

**MINUTES** of the meeting of the **CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE** held at 10.00 am on 15 February 2024 at Woodhatch Place, 11 Cockshot Hill, Reigate, RH2 8EF.

These minutes are subject to confirmation by the Committee at its meeting on Wednesday, 17 April 2024.

**Elected Members:**

- \* Fiona Davidson (Chair)
- \* Jonathan Essex
- \* Robert Hughes
- \* Rebecca Jennings-Evans
- Rachael Lake BEM
- Bernie Muir
- \* John O'Reilly
- \* Mark Sugden
- \* Ashley Tilling
- \* Liz Townsend
- \* Chris Townsend (Vice-Chairman)
- \* Jeremy Webster (Vice-Chairman)
- Fiona White

**Co-opted Members:**

- \* Julie Oldroyd, Diocesan Representative for the Catholic Church
- Mr Alex Tear, Diocesan Representative for the Anglican Church, Diocese of Guildford

(\* = present)

**1/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS [Item 1/24]**

Apologies were received from Cllr Fiona White.  
Cllrs Rachael Lake and Bernie Muir attended remotely.

**2/24 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS: 6 DECEMBER 2023 [Item 2/24]**

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

**3/24 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST [Item 3/24]**

None received.

**4/24 QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS [Item 4/24]**

**Key points made in the discussion:**

1. No public questions or petitions were received.
2. There were two Member's questions from Cllr Fiona Davidson, the first on the SEND capital programme and another on the commissioning of diagnostic and treatment services for Foetal Alcohol Spectrum

Disorder. Responses to these questions have been attached to these minutes.

3. The following supplementary was asked in relation to the second question: How many children and young people were referred for Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder assessments in the past two years and how many developmental paediatricians and Mindworks personnel have had formal training on FASD in the past three years?

#### **5/24 ACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKER AND FORWARD WORK PLAN [Item 5/24]**

The Committee held a forward planning session on 24 January 2024.

#### **6/24 ALTERNATIVE PROVISION [Item 6/24]**

##### **Witnesses**

Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Lifelong Learning

Julia Katherine, Director – Education and Lifelong Learning

Carrie Traill, Service Manager – Educational Effectiveness (Head of Education)

Dee Turvill – Alternative Provision & Participation Manager

Sandra Morrison, Assistant Director Inclusion & Additional Needs SE

Leanne Henderson, Participation Manager, Family Voice Surrey (FVS)

Gen Dearman, CEO of Challengers

##### **Key points made in the discussion:**

1. Family Voice summarised the findings from their Alternative Provision (AP) survey conducted in September 2023, which highlighted some children were receiving very little or no AP after missing 15 days of school. The Alternative Provision & Participation Manager said such cases were neither typical nor the exception but complex. On occasion more than one independent provider was offered to build up a full-time package.
2. The survey found inconsistencies in medical evidence required; Family Voice said this issue was not new, but there had been an escalation in emotional-based non-attendance since the pandemic. The Alternative Provision & Participation Manager informed the Committee that following a new medical policy in December 2023, a new medical panel aims to deliver consistency in the messaging to parents and the evidence requested which, while not a legal requirement, helps to ensure provision is appropriate.
3. The Cabinet Member thanked Family Voice for their exemplary work and noted that as a result of a Local Ombudsman review, there had

been a programme of improvement with the objective of a consistent and compliant approach to all children with alternative provision needs.

4. The CEO of Challengers spoke about the charity, which provides play for excluded children with disabilities and is funded mainly by the Local Authority directly but sometimes by schools. She shared that 12 of the 22 children they have supported over the last year have now reintegrated into education. She explained that children were with them for an average of 6.5 months and the longer they had been out of education before being supported by Challengers, the longer it took to get them back into education. The charity has a waiting list. Asked if it had been impacted by changes in short breaks funding, the CEO replied that it had affected parents' resilience and the behaviour and confidence of young people who received less play provision.
5. A Member asked if there were protocols that included clear criteria for what was expected from alternative provision providers, at the point of commissioning and in terms of quality of delivery. The Member also asked what assurance checks were conducted, especially on unregistered providers. The Service Manager for Educational Effectiveness responded that 58% of young people in AP attended either a short stay school or AP academy, both of which have a service level agreement with the Council and are monitored by Inclusion Officers on a half-termly basis. She added that 100 per cent of these are Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding. The independent sector has termly monitoring visits. Checks had increased under a new dynamic purchasing system. Each individual child has a plan monitored by their SEND case officer, with targets taking into account their past trauma. A Member expressed concern over some children experiencing changes in their case officer.
6. The current alternative provision strategy was agreed in 2021. The Member asked how the Council was meeting Family Voice's ambition for all children to access full-time education. The Alternative Provision & Participation Manager said the goal was for children to access a minimum of three hours a day but there were cases where due to demand this was not being met.
7. A Member asked if witnesses acknowledged that some school leaders, parents and carers felt that they had not been suitably involved in decision-making around alternative provision. The Service Manager for Educational Effectiveness said that the Service cares deeply about schools, parents, carers and other stakeholders. Comprehensive consultations took place when developing the Dynamic Purchasing System and the Service was committed to constant improvement. The Assistant Director said the Service had met with Family Voice to discuss their recommendations and had agreed to work together to develop solutions.

8. A Member asked about the length of time children spent in alternative provision and how successfully reintegration was being measured. The Service Manager for Educational Effectiveness said the average duration was six months, though some cases could be a lot more complex and require more time. Work was underway internally within the Council but also with partners to see how schools could expand existing alternative provision programmes within schools. The aim was to keep pupils in the same environment and disrupt their education as little as possible.
9. Noting that the Local Ombudsman had found 63% of reviewed cases were not compliant with duty, a Member asked if this had been rectified and how. The Assistant Director Inclusion & Additional Needs SE said that there had been training conducted with case workers on their responsibilities. The Service was also launching another dip sample to review cases against the quality used in the previous dip sample, which would be shared with the Committee when available.
10. A Member asked how the Council and Surrey schools were managing the safeguarding of children and young people whose alternative provision was part-time. The Assistant Director said issues would be identified by the Inclusion Officers' half-termly checks. Where independent alternative providers were used, the Council expected them to have DBS and other security checks in place. The Council would not dictate to schools which alternative provision providers to access, but would share those with a good history of compliance. The Chair emphasised that it was right for the safeguarding of children absent from school to be a priority.

*Break at 11:54, meeting resumed at 12:04.*

#### **Actions**

1. Alternative Provision & Participation Manager to provide the number of CYP not routinely accessing 15 hours of alternative provision a week.
2. Head of Education to provide the number of hours of AP a day received by the 42% of CYP not in a PRU/AP Academy.
3. Alternative Provision & Participation Manager to provide the number (and proportion) of AP placements provided by the third sector.
4. Head of Education to provide data on how many CYP who reintegrate into education following AP subsequently bounce back into AP.
5. Assistant Director – CFL Commissioning to provide more information on the breakdown of funding for Independent AP, given the wide variance (between £96-£153,000 per pupil).

**Resolved:**

The Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee:

- 1) Recommends that, by September 2024, the Service strengthens its Governance Group to ensure all parties engaged in Alternative Provision have a forum to discuss key issues, with the aim of improving provision and relationships between the Council, school leaders, parents, carers and providers.
- 2) In order to have knowledge of the quality of alternative provisions used and offered to children and young people, recommends criteria measuring the outcomes of individuals using AP are developed and implemented by the Service within six months, to include: educational attainment; employment destinations; number of weeks Children and Young People (CYP) spend in AP before being reintegrated into education; how many CYP are successfully reintegrated into education; and how many CYP return to AP following reintegration.
- 3) a) welcomes the agreement of SCC to agree each of the Family Voice Surrey (FVS) AP recommendations, and  
b) recommends that SCC:
  - (i) prioritises the development of the parent handbook described in FVS Recommendation 3 with the aim of delivering it by the end of June 2024;
  - (ii) provides a delivery date for the recommendations that are entirely within its responsibility by April 2024;
  - (iii) and consults with partners to agree a delivery date for the other recommendations by June 2024.

## **7/24 FOSTER CARER SUFFICIENCY [Item 7/24]**

### **Witnesses**

Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Lifelong Learning

Tina Benjamin, Director – Corporate Parenting

Matt Ansell, Director – Family Resilience & Safeguarding

Jo Rabbitte, Assistant Director – Children’s Resources

Sam Morris, Secretary to Surrey County Fostering Association (SCFA)

### **Key points made in the discussion:**

1. The Director of Corporate Parenting shared that eight households had been approved as foster carers since the submission of the report, with more to go through the assessment process. If all were successful, there would be a further 26 general foster carers and 43 kinship foster carers in Surrey by the end of the financial year.

2. The Secretary to Surrey County Fostering Association (SCFA) noted that they had been working closely with the Service to make a foster carer charter to help foster carers feel valued and regarded as working in partnership with the Service. The Secretary shared a feeling widely held among foster carers that not all social workers understood what foster carers were managing on a daily basis, in addition to their birth families and jobs, and would like new social workers to undergo training in order to foster realistic expectations. They should be treated like colleagues, especially with respect to booking meetings. Foster carers were expected to conduct transport for the children's contact hours with their birth families, something that had continued after the pandemic, adding more pressure. She said as the people who often know the children best, foster carers would like to be more involved in the decision-making process. The Secretary also shared that carers would like to have paid respite and enjoy rights afforded to normal full-time employees such as paid leave. They would also like to see greater support from mental health services for foster children.
3. A Member asked the Council what they specifically could do to encourage Surrey foster carers to stay in their roles. The Assistant Director for Children's Resources said that they could be invited to the retention and recruitment board for foster carers, which would give them a platform to voice concerns.
4. The Secretary to the SCFA noted that fostering was seen as a middle-class role by some people in Surrey and the narrative had to change to debunk that myth and advertise the financial benefits of fostering. Word of mouth was the most important factor to improve recruitment. It was her view that the support given to foster carers by Surrey County Council was better than Independent Fostering Agencies and that this should be promoted.
5. The Director for Corporate Parenting explained there had been an overview of competitors' benefits in 2023. Fees and allowances were raised significantly for the first time since 2019 and there was a built-in annual inflation-linked increase. Paid leave had not been considered but could be investigated and costed. The Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Lifelong Learning said she could take that under consideration but that the interests of children and young people were the utmost priority.
6. The Chair asked how the Service could improve how children's social workers interact with foster carers. The Director of Family Resilience & Safeguarding invited representation from the SCFA to come to leadership meetings and discuss how to improve communication and support for practitioners.
7. A Member asked how the Directorate planned to drive forward and implement the draft foster carer charter. The Assistant Director for Children's Resources said the Service hoped to launch the charter in Foster Care Fortnight in May.

8. A Member asked how the Service planned on embedding the communication strategy and improving relations. The Director of Family Resilience & Safeguarding said he also had several examples of foster carers complimenting the excellent practice of social workers and he would be providing examples of best practice across the Service. The Director for Corporate Parenting added that when children were reviewed by Independent Reviewing Officers they could make sure the foster carer's voice is heard in the planning, something already happening in some cases. The Director for Quality and Performance said foster carers were rarely invited to child protection conferences and should be.
  
9. A Member asked what could be learned from Hampshire and Sutton local authorities' recruitment success. The Assistant Director for Children's Resources said they had a larger marketing budget and although they generated a high number of enquiries, Surrey's conversion rates were comparable. Surrey was now part of the Department of Education funded programme to recruit and retain foster carers as part of a £2.6 million recruitment hub in the South East running from May 2024.

### **Actions**

1. Director – Corporate Parenting to inform Committee what the target is for Foster Carer recruitment and how this compares with predicted performance for the next three years.
  
2. Assistant Director – Children's Resources to provide a written response on what strategies Hampshire and Sutton are pursuing in order to have achieved a net increase of foster carers last year (as shown in appendix 3).

### **Resolved:**

There is no doubt that SCC is committed to increasing the number of Surrey foster carers, and to ensuring that foster carers come from as wide and diverse a demographic as the children that Surrey cares for. Improving sufficiency has many advantages for all parties: children and young people, foster carers and foster families and Surrey County Council. To achieve this objective, the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee recommends that:

- 1) The Children and Families Directorate drives forward the Surrey County Fostering Association (SCFA) Foster Carer Charter, with the goal of agreeing a final version by Foster Care Fortnight in May 2024 and developing an implementation plan by the end of October 2024.
  
- 2) The Service actively considers the following 15 points that SCFA (those currently doing this difficult job) believe would improve recruitment and retention:

1. Involve foster carers in decision-making meetings to reinforce a partnership approach to fostering between foster carers and SCC/commissioned services.
  2. Create a culture where children's social workers (and other professionals) regard foster carers as colleagues to engender a relationship of mutual trust and respect.
  3. To foster an understanding of the foster carer role, the demanding daily lives of foster families and their lived experiences, perhaps ASYEs could shadow a foster carer or SCC could work with the SCFA to create a training course or webinar.
  4. Make SCC's policy that foster carers' emails are answered within a set SLA (suggested 72 hours) and social workers on duty are required to respond within 30 minutes to phonecalls and emails.
  5. Conclude Standards of Care and Allegations of Harm investigations within an appropriate timescale.
  6. Work with SCFA to update the Skills to Foster course to better prepare new carers and empower their voice.
  7. Centralise Gateway to Resources personnel to ensure they know carers, enabling a more child-centred matching approach.
  8. Work with the SCFA to consider and cost giving paid annual leave to foster carers in line with neighbouring LAs and IFAs.
  9. In collaboration with the SCFA, improve functionality of the Olive training platform, which is very difficult for foster carers to access and use.
  10. Review the transport to contact policy to consider returning to the pre-Covid situation where contact supervisors provided transport for CYE on contact visits.
  11. Social work Assistant Directors to join the Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention Board.
  12. Create a Surrey Offer that better promotes the support offered by SCC that is unrivalled by IFAs.
  13. Provide the services of a benefits and tax advisor when required.
  14. Publicise that it is not necessary to be a homeowner, and make it known to prospective carers who may be on benefits, including kinship and connected carers, that it is possible to be a foster carer on benefits without benefits being significantly impacted.
  15. Introduce a retention scheme with bonuses or a letter of recognition from the SCC Director for certain milestones.
- 3) Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting set up a working group, comprising children's social workers (representing each quadrant) and foster carers, and empower it to explore how relationships between these key stakeholders in the fostering process could be improved, and to develop recommendations for implementation by the end of September 2024.

**8/24 CHILDREN'S HOMES - OFSTED REPORTS PUBLISHED SINCE THE LAST MEETING OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE [Item 8/24]**

**Witnesses**

Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Lifelong Learning

Tina Benjamin, Director – Corporate Parenting



**Key points made in the discussion:**

1. The Chair praised officers for the continued Good rating in the latest Ofsted report.

**9/24 PERFORMANCE OVERVIEW [Item 9/24]**

**Witnesses**

Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Lifelong Learning

Patricia Denney, Director – Quality and Performance

**Key points made in the discussion:**

1. The Chair noted that there would be an opportunity to discuss performance metrics at the next performance sub-group meeting on 20 February 2024.

**10/24 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING 17 APRIL 2024 [Item 10/24]**

The Committee noted its next public meeting would be held on Wednesday 17 April 2024.

Meeting ended at: 1.20 pm

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**Chair**