Statement of Purpose. The Statement would be submitted to OFSTED at the end of August and brought back to the Panel on an annual basis. There was also a separate statement for private fostering arrangements.

There was a national shortage of foster carers but recruitment had been undertaken successfully in Havering of both new foster carers and those working in the independent sector. Benefits such as parking, leisure facility access and in particular Council Tax exemption were attracting foster carers to Havering.

The Target Operating Model would mean all staff would now be on the out of hours rota. The Havering Association of Foster Carers had a new and enthusiastic committee. The Council had used free advertising on Time FM to recruit new foster carers.

Officers were looking at ways to improve the profile of the fostering service and it was possible an advertisement for foster carers could be included with future Council Tax bills. The foster carers handbook had been updated but there was still some further work to complete and it was hoped to distribute this by January. Copies could be provided to the Panel in due course.

7. The annual Foster report was presented to the Panel. It was a legal requirement to publish the annual report which covered the period April 2022 – March 2023. The report identified areas of strong practice and areas for improvement.

It was clarified that foster carers were reviewed by the Independent Reviewing Officer and returned to the Fostering Panel every three years. This was in addition to the annual review that all foster carers undertook.

More younger children have been entering the care system. The borough's changing demographics meant that placements and foster carers were now more diverse. The Council had a target for this year of a net gain of 10-12 foster carers in Havering. 24 carers had recently been recruited and were undergoing an initial assessment of placement viability.

The new Chair of the Havering Foster Carers Association asked in the annual report for better communication from the service to foster carers. Officers aimed to finalise

the annual report by the end of August and were happy to take comments from Members on the draft.

8. Officers reported that there had been a lower number of complaints overall and that responses were now being completed more quickly. It was hoped feedback from Looked After Children and this could be done via an app.

It was hoped to see a further reduction in complaints this year. The complaints team would work with the appropriate team manager to ensure complaints were dealt with within timescales.

Officers were happy to receive comments on the complaints report by the end of August.

9. Update presentation from NELFT.

A representative from NELFT reported that mental health was a top concern of young people and yoga, relaxation and exercise were important ways of dealing with this area. It was noted that the Cocoon facility was offering yoga sessions to young people. It was also often difficult for young people to contact their GP or deal with GP receptionists etc.

These concerns would be incorporated into the NELFT strategy which would be shared with the Corporate Parenting Panel. NELFT was also undertaking work with Healthwatch in order to obtain the views of young people in more detail. The Council had also undertaken a survey of all Children in Care and there would also be surveys conducted with individual schools.

The Panel thanked the NELFT representative, who would shortly be changing roles, for her work and input.

10. The Panel received a report that set out the dataset for 2023/24 as at 30 September 2023. The report outlined the key Performance Indicators update and benchmarking against London and Statistical Neighbours.

It was noted that Havering's rate of Children in Care (CIC) had remained below that of both Statistical neighbours and the London average since 2016/2017. Following the high contact and referrals into services there was a significant spike in the numbers of children in our care in August and September of 2022 when the service had 261 children.

The number of CIC reduced significantly during the last half of 2022/23 down to 239 at 31st March 2023 but has since started to increase again during the first half of 2023/24 up to 260 at 30th September. There were a number of factors which appeared to impact on this increase and it would be important to review this and monitor the trend over the next few months - before drawing a final conclusion as to what factors were driving the change.

Members acknowledged the positive trends and the areas that required improvement.

The Panel **noted** the performance update report.

11. The Panel received the annual report of the Havering Fostering Service (HFS) from April 2022 to March 2023. HFS a regulated service and subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act 2000. The annual report forms part of the monitoring process of Havering Fostering Service as required under the Fostering Service Regulation 2011 and Fostering National Minimum Standard 2011.

The annual report outlined the performance of the Fostering Service complied with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards, which sets out the condition that the Fostering Service will monitor and report to the Corporate Parenting Members about the management and outcomes of the service.

The report informed that the Service understands that the majority of children are best looked after within their families, with their parents playing an integral role in their upbringing. It is also noted that where this is not possible the Council is committed to providing alternative high quality care to Children in care within a family environment where possible.

The Panel **noted** the annual report.

12. The Panel received the annual report of the Adopt London East April 2022 – 2023.

This was the fourth annual report for the Adopt London East Partnership and its third full year of functioning. Adopt London East has responsibility for all adoption led services, delivering these on behalf of the local authorities.

The report outlined the following recommendations for 2023/24:

Finding prospective adoptive parents.

1. Continue to progress the aims and objectives of the Black Adoption Project, including implementation of new pilot projects to improve services to Black prospective adopters.

2. Re-establish strong adopter information sessions and enquiry processes as the capacity in the assessment team increases.

Preparing and approving adoptive parents.

3. Through greater capacity in the assessment team, increase the number of approvals whilst maintaining high standard of assessments. There is a target of 25 approvals.

Planning for children.

4. Implement recommendations from the Early Permanence research report into barriers to Early Permanence in London.

Placing children with adoptive parents.

5. Continue to focus on the number of children who move to in-house and local

adoptive families.

Providing support to adoptive parents and others.

6. Implement changes to the website which make it more accessible to all those accessing support, including adult adoptees, birth parents, and families with adopted children.

7. Begin to use audit data for Adopt London to compare and understand different levels of demand and models of adoption support to improve services across Adopt London.

Working as part of adopt London.

8. Strengthen arrangements through a legal partnership agreement for Adopt London. The legal partnership agreement has stalled this year due to complexity and capacity in the legal department leading on this work. It is hoped this can be progressed further in 2023/24.

The Panel **noted** the annual report.

13. The Panel received a presentation on the Calendar of events and activities of the Say It Louder Club.

The newly appointed Youth Influence and Participation Coordinator was introduced to the Panel.

It was detailed that Young People were provided expertise with the following consultations:

- Havering's young people's budget consultation using Mind of My Own.
- Children's Commissioner's BIG ASK consultation.
- Meeting with OFSTED Inspectors
- In January 2024, Young People with SEND will be consulted about the care they receive.

The Panel noted that Young People in Havering will be participating in Pan London CiCC (Children in Care Council) – Pan London Residential for young people in care aged 15-17 years, planned for March 2024.

In order to provide Young People with an opportunity for personal development the club was undertaking Individual issues exploratory programme in:

- Navigating friendships
- Relationships with carers
- Caring with boundaries
- Social Workers attending visits on time
- Young person not wanting to return home

Members commended the team for their engagement with the Children and Young People.

The Panel **noted** the events and activities of the Say It Louder Club.