

Wednesday, 6 July 2022

CORPORATE PARENTING ANNUAL REPORT REGARDING LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Purpose of report:

Update on: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Corporate Parenting; the key performance data for year ending March 2021 for Looked After Children as compared with statistical neighbours and nationally; and, any relevant national policy developments, such as Care Review output.

The development of the work of the Corporate Parenting Board has been provided within the annual report.

Introduction:

1. On 28 July 2020 it was agreed for the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning Culture Select Committee to receive an annual report in relation to the delivery of Corporate Parenting within Surrey County Council.
2. In order to provide the report, it was agreed to present the Department for Education (DfE) benchmarking data. The current data covers 1 April 2020-31 March 2021.
3. Whilst it is important for members to have national benchmarking data it does mean a delay in seeing current outcomes/performance . This year's statutory return is currently being completed. It is due to be submitted to the DfE in June. Therefore we will be able to verbally give an update on Surrey 21/22 performance at the July meeting if required.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Corporate Parenting

4. The Government ended all Covid restrictions in February 2022. For the past year, and prior to this, staff had settled into a hybrid model of working, where time in the office was combined with working from home, and meetings were a mixture of face-to-face or virtual.
5. Whilst we have now returned to 'business as usual' with the Council's building restrictions regarding social distancing and wearing face masks removed, it is fair to say that 'business as usual' is quite different to what one would have

experienced prior to March 2020, and continues to be a more hybrid model of working which appears to work well for staff.

6. Surrey Children's Services Department, after receiving a rating of 'requires improvement' in all domains from Ofsted report published in March 2022, is ensuring that improvements continue to be made at pace, at the same time as recognising what has already been achieved.
7. Covid-19 impacted Corporate Parenting on many levels, not least:
 - a) our ability to visit children face-to-face was reduced to balance safety of contracting Covid-19 with safeguarding and statutory duties;
 - b) our access to external services were reduced, with many voluntary services ceasing to function and to offer a service, and with statutory partners also struggling to deliver services to the same level, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs);
 - c) Family time/contact for our Looked After Children was reduced to virtual contact being offered when face-to-face was not possible;
 - d) Children and families experienced Covid-19, and this impacted on the ability to carry out face-to-face visits until such time that they were no longer contagious;
 - e) The impact of long-term isolation on staff, children and families including feelings of loneliness and increased mental health issues; and,
 - f) Staff sickness increased. Whilst many staff continued to work despite having Covid-19, they could not carry out face-to-face visits to prevent the spread of the virus.
8. The Government's relaxation of statutory duties aided our ability to carry out visits virtually, however the relaxations have now ended, and statutory visits must occur face-to-face, unless the child or family have Covid-19.
9. Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) have returned to face-to-face, rather than virtually, however there are continued pressures with staffing within Health/ NHS and social care which can impact on the timeliness, although our performance fairs well with statistical neighbours and nationally in terms of completing health assessments (see paragraph 20, below).
10. Dental appointments have been re-established for Looked After Children, although we continue to have a national shortage of NHS dentists. Whilst the NHS continue to encourage dentists to prioritise Looked After Children, there is

no statutory duty for them to register Looked After Children and therefore it can take time to find a dentist with availability to register a child, although the main delay can occur when a child changes placements/area, and then needs to register with a local dentist, therefore this can also impact. In saying this, the performance data in this area shows that Surrey County Council remains in a strong position when compared to statistical neighbours and nationally (see paragraph 19, below).

The key performance data for year ending March 2021 for Looked After Children as compared with statistical neighbours and nationally

11. The key performance data for the Council in relation to Looked After Children can be found in the attached report entitled *Appendix 1: Corporate Parenting Data & Performance Information*; this report will be referred to as the Appendix 1 report within this document. The performance intelligence team have undertaken a comparison of the data, from 2019/20 with that of 2020/21 including data from South East benchmarking, statistical neighbours, and national performance.
12. Local authorities only submit data for children who have been Looked After for 12 months or more.

Looked After Children performance data and comparisons

13. Slides 2 and 3 of the Appendix 1 report shows that as of the 31 March 2021 the number of Looked After Children (CLA) by Surrey County Council was 996, which was an increase of 1.5% from the previous year. This resulted in a slight increase in the rate of children per 10,000 when compared to 2020. Surrey County Council, however, continue to have lower rates of Looked After Children than both statistical neighbours and nationally.
14. Slide 4 shows the data for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and reveals that the percentage of UASC decreased by 3% between 2020 and 2021, falling from 108 in March 2020 to 78 by 31 March 2021. This is a similar picture to that seen by statistical neighbours and nationally. It is suspected that this decrease may well have been a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which impacted on all countries and restricted travel. This view would be supported by the increase we are seeing in numbers of UASC at the current time. Due to the National Transfer Scheme placing a directive onto all local authorities to take up to 0.07% of their child and young people population of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, it is believed that these numbers will continue to rise until we reach this percentage. For Surrey County Council, this means we should expect to have up to 185 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in our care; currently [as of 26th May 2022] we have 135.

15. The majority of Surrey County Council's Looked After Children, as of 31 March 2020, were placed with foster carers and this increased from 70.0% in 2020 to 72.0% in 2021 (Slide 5). This data would support the approach by Surrey County Council to consider in-house foster carers as the first option for our Looked After Children, followed by independent fostering agency foster carers, before considering children's homes or alternative care providers. This approach is part of our sufficiency strategy.
16. For Surrey County Council's Looked After Children living in children's homes (regulated, non-regulated and secure units) we saw a slight decrease of 1.0% to 20.0% in 2021 whereas our statistical neighbours remained the same, and nationally there was a slight increase. Again, this data supports our approach to use foster carers as the first option.
17. Slides 6 and 7 shows that for children placed for adoption, Surrey saw an increase of 0.2% for adoptive placements. Our statistical neighbours saw a 0.3% increase and nationally there was also a 0.2% increase. Surrey County Council have lower numbers of adoptions in comparison to statistical neighbours and nationally, however we also have higher numbers of Special Guardianship Orders, suggesting that we prioritise exploring the wider family members to care for the children. In addition to this, the Court also has a role in relation to what Orders they are willing to grant during and at the conclusion of proceedings.
18. Slide 8 shows that the proportion of Surrey County Council's Looked After Children placed within 20 miles of their home address has increased by 3.0%, from 54.0% in 2020 to 57.0% in 2021. The proportion of Looked After Children living over 20 miles from their home address has increased slightly by 1.0%, from 35.0% in 2020 to 36.0% in 2021. Surrey differs from the national performance data, however is very similar to statistical neighbours. When this is considered in context, Surrey is a large geographical area surrounded by other local authorities and we are in the unusual position where keeping children in Surrey can mean moving them over 20 miles away, whereas moving them out of county could be a much closer option. For instance, Oxted to Farnham is 41 miles, whereas Oxted to Westerham, Kent, is 3.4 miles.
19. Slide 9 indicates that there has been a 1.0% increase in the number of Surrey County Council's Looked After Children living within Surrey, as of 31 March 2021. This percentage was 51.0% in 2020 and increased slightly to 52.0% in 2021. For those Looked After Children living outside the boundaries of Surrey the percentage has decreased slightly by 1.0% from 49.0% to 48.0%. Again, this would reflect wishing for our children to be closer to home, and our sufficiency strategy to ensure children are able to live in Surrey.

20. Slide 10 shows that the number of Looked After Children with an up-to-date Dental Check decreased significantly from 92% in 2020 to 58% in 2021. This can be attributed to dentists being closed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Positively, Surrey compares well when compared to both statistical neighbours (44%) and nationally (40%). With all restrictions lifted in 2022, we expect that our performance will continue to be strong and reflect how we prioritise this, and indeed on 26th May 2022 our data showed 82.6% of dental checks completed.
21. Equally, Surrey compares well in terms of completed Health Assessments with a 3% increase between 2020 resulting in 94% completed in 2021 (Slide 11). Whilst statistical neighbours (88%) and national (91%) performance also increased, Surrey remained strongest. Much work has been undertaken with Health colleagues to increase capacity to enable the health assessments to occur on time, and also to ensure we work together to meet our statutory duties. Covid has impacted on staffing both for the NHS and social care, and there have been times since this data was published where we have struggle to meet demand as a result, however there is much focus in prioritising recruitment from our Health colleagues to ensure this remains a priority. In addition, we have made changes within social care which we are currently piloting in the North West that enabled the Looked After Children service manager to be immediately alerted to any missed health appointments, enabling a proactive approach to resolving this issue. It is envisaged this approach will be rolled out countywide in August 2022.
22. Slide 12 provides the overview of Surrey County Council's performance and comparisons for Looked After Children. The overview shows that for those children entering Care in 2021, those entering Care through the granting of interim Care Orders (ICOs) increased from 21.7% in 2020, to 24.6% in 2021. This is considerably lower than both our statistical neighbours and nationally, whereas those entering Care through section 20 is much higher; with Surrey using section 20 for 65.6% in 2021 (a slight decrease on 2020). Statistical neighbours and nationally used Section 20 for 48% entering Care.
23. The use of Section 20 as opposed to the use of ICOs perhaps suggests that Surrey County Council is less likely to enter care proceedings, less likely to seek an ICO, or less likely to be granted and ICO than both statistical neighbours and nationally. However, this approach would also be in line with that of the family safeguarding model, where there is an effort made to work in partnership with the family to address the concerns. These hypotheses need further testing to establish whether Section 20 is always being used appropriately and is always supported through timely court proceedings when in the best interests of the child. There has been a recent discussion (May 2022) with the Courts around tracking children in care proceedings. Whilst this was mainly to track the length of care proceedings, it will also bring scope to enable

tracking of the types of Orders granted and any trends/ outliers that may need further explored.

24. For those Surrey County Council children subject to care proceedings, there was a 5.4% increase in the proportion of children subject to interim Care Orders, rising from 17.9% and a 2.9% decrease in full Care Orders, falling from 53.9% in 2020 to 51.0% in 2021. It is highly likely that the delay in care proceedings caused by Covid-19 restrictions leading to longer proceedings resulted in the decline in full Care Orders. In addition, the adversity caused by Covid-19 may also have played a part in the slight increase in the numbers of interim Care Orders granted.
25. Immunisation checks year on year increased from 91% in 2020 to 93% in 2021, reflecting that more focussed recording has been maintained.
26. Surrey County Council's Looked After Children with confirmed substance misuse decreased by 3.4% from 5.6% in 2020 to 2.20% in 2021. It is unclear at this time if this is as a result of the impact of Covid-19 restrictions, however if so, then it may increase again in next year's data.
27. For Surrey County Council's Looked After Children, there is a statutory requirement to undertake a strength and difficulties questionnaire [SDQ] which helps ascertain how a child is doing emotionally. The DFE data reports on how many SDQs have been completed. The completion rate for Surrey County Council increased by 6% from 83% in 2020 to 89% in 2021. This is a positive improvement in compliance to ensure SDQs have been completed, and an improvement to build. It is particularly relevant, knowing the impact Covid-19 has had on mental health/ wellbeing and loneliness and therefore being able to use SDQs to consider a child's emotional wellbeing enables identification of any needs and therefore the ability to intervene and support. Given the national increase in mental health difficulties in children during the pandemic, it is key that SDQs remain a focus area.
28. For Looked After Children under 5 years old and continuously looked after for 12 months or more, there has been an increase in developmental checks rising from 94% in 2019/20 to 98% in 2020/21 Again, this is a positive improvement and one to build upon.

Our priorities

29. Our current priorities, as a service, is to ensure we continue to build on the improvements we have made.
30. We are creating our own bespoke, in-house reunification programme so that we consider at the earliest opportunity whether children can be reunified to their parents, if safe to do so. We have secured a Transformation bid in which to do

this work and are confident that our practice is now strong enough to enable this to happen in-house and using the family resilience model already embedded. In addition, because this will be in-house, it will enable a level of flexibility where there are possibilities to reunify children to the place they call home to a relative other than their parents. The final stages of planning are underway for this, and it is hoped the project will be able to take over from the NSPCC reunification pilot by August 2022.

31. The recoument of costs from those with Parental Responsibility policy is in the process of being finalised and will be implemented to ensure that where parents request for their children, under the age of 16, to be accommodated, they are means tested and expected to contribute to the costs of providing such a service.
32. We have produced a service plan alongside operational staff, so that key priorities are clear. Our top priority is to ensure our placement planning form and process is consistent across the county; this is in line with the recommendations from the Ofsted report March 2022. We are currently working alongside Fostering to ensure the form and process is robust and meeting the needs of both the services and our children.
33. Our second area of focus is on preparing our children for independence and adulthood. Much work has occurred in relation to Preparing for independence with our own innovative approach called 'Surrey, how do I - -'. This consists of virtual online help/support with independence skills, alongside a set of face-to-face workshops throughout the year to help bring our children together to prevent loneliness and improve mental health, but also to learn new life skills and provide them with opportunities to obtain accredited certificates through ASDAN.
34. Our third focus will be on how we record onto a child's file, changing our language and writing all recordings directly to the child. We already do this with some of our Looked After Children review letters and visits, however we wish to take a whole system approach in this area, so that any child who later asks to see their file will be presented with a much more child friendly document to read, that looks similar to reading a diary. Discussions around how we will do this have started in terms of discussions with the Looked After Children Service Managers, their staff and the Independent Reviewing Service. The next phase will be to set up working groups to include User Voice Participation, the Independent Reviewing Service and staff from the Looked After Children service. We already have a number of staff who record their visits in this style [writing to the child] but we wish to imbed it into everyday practice. This will be a major piece of work, as all templates and documents currently in use will need to be redesigned to cater for this new approach, therefore it is likely to take the

remainder of 2022 to see a real change in the recording. Working Groups will not begin in this area until July 2022.

35. Knowing that mental health difficulties and loneliness are major issues for our young people, our fourth focus is to improve the health and wellbeing of our young people. This is being embedded within our work, but it will include ensuring SDQs are completed and services accessed at the earliest convenience, and also enabling opportunities for young people to come together, such as with 'Surrey, how do I - -' events. In addition to this, we wish to ensure more consistency across the service in completed risk assessments and accessing services which we plan to do through learning sets and a major focus of this work is also ensuring health assessments and dental checks are completed on time, every time. By being part of the service plan, it ensures all staff within the service see this as a key priority.
36. Our fifth focus is to ensure recruitment and retention to the Looked After Children service is a priority. We know where there are vacancies within teams this can lead to instability for our children, and results in young people having to repeat their story and adjust to new workers. This focus is a countywide initiative across the directorate and we believe it is key to be part of the Looked After Children service top five priorities at this time.

National policy developments

37. The *independent review of children's social care in England* was published on 23rd May 2022. This report makes eighty recommendations to the government as to the changes required to social care.
38. In terms of Looked After Children, some of the recommendations are for Special Guardians and Kinship Carers to receive a new statutory financial allowance to care for a child. In a similar reform to the adoption service by creating Regional Adoption agencies, the Care Review recommends that local authorities take back control in relation to care provision, and create mandated Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) to create and run all public sector fostering, residential and secure units in the region. The RCCs are also recommended to commission not-for-profit and private sector care.
39. Equally, the Care Review recognises the shortage of foster carers and makes a recommendation for a 'new deal' with them to provide support networks and training, and to have greater trust in their day-to-day care of our children. The Care Review calls on the government to immediately launch a national foster care recruitment campaign to approve 9,000 new foster carers over the next three years.

40. The Care Review calls for the independent visitors to end, and to provide children with an opt-out independent advocate, and to make Care status a protected characteristic.
41. It concludes that the cost of the reform will require £2.6 billion investment over a four-year period. The Care Review can be found at [The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf](#)
42. In March 2021, the Competition Market Authority (CMA) launched a market study into children's social care in England, Scotland and Wales, to consider how the placements market was operating. Two main concerns had been raised with the CMA: 1) that local authorities were too often unable to access appropriate placements to meet the child's needs in their care; and 2) that the prices paid by local authorities were high and this, combined with growing numbers of Looked After Children, was placing significant strain on local authority budgets, limiting their scope to fund other important activities in Children's Services and beyond.
43. Recommendations are made within this report for the reform of the operation of the placements market. It identifies that there are significant issues with how the placements market is functioning, particularly in England and Wales. It found that:
 - a lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, means that children are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs;
 - the largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than we would expect if this market were functioning effectively; and
 - some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, creating a risk that disorderly failure of highly-leveraged firms could disrupt the placements of children in care.
44. The CMA concludes that this market is not working well and that it will not improve without focused policy reform. The CMA sees the main focus as needing to improve the functioning of the placements market, via a robust, well-evidenced reform programme which will deliver better outcomes in the future. This will require careful policymaking and a determination to see this process through over several years.
45. There are three main recommendations to the Government, as follows:
 - to improve commissioning, by having some functions performed via collaborative bodies, providing additional national support and supporting local authority initiatives to provide more in-house foster care;

- to reduce barriers to providers creating and maintaining provision, by reviewing regulatory and planning requirements, and supporting the recruitment and retention of care staff and foster carers; and,
- to reduce the risk of children experiencing negative effects from children's home providers exiting the market in a disorderly way, by creating an effective regime of market oversight and contingency planning.

46. The full report can be accessed at: [Children's social care market study final report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/94222/Childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report-2021.pdf)

Conclusions:

47. The performance data, both when compared from 2020 to 2021, and when compared to both statistical neighbours and nationally, compares well.
48. Whilst there has been concerns as to the impact on Looked After Children of Covid-19 and restrictions, what the data helps show is that Surrey County Council continued to perform well in almost all areas when compared to statistical neighbours and nationally with the exception being Looked After Children placed over 20 miles from their family home, and the percentage placed outside Surrey. It is however key when considering this information that the geographical size of Surrey, along with the number of counties it borders is recognised.
49. As the Council is aware, there is a sufficiency strategy in place which includes seeking to place children 'closer to home' and to ensure we have the right provision within Surrey to meet their needs. Information in relation to this has been presented in other forums, and is regularly communicated at the Corporate Parenting Board.
50. Whilst the performance data cannot evidence it, the improvement in some of the performance is very much aided by our improved relationships and working together with our Health colleagues.
51. Our key priorities for this year are highlighted within the subsection above 'Our Priorities'. Whilst compliance has been a major area of focus, there is now a need to focus on quality and to make changes that result in better outcomes for our children; we believe that our top 5 service priorities help us do just that.

Recommendations:

52. The Select Committee notes the Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report and Performance Report in relation to Looked After Children.
53. The Select Committee are to receive a report next year which will include:

- a) any relevant national policy developments that impact Corporate Parenting;
and
- b) the key performance data for year ending March 2022 for Looked After Children as compared with statistical neighbours and nationally.

Next steps:

With the Ofsted ILACs completed and the report published in March 2022 rating Surrey Children's Service Department as 'requires improvement' in all areas, the main focus is now on achieving consistency across the county, and in continuing to improve our practice to ensure the best outcomes for children. See separate ILACS report for update on progress of our improvement plan: Achieving Excellence.

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Sources/background papers

Appendix 1: Corporate Parenting Data & Performance Information

Appendix 2: Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report

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