

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

Corporate Parenting Annual Report for 2015-16

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1. Introduction

- 1.1.** Children who are in care and young people who are leaving care are amongst the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community. It is essential that this group of children and young people are provided with the right services and support to address their needs and help them to achieve positive outcomes.
- 1.2.** This report concerns the work of the Corporate Parenting Group of Elected Members and partner agencies from April 2015 to March 2016 about the 'promises' made to children in care aimed at improving outcomes for them. The achievements and challenges from this period are also reported along with setting out priorities for further action.

2. The Corporate Parenting Group and Corporate Parenting Strategy

- 2.1.** The Corporate Parenting Group has aspirations for children in the care of the Borough and has set out promises as part of fulfilling its roles and responsibilities which are :
 - To make sure you get the best care
 - To look after you and treat you well
 - To help you be healthy
 - To get the best education
 - To be successful in life
- 2.2.** The promises to children in care which have been made to children and young people as part of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. The Corporate Parenting Strategy and Action Plan has been refreshed and agreed with Members in June 2015. This updated strategy sets out the collective responsibilities of the Council and its partners to provide the best possible care and protection for children and young people who are looked after in public care. This then involves a number of actions aimed at achieving improved outcomes. The arrangements in place, work carried out and performance are reported in Appendix 1 below.
- 2.3.** In 2015/16, progress has continued to further strengthen the Corporate Parenting arrangements to ensure strong elected member representation including the Lead Member, through the Members' Corporate Parenting Group.

- 2.4. The local performance dataset provided for the Corporate Parenting Group has been revised and expanded considerably. The report and appended dataset provides an update on numbers and trends, as well as trends in safeguarding, education, employment and health outcomes with benchmarks and analysis. The revised dataset has enabled detailed discussion in strengths and areas in need of improvement.
- 2.5. Over the course of the 2015-16 period the panel has met regularly on a bi-monthly basis attended by elected members and partners from health, social care, leisure services, education and the corporate management team. The Council's Rights and Participation Team have continued to attend and support the Borough's Children in Care Council (Skittlz) at the MCPG meetings.
- 2.6. The Corporate Parenting Group has received detailed reports from the Looked After Children's Health Service, the Virtual School and Children's Social Care services about a range of issues and performance during the course of 2015-16.
- 2.7. After the June 2015 elections a training session for new members was delivered to 20 Council Members regarding the work of the Children in Care Council (Skittlz) to raise awareness. The session was very well attended and received by Members, who reported that they felt their knowledge and understanding of Skittlz, looked after children and their corporate parenting role had increased.

3. Children in Care and key trends for 2015-16

- 3.1. There has been a reduction in the total of children looked after in care from 457 to 418. This means that the rate per 10,000 children has fallen from 77 to 71 but continues to be higher than the London average of 52, national average of 60 and statistical neighbours of 69 per 10,000 children.
- 3.2. The demographic profile of the Borough highlights that the number of children is increasing by 2-3% each year. There are also high rates of domestic violence and deprivation which will impact on families. The reduction in the total number of looked after children is therefore a positive trend when considered in this context. Services continue to give close attention to support to families to avoid children coming in to care when safe and appropriate and consider alternative options.
- 3.3. A total of 344 (82.2%) children were placed in family based care through foster care, placement with adoptive carers or placement with parents. The % of children placed within the Borough has increased from 37.7% at the

year end of 2014-15 to 40% at the end of 2015-16. It is important to note that there are also a lot of foster carers who live in neighbouring boroughs such as Havering. High numbers of children continue to be cared for in family based care within or nearby to the Borough which can be beneficial for the children in maintaining links with family and services, including schools

- 3.4.** The number of children placed in residential care has fallen from 45 to 35 over the course of the year as appropriate arrangements have been put in place for moving on in their care plans.
- 3.5.** More young people are living in semi independent placements – increased from 32 to 39 - as part of plans to move towards leaving care and adulthood.
- 3.6.** There has been a slight decrease - from 67 to 65 - in the number of children who are placed 20 miles plus from home. It is sometimes necessary to place further away to achieve the placement to meet the child's needs.
- 3.7.** The number of children adopted in this period has gone down from 32 in 2014-15 to 27 in 2015-16. This is the 3rd highest amongst the London boroughs. Performance, including the timeliness of achieving adoption, has been affected by rulings on cases in the courts and by the challenges in finding a suitable match for children who are hard to place. The adoptions achieved have included numbers of 'hard to place' children who are older, have a disability, are part of a sibling group or from a minority ethnic background.
- 3.8.** The number of children being made the subject of Special Guardianship Orders has increased from 7 in 2010-2011 to 33 in 2015-2016. This is another form of permanency that is considered alongside adoption and long term fostering. The special guardianship arrangements often mean staying within the wider family network or continuity of care from foster carers.
- 3.9.** The figures highlight that Special Guardianship Orders have become increasingly popular within care proceedings. Significant numbers of children have therefore been supported to have plans for permanency through adoption or special guardianship as alternative arrangements to long term care.
- 3.10.** A good, and increased, level of performance has been achieved in a number of areas of practice which are important for children looked after in

care including reviews on time ensuring that plans are checked and adjusted; Personal Education Plans taking place; health assessments and dental checks achieved; and visits to children who have been in care longer than one year

- 3.11.** Despite instability in the staffing in the parts of the services involved each looked after child has an allocated social worker and, when leaving care, a personal adviser. Plans are in place to recruit social workers and reduce the number of agency staff in the children's social care services.
- 3.12.** A fuller breakdown of information regarding children in care including age, ethnicity, gender and type of legal order is attached in Appendix 2 which is the Children in Care dataset for the Corporate Parenting Group.

4. Challenges

- 4.1.** Work will continue to further reduce the number of children who are looked after in care to achieve a lower rate per 10000 which is closer to that of statistical neighbours at 69 per 10000. This however has to be seen in the context of the borough's population, levels of needs and demand for services.
- 4.2.** Achieving adoption with the necessary order through the courts and an adoptive placement within the timescales will continue to present challenges when taking into account the profile of the children whose plan is for adoption and some children being 'hard to place'.
- 4.3.** There is every indication that the number of special guardianship orders (SGO's) will continue to grow. It is important that this work is not seen as being secondary to that of adoption as breakdowns of SGO arrangements will be likely to have an adverse impact on children and will have resource implications if children come back into the care of the local authority.
- 4.4.** The number of young people who are in employment, education and training can be seen as both an achievement and a challenge. It is an achievement when making comparisons with national and statistical comparative performance but still means that there is a significant number of young people who are not in employment, education or training and is therefore an area for continued attention.
- 4.5.** Sourcing and sustaining accommodation for young people 18+ remains a continued challenge due to the lack of social housing stock available for care leavers.

- 4.6.** Recruitment of permanent staff has remained as a priority for the services involved during this period and recognising that this can impact on performance in supporting children and young people in care. However on a positive note there is comparative stability within the children in care, leaving care, fostering and adoption services.

5. Priorities for 2016-17 within the Corporate Parent Strategy

- 5.1.** Continuing to recognise the importance of service user views, plans are in place to involve more young people who are care leavers in the Children in Care Council (Skittlz).
- 5.2.** 'Total Respect' training about children's experience in care and led by young people who are 'care experienced' – is to be arranged for Elected Members and the Corporate Parenting Group.
- 5.3.** A focus on long term placement stability for children through increased management oversight, tracking of individual cases to identify the reasons for any placement breakdown and further guidance and supervision for social workers about permanency planning for children.
- 5.4.** Monitor and improve timescales and performance regarding the placement of children with adoptive families. An action plan is now in place for the Adoption Service for the 2016-17 period which will closely track individual cases and check that the actions necessary to progress adoption are taking place. This is overseen by the Adoption Improvement Group. Members have also requested that adoption is discussed at Scrutiny Panel.
- 5.5.** The arrangements to support carers and children where there is a special guardianship order are to be reviewed to ensure that these can meet needs and help to avoid placement breakdowns.
- 5.6.** Continued attention will be given to performance regarding care plans and pathway plans being up to date and in place
- 5.7.** Children and young people's views are being sought and recorded and arrangements are in place to check this through the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers, through audit as part of a programme of quality assurance work and through arrangements for supervision.
- 5.8.** Work is planned to implement the Health Action Plan regarding looked after children and ensuring initial health assessments, reviews, dental and optical checks.

- 5.9. Further work needs to be undertaken with CAMHS to clarify the pathways for LAC and the Tier 2 resources available to support emotional wellbeing if the criteria for CAMHS is not met. This work has already commenced with a newly appointed Operational Lead for Targeted Children's Services in CAMHS and plans for a dedicated CAMHS LAC social worker.
- 5.10. The introduction of new arrangements for e - Personal Education Plans which will be part of a scheme in which the PEP is reviewed and updated each term with two meetings interspersed with work done on line The Virtual School is leading on this and providing briefing and training to achieve a smooth introduction. PEP champions are in place and available on a session basis for input about children's plans for education. The Virtual School will also continue to focus on ensuring that plans are in place at an early point for children in their pre school year at nursery.
- 5.11. Support will be given by the Virtual School to year 6 and 11 students during key stage/exams and students who have special education needs to fulfil their potential.
- 5.12. Focused attention to improving school attendance for children who are in care led by the Virtual School.
- 5.13. Continuing work to improve EET with close attention to each individual young person's situation and plans alongside creating opportunities in partnership with providers of work, training and education

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Appendix 1 : Progress report regarding the promises to children in care for the period 2015-16 – see below

Appendix 2 : data set for 2015-16 is attached as separate document