

Meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 11th November 2020 at 6.00pm

On Microsoft Teams

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Agenda - Public Session

(Meeting open to the public and press)

1. Chairs Announcements

Welcome to this virtual meeting. This is a formal Council Committee. The public proceedings will take place live on the Internet.

It will assist with the conduct of business if participants speak only when invited. I shall adjourn the meeting if necessary if protocol is not observed.

Members of the public are welcome to view the proceedings but should not make contributions until they are invited in line with our procedure.

All Members of the Committee have received the reports and associated documents in advance and had the opportunity to read them. The public reports are published on the Internet.

All participants should mute their microphones and video feed when they are not speaking.

Please remember to unmute your microphone and switch on your video feed when it is your turn to speak. Speak clearly and slowly into your microphone.

Anyone wishing to speak should indicate using the 'raise your hand' button on Microsoft Teams. I will invite people to speak at the appropriate time.

If you do not have the hand button, please type your request to speak in the chat function. Please note that the 'chat' function is monitored and has a full audit trail and anyone found to be misusing this function will be removed from the meeting.

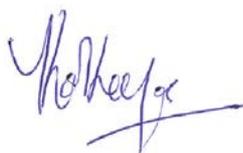
Finally, I ask for everyone's patience with the use of technology. I apologise in advance if we experience any unforeseen difficulties which we shall try to



resolve expeditiously.

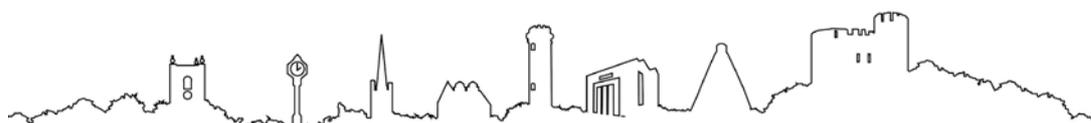
I shall now follow the agenda items as listed.

2. Apologies for absence.
3. To report the appointment of any substitute members serving for this meeting of the Committee.
4. To receive any declarations of interest under the Members' Code of Conduct.
5. To confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 9th September 2020 as a correct record.
6. Children's Services Update – Acting Director of Children's Services.
7. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 (Pages 1 – 23)
8. Fostering and Permanence Service Update (Pages 24 – 29)
9. Care Leavers Report (Pages 30 – 34)
10. To consider any questions from Members to the Chair where two clear days notice has been given to the Monitoring Officer (Council Procedure Rule 11.8).



Chief Executive

Dated: Tuesday 3rd November 2020



Distribution:

Members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee:

Councillor A Millward (Chair)

Councillor P Sahota (Vice-Chair)

Councillors M Aston, J Baines, I Bevan, P Bradley, J Cooper, S Craigie, K Lewis, C Perks and S Ridney.

Cc Councillor R Buttery (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

Church Representative – Mr T Reid (Worcester Diocesan Board of Education)

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- Elected Members can submit apologies by contacting Democratic Services: Telephone 01384 815238 or E-mail Democratic.Services@dudley.gov.uk



**Minutes of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee
Wednesday, 9th September 2020 at 6.00 pm
Microsoft Teams Meeting**

Present:

Councillor A Millward (Chair)
Councillor P Sahota (Vice-Chair)
Councillors M Aston, J Baines, I Bevan, P Bradley, J Cooper, S Craigie, K Lewis, C Perks and S Ridney.

Officers:

H Ellis (Acting Director of Children's Services), S Jones (Acting Head of Family Solutions), J Keeble, (Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion), D Nicklin (Complaints Manager) and K Buckle – (Democratic Services Officer).

6. Declarations of Interest

Councillor I Bevan declared a pecuniary interest as an employee of Dudley Group of Hospitals Foundation Trust.

7. Minutes

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 29th June 2020, be approved as a correct record and signed.

8. Children's Services Update

The Acting Director of Children's Services referred to Children's Services main objective which was being able to secure a permanent Leadership Team.

The appointment of Andrea Stone, the Assistant Director for Social Care, was referred to and Andrea introduced herself. The positions of Head of Safeguarding and Head of Children in Care and Placement Resources were currently being advertised.

The Schools within the Dudley Borough were now open with a 90% rate of attendance however, it was understood that some children and families had issues in relation to anxieties and shielding. Schools would continue to be supported by the Local Authority and attendance figures would continue to be monitored.

A further area of focus had been in relation to children's social care, with the securement of that Improvement Plan being imminent. There was emphasis placed upon ensuring that all improvements were recorded accurately within that Plan.

The commissioning of a former HMI Inspector to perform a sense check on Children's Social Care was referred to, together with the complete service review. The final feedback from that review would be provided on Friday, which would be reported within the Improvement Plan and shared with the Committee at a future date.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) improvement journey continued to provide challenges, particularly with those children with disabilities returning to school. Work was continuing with parents and carers in special schools to ensure that (SEND) children were integrated back into education and learning.

Members welcomed the attendance rate figures following the return to schools, and the Chair thanked and congratulated all teams within Children's Services.

The Acting Director of Children's Services accepted that attendance figures would fluctuate, however the return to school had commenced on a positive note.

Resolved

That the information on the Children's Services update and as reported on at the meeting, be noted.

9. **Children's Services Complaints: Response Times Action Plan**

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on actions taken, and processes put in place to improve complaint response times within Children's Services. Appended to the report submitted was the Children's Complaints – Referral and follow up Action Plan.

It was reported that consultations had taken place with Senior Managers and ICT Services, with revised processes for dealing with complaints now in place.

It was noted from the initial referral, Managers were fully aware of the need to provide a reason for the late response to a complaint.

Service Managers were now copied into referrals for complaints, within their areas of service, in order that they could check and track the progress of complaints.

There was also an additional reminder again involving Managers, in order that they were aware that the response date was approaching, and the new processes

identified those complaints that had exceeded the target dates. There was an expectation on those Managers to assist the Complaints Team, in order to ensure that as far as possible those responses were provided on a timely basis.

Amendments to ICT systems had been made, in order to capture the data and information from Managers on late response times and the reasons for those late responses. That data had been collated from 1st April 2020, with Managers now providing information for late responses from the beginning of the financial year.

A report to a future meeting would be submitted detailing the reasons for late response times.

The Assistant Director for Social Care referred to the previous issues in relation to complaint response times, advising that Heads of Service and Service Managers were now aware of the expectations in relation to responding on time, and monthly panel meetings would now be implemented in order to monitor those complaints that had not been responded to within the relevant time frame. Therefore, she was confident that there would be improvements in timely responses.

Arising from the presentation of the report, Members raised concerns and made suggestions and Officers responded as follows:-

The first four reminders referred to in the Children's Complaints – Referral and Follow Up Action Plan were reminders before the due date for responses, the further four reminders were after the due date for responses in order to inform Managers of the requirement to provide reasons for the delay in responses. It was agreed that the reasons for late responses could not be a tick box exercise, with Officers quality checking those responses.

It was further agreed that checking Key Performance Indicators and targets within Children's Services would be considered.

It was stated that regular updates in relation to complaint response times would be presented to future meetings of the Committee.

Resolved

- (1) That the report submitted on the Children's Services Complaints: Response Times Action Plan together and the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.
- (2) That the revised processes and actions put in place to improve complaint response times be endorsed.
- (3) That the Acting Director of Children's Services be requested to submit regular updates in relation to complaint response times to future meetings of the Committee.



10. **Early Years Transformation Academy in Dudley**

Members considered a report on the partnership progress through the Early Years Transformation Academy (EYTA), and the 'critical first 1001 days vision' and Dudley's Implementation Plan, to support transformation of the maternity and early years system, and contribution to maternity and early years outcomes.

The Acting Head of Family Solutions referred to the opportunity to apply and being successful, in being a part of the Early Years Transformation Academy EYTA, working with the national think tank 'The Early Intervention Foundation'.

It was noted that the Local Authority had the support of the EYTA for a 12 month period, in order to develop outcomes across Maternity and Early Years Services. The intention had been to have a fundamental change away from services failing to share information, as it had become evident over the previous months, that although many Services across the Council were better connected through early years links, Maternity Services were not and an important opportunity had arisen to develop and forge stronger links with maternity colleagues based at Russells Hall hospital .

One of the main tasks was to fully review Needs Assessments, and across systems develop a detailed understanding of what challenges were presented in terms of maternity and early years outcomes, and geographically which areas in the Borough were most greatly affected.

Areas surrounding impacts on outcomes included data in relation to babies who were born with low birth weight, school readiness challenges, children who were overweight and obese at a young age, issues with regard to smoking during pregnancy and infant mortality. It was noted that much of this information was contained in the 'Understanding Dudley' document which was in the public domain and linked through the council's website.

The important approach, particularly with Dudley Council for Voluntary Service partners, conducting work in relation to community engagement and undertaking a dialogue with residents, with those that had recently experienced Maternity and Early Years services, in order to gather information in relation to areas of the services that had worked well were referred to.

Analysis for any key areas of development required within those services was also referred to.

In terms of the implementation work around the critical 1001 days, it was stated that the first 1001 days of a child's life commences antenatally and continued until the child's second birthday. The desired achievements were for every woman to experience a healthy pregnancy, to improve school readiness, reduce the impact of poverty, empowering families to make better healthy choices and strengthen relationships with communities and families.

The detailed plan in order to achieve the above was firstly in relation to forming a targeted community based, Midwifery Service as it had been evidenced that a Continuity of Carer Model that provided a consistent midwife throughout the community phase antenatally in the ward at the delivery and then post-delivery stages vastly improved maternity outcomes.

It was noted that there was currently a particularly distinct team who worked within Russells Hall hospital, in terms of the delivery stage and that team were separate from the community Midwives. Health visiting offered a very similar approach in all areas of the Borough. Health Visiting through the (EYTA) intended to employ an increased level of contacts with families in areas that are most challenged, with health and inequality. It was planned to have an increased offer around parenting support within the most challenged areas in the Borough.

The plan to increase the uptake of the targeted free early learning places for two-year olds was in place through Dudley's network of Family Centres.

It was reported that in some of the disadvantaged areas within the Borough, opportunities for community learning and parental engagement in relation to early years was unrepresented by the voluntary sector, and there were plans to ensure that those opportunities were provided for parents to access community led provision.

In terms of delivery during the pandemic, it had become clear that the plans outlined above could not be implemented, particularly in relation to maternity services, as the focus had been on women giving birth safely, with the whole system change being placed on hold.

In relation to the Continuity of Carer Model, it was hoped to implement that by the autumn. The work from a maternity perspective would focus on the Netherton, Woodside, and St. Andrews Ward, as it had been identified that some of the health inequality issues were most challenging in that Ward.

Sophisticated work within Management Information Teams, in relation to maternity and early years systems would commence, in order to recognise that the changes made to systems were impacting on infant mortality, low birth weight, smoking at the time of pregnancy, the delivery on school readiness and on all the effects on maternity and early years systems.

The ambitious delivery plan was now dependant upon it being triggered by Maternity Services.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members asked questions and made comments and responses were provided as follows:-

- Family Centres in the Dudley Borough had been under-utilised in terms of Maternity Services, however there were now opportunities to create better links that would not affect the work that was currently undertaken in General Practitioner's Services and in other venues.

- In relation to the Time for Two's provision not being accessed in more deprived areas, there may also be problems in areas where English was spoken as a second language, and areas where there was more significant cultural diversity. There were members of staff working within the Council who spoke community languages, to ensure that every child that would benefit from a two-year place, could access that place, as well as the more general messages around the advantages in taking up the two year place.
- The Dudley Clinical Commissioning Group, Public Health and the Council report on information at different frequencies, therefore it was dependent upon what aspect of improvement was being examined, as some of the impact of the work outlined would be immediate with some producing results over longer periods of time.
- In relation to community resilience, of the five Local Authorities who had been involved in the early intervention work, Dudley was the only Authority who was fortunate to have someone from the Community Voluntary Sector working alongside them, to help and build on community resilience. It was important to note that some of the information and advice from family members may not always be evidenced based, for example commencing solid feeding and safe sleep, as there would still be the requirement to take advice from professionals, with advice being taken on equal measures from both.
- The impact of vaping on unborn children was unclear at this stage, however research was being undertaken in this regard with Maternity Services.
- It was hoped that the implementation of the programme set out above would ensure that support was where it was needed and ensuring greater levels of support for families that need it.
- Regarding playgroups and support to communities, that information was available through the Family Information Service, however it was recognised that some of the informal playgroups within the Borough were parent and carer led and faith-based provision, that required additional support. The Community Voluntary Sector could help provide that support, within the programme ensuring that those settings received the correct amount of support, in order that they could impact upon a child's development in the most sophisticated method.

A Member commented on a paragraph in relation to the Equality Impact Assessment contained in the report submitted, that it was not an option to complete those assessments it would be a requirement.

It was agreed that in relation to the Working Group that was to take place in October regarding the Early Years, that would include an invitation to health partners and encompass items to consider community resilience, and how the Council interacted with hard to reach groups, the support being provided to mother and toddler groups and the possibility of further support. An item on infant mortality would also be presented to the Working Group.

It was further agreed that the issue of vaping and the effect on unborn children should be scrutinised once data becomes available.

Resolved

- (1) That the report submitted on the Early Years Transformation Academy in Dudley, be noted.
- (2) That the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee (Scrutiny Development) Working Group in October, 2020 considers items on the early years, community resilience and how the Council interacts with hard to reach groups, the support being provided to mother and toddler groups and the possibility of further support and an item on infant mortality.

11. Elective Home Education

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted to provide Members with a position statement around Elective Home Education (EHE) in Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council's (the Local Authority) area up to July 2020.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion presented the report submitted, stating that the Local Authority had a statutory responsibility to ensure that all children of school age received an education.

It was reported that parents had the ability by themselves or by appointing tutors to provide the education. At present regular telephone calls were taking place with the Department for Education Dfe in relation to EHE. The rise in applications to home educate was a national issue, and the applications within Dudley were increasing, as in August 2019 there had been seven enquiries and/or applications and for the same period in 2020 there had been 17 enquiries and/or applications.

It was stated that the Pupil Access Team had now received 28 applications.

It was acknowledged that parents were clearly very anxious to return their children to school, and it could be the case that parents, carers or grandparents were shielding. The rise in EHE applications may not be driven from a real genuine desire to educate children at home. Those applications should be dealt with systematically on a case by case basis and capacity within the Pupil Access Team would be addressed.

It was reported that the Local Authority were sensitive in relation to anxiety issues surrounding EHE, and although as an Authority fixed term penalties could be issued to those parents whose children were not attending school, it was believed that parents would fail to re-engage should the statutory route be taken. Schools would continue to be supported however a balance was required in relation to those parents who were genuinely anxious about their children returning to school.

The Local Authority were part of a national strategy entitled Wellbeing for Education Return however, should families fail to re-engage in relation to returning to school, there may be no alternative but follow the statutory route.

It was acknowledged that there could be safeguarding issues surrounding EHE, as there would be no daily oversight of those children, however it was stated that there was no direct link between EHE and safeguarding, but there were particular concerns in relation to more vulnerable groups of children, for example children in need and those subject to child protection plans.

Returning to education was vital, particularly for children out of school who were in families with high levels of anxiety, as health and wellbeing issues may be prevalent.

In relation to those children who were Year 11 students prior to lockdown, the Local Authority had worked with Connexions to ensure children were supported to access post 16 education/training or employment provision.

The graphs contained within the report submitted were referred to and it was noted that the Local Authority were slightly below the national average for EHE.

The current review of the Education Outcomes Teams was referred to, with the Pupil Access Team operating as two teams. The need to have the capacity to process applications for EHE was also referred to, as the Local Authority must ensure that a child has an education at home or was supported in returning to school.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members asked questions and the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion responded as follows:-

The Local Authority continued to challenge schools to minimise exclusions and movements around the system. Once the new Ofsted Inspection Framework was launched, as it refers to a specific judgement relating to “off rolling”, all Secondary Head Teachers were appraised of the new Framework, and the message had been enforced that operating according to a general inclusive philosophy was necessary.

Those parents who were assessed and deemed not to have the necessary means to home educate would be discouraged from this.

In terms of safeguarding not seeing the child in school was an issue, and the request of the Chair to forward a letter to the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP, highlighting the grave concerns of the Committee in relation to the increasing numbers of those applying to home educate their children, and that the area of Elective Home Education being largely unregulated would be supported, as should numbers of EHE rise robust action would be required from a national perspective.

It was agreed that the increase in primary school children being home educated posed major concerns, in terms of their future academic potential and the reduction in their attainment levels.

The data in relation to children from ethnic minorities being home educated would be captured in future.

It was agreed that home education may impact on a child's social and communication skills.

The Acting Director for Children's Services referred to the daily telephone calls to the Dfe, reporting the increasing number of EHE applications and enquiries, and challenging the Dfe in relation to the support required in that regard.

Resolved

- (1) That the report submitted on Elective Home Education, be noted together with the following:-
 - (i) That the further rise in numbers of EHE pupils was predicted, due to the effects of COVID-19, and the anxieties many parents face with returning their children to mainstream schools in September, as well as Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education being made compulsory, in both primary and secondary schools, although parents retained the right to withdraw their child from the sex education aspect , with the remaining content compulsory, be noted.
 - (ii) That the full review of EHE services was being carried out to ensure that support was provided appropriately, including a review of the existing EHE staffing levels, and the relationship between EHE support and other Education, SEND, Public Health, Connexions, Children Missing Education and Social Care Services, be acknowledged.
 - (iii) That once the Department for Education had analysed the feedback from their consultation on proposed legislation on EHE, there may be changes to the local authority's duties for EHE pupils, that would inform the review of the service, be noted.
- (2) That the Acting Director of Children's Services be requested to prepare a letter for the signature of the Chair, to the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP, highlighting the grave concerns of the Committee in relation to the increasing numbers of those applying to home educate their children, and that the area of Elective Home Education was largely unregulated.

12. **Summer Provision and September school update**

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on the overview of the summer provision in Dudley; an analysis of secondary and college provision; an analysis of Virtual School events and of the Dudley Performing Arts (DPA) events, together with a summary of the Local Authority's support for schools in September 2020. Members noted that the report had been prepared in August 2020.



The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion referred to the ambition to co-ordinate as much provision during the summer as possible investigating a wide range of programmes. Primary school provision as outlined in the report submitted was referred to.

The college-based support for Year 11 pupils was outlined, together with the large provision for those not in employment, education or training (NEETS). The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion wished to record his thanks to John Cunningham for his help and support with supplying the summer provision.

It was reported that 1,000 Year 10 pupils had participated in a project entitled the 'Edu School' which was an online programme to support disadvantaged Year 10 pupils.

It was stated that the Dudley virtual School had hosted a range of provision, together with Dudley Performing Arts organising two weeks of events, targeting children and young people who were likely to find it difficult to re-engage with school in September.

The Black Country Living Museum were very supportive, and the video link that had been forwarded to Members in order to celebrate activities was referred to.

There had been particular support for SEND children. Connexions, Dudley College and various other organisations had assisted in preventing NEETS. The different providers worked to offer apprenticeships delivering opportunities and qualifications to young people.

The Brockswood Animal Sanctuary provided access to work experience placements.

It was confirmed that Data in relation to the Virtual School events could be provided to Members should they require it.

Although the number of pupils accessing the Dudley Performing Arts events had been disappointing, they had only targeted those children who may have had difficulties re-engaging with schools in September. The positive comments from some of those attending the events as contained within the report submitted were referred to.

Although school attendance rates were at 90%, the Local Authority would continue to support schools by engaging with those parents who had not returned their children to school.

It was reported that the Local Authority had launched their Education Strategy with Secondary Head Teachers, as the need for an overarching strategy as to the vision in order to challenge and support schools was necessary. The six key principals would be introduced as part of that strategy that would all link into the Ofsted Programme that was based around inclusion. This Strategy would also be launched with special schools, governors and primary schools in due course.

There was the requirement to complete work to ensure systems were much more inclusive and joined up, as there were children in special schools who had moderate learning difficulties (MLD), who could be educated in mainstream provision with specialist support and there were financial implications connected to this. Should special schools educate children that could access mainstream provision, there would not be enough capacity to educate SEND children, with out of Borough places being funded, which had a huge cost implication for the Local Authority.

All of the special schools within the Dudley Borough were rated outstanding by Ofsted and their practice should be shared with mainstream providers.

The work in relation to the commitment to reduce exclusions and the removal of children from their educational settings was referred to, together with the place planning that was required, due to the need for further school provision in Halesowen, in view of the reducing birth rate data there was a need to reduce primary provision.

There would be a new structure of the Education Team which would follow on from the current consultations with individuals and Human Resources. The need to bring together other teams into a wider team banner in order to work in schools to provide support and challenge was referred to.

It was reported that the Pupil Access Team had been divided into two separate teams, with the Education Investigation Service and the Inclusion Team being based in schools. In relation to the Hearing, Visual and Physical Impairment team, there was the desire to co-ordinate those teams. The Borough SEND teams would be included into the overall structure, in order that they could become involved in regular meetings and be part of the overall communications.

Township meetings took place on a weekly basis and questions from Head Teachers were discussed with the Dfe.

The Risk Assessment Action Plan for the potential re-opening of schools for September 2020, appended to the report submitted was referred to, with the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion preparing weekly bulletins for schools. There was currently work being completed in relation to revising schools' open evenings, as there was the need to put in place some guidance and leadership from the Local Authority.

It was reported that work was taking place with the police in relation to 'A Park Safe' initiative, to improve parking safety around schools.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted Members raised questions in relation to the following:-

- The arrangements being made for children to return to school who were fitted with a tracheostomy.

- Were pupils who were EHE children able to access the summer provision referred to in the report submitted?.
- Were there any contingency plans in place should school staff become ill?.
- Concerns were raised in relation to the lack of special school places within the Borough.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion responded stating that:-

The Local Authority had been constrained by some of the guidance in relation to children who were fitted with a tracheostomy returning to school, however it was hoped that the children referred to would return to school very soon. The parents of those children had been written to, however there were two issues in relation to their return, the first being to purchase ventilators in order to recycle the air in the school, and the second being to provide Face Fit Mask training to staff. The Head Teachers were very supportive, working with Public Health and a range of medical services. The delay going forward was how fast the ventilators could be installed, and a response was currently awaited from the Dfe in relation to assistance with funding costs.

Should there be children who genuinely required that complexity of education provided by special schools, those children should be in special schools, however there was the need to make secondary schools more inclusive in relation to children with MDL.

Schools were requested to provide details of pupils who should access the summer provision, and the Head of Educational Outcomes and Inclusion could check the position as to whether any EHE children were involved in the provisions.

The Chair expressed praise for the work that had taken place across the Borough and suggested that the Greyhound Trust in Sedgley could be approached in relation to work experience for young people and SEND children.

The Government had issued Contingency Guidance on 28th August 2020 providing a tiered response in relation to certain levels of lockdown. There was the desire to keep primary school children in school right through until tier 4, which would probably be a national lockdown. Special schools and alternative education provision would remain open. The secondary schools and college sectors would be more difficult to manage, as those children were more likely to contract and pass on the virus. Secondary schools would move into a two week in and a two week out model for the different year groups. Some pupils would remain in school whilst some would learn remotely, essentially key worker children and vulnerable children would remain in school. In relation to tier 3 selected cohorts would remain in school, such as those who were a priority for example those who were or would be sitting exams.

The Acting Director for Children's Services referred to the passion for providing SEND children with the correct education setting, referring to the SEND Inspection in May, 2019, resulted in the need to undertake a complete transformation of the SEND Framework. There was a Written Statement of Action, 14 recommendations and a huge amount of work that had to be conducted as part of the Written Statement of Action.



The pressures within the special school economy were recognised, together with the pressures in secondary schools. The continued hard work in relation to SEND was referred to together with the detail of the Inspection, that included the statement that ‘the Local Authority were not aspirational or outcome focused for those children and there was the need to support schools to step up in relation to inclusion’.

The Chair suggested that special schools and their provision should be an area for further Scrutiny, with respect to support schools in September, 2020 and it was agreed by the Acting Director of Children’s Services that this item would be included as part of the Scrutiny in relation to EHE.

The Vice-Chair thanked the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion for the detailed report and asked whether it was a concern that only six primary schools provided activities during the summer, with no schools within the North of the Borough providing activities.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion advised that the schools had either funded the activities or parents had paid for the activities. There was funding rolled out as part of the catch-up funding, with schools being allocated £18,000 to £20,000, which could be utilised for two weeks of summer provision or directed towards providing additional staff.

The Chair echoed the comments of the Vice-Chair referring to the concise report and requested that thanks also be expressed to all of those involved with the summer provision.

A Member advised that work had been completed on a programme to provide activities in the North of the Borough in partnership with some voluntary organisations, however due to the lockdown restrictions those activities did not take place.

Resolved

- (1) That the report submitted on the Summer provision and September school update, be noted.
- (2) That Special Schools and their provisions be carried forward as an item for Scrutiny with respect to the support for schools in September, 2020.

The meeting ended at 8.20pm

CHAIR



Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 11th November 2020

Report of the Acting Director of Children's Services

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020

Purpose

1. The role and function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010, and linked to Care Planning Regulations and Guidance, which were introduced in April 2011. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Children in Care and for challenging any drift and delay. The IRO Handbook (Section 7.11) sets out the requirements to produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the Members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee. The IRO annual report sets out and meets these requirements and serves to ensure the Committee are assisted to understand the quality of practice and experiences of Children in Care.

The report is being shared with the Scrutiny Committee to assure the Committee of the effective functioning of the Safeguarding and Review Service, which has operational line management of IROs, for children subject to Child Protection plans and effective care planning for Children in Care (CIC).

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that: -
 - The Committee note and comment on the content of this report.

Background

3. This is the IRO Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020.
4. The Annual Report demonstrates progress with regard to children who are looked after and their participation in their meetings and service development. The completion of the CIC survey in December 2019 and the joint event with the Children in Care Council in February 2020 demonstrated strengths in this area of



service activity during this year and evidences a strong commitment to working in partnership with and ensuring children have a voice in service development. The service seeks to capitalise and build on this work, and plans to develop several working groups, to further strengthen participation across the service with a range of stakeholders.

5. The IRO Handbook outlines the duty upon IROs “to review the child’s care plan and progress between formal reviews”. In Dudley, there is a standardised approach to undertaking Progress Reviews to ensure progress takes place for all children and young people allocated within the Safeguarding & Review Service. This model of practice is unique to Dudley and is evidenced by audits to play a role in effective oversight by the IRO in children’s lives, to ensure their plans are being progressed. Having said this, during the reporting cycle there was no way to measure whether a Progress Review had taken place.
6. This year has seen an increase in IRO challenge as evidenced by the increase in the number of dispute resolutions raised. The aim of this dispute resolution process (DRP) is to improve progress of plans for our Children in Care, and our children subject to Child Protection plans. Dudley has a formal process in place for the IRO to raise concerns, and to ensure this is brought to the attention of the most appropriate manager. This year has seen a continued increase in challenges made from the IROs. The high number of informal disputes is a strong indication that issues raised are addressed and resolved, before having to initiate the formal process. The report outlines further detail with regard to the reasons for informal and formal DRPs, with the main reason being the Care / Pathway Plan not completed/updated for informal disputes, and Child Protection plans not progressed for formal disputes.
7. The Annual Report highlights a number of areas of practice where the Service needs to develop. This includes strengthening the voice of children who are subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences and Child Protection planning. There has been no service data collected or feedback obtained from children or their parents involved in Child Protection planning during this reporting period, and this is a significant disadvantage to understanding children and their family’s experiences during a time of crisis, and is required to inform service development. The numbers of children accessing advocacy services and independent visiting is also poor, and requires significant investment from social workers and IROs, to improve children’s access to these services and the voice and opportunities this gives children.
8. The performance data also highlights that the Service are not meeting its targets for the timescales in which key meetings across the Service (Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC’s) Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPC’s), or Children in Care Reviews). This is in part due to ambitious target setting. However, there are key areas where action can be taken to improve timeliness. This includes challenging individual social work teams where there has been late notification of a change in the child’s circumstances, and where the social work report has not been submitted within the required timescales.



A number of Service Objectives for 2020/2021 are outlined in order to build upon strengths and address areas of weakness.

Finance

9. There are no cost implications arising from this report.

Law

10. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Equality Impact

11. IROs and Social workers provide support to the whole community including a range of diverse groups. Good quality practice will be more attuned to the equality issues experienced by individuals, families and communities. Effective IRO oversight and challenge will assist with the development of high-quality social work practice.
12. The annual report outlines where children and young people have been consulted with and future plans in this area.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

13. There are no organisational development/HR implications arising from this report. The development work around Dispute Resolution and Participation can be managed within the current resource.

Commercial/Procurement

14. There are no Commercial/Procurement implications arising from this report.

Health, Wellbeing and Safety

15. Good social work practice will support the health and wellbeing of children young people and families who access services. In addition, a positive organisational learning culture reduces staff burn out and sickness levels and increases general and emotional wellbeing.



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Appendices

1 – IRO Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020



IRO Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020

Safeguarding and Review Service

30th June 2020

Terry Cranston, Service Manager Safeguarding and Review

Jazmine Walker, Service Manager Safeguarding and Review

Introduction

This report will cover the period from the 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020.

The role and function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010, and linked to Care Planning Regulations and Guidance, which were introduced in April 2011. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Children in Care and for challenging any drift and delay. The IRO handbook states that an IRO must be a registered Social Worker with at least the equivalent status to an experienced Team Manager.

The IRO Handbook (Section 7.11) states the IRO Service Manager “should be responsible for producing an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board.

This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. It should make reference to the:

- procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the makeup of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;
- extent of participation of children and their parents;
- number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
- outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews; and
- whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children”.

Whilst the IRO Handbook sets out expectations of the Local Authority’s provision of the IRO Service to review Children in Care, Dudley’s service model means IROs for Children in Care also review children subject to Child Protection planning. Therefore, the report will cover both Child in Care and Child Protection activity within the service. IROs reviewing children subject to Child Protection planning do so within the framework of Working Together to Safeguard Children and Families (2018).

SUMMARY OF KEY AREAS OF PROGRESS DURING 2019/20

	Need	Action	Update
1	Voice of the Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The service to continue with ensuring that the voice of the child/young person informs service delivery. More children to be supported to chair / co-chair their own reviews. Target of 30% YP for 2019/20 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> January 2020 CIC Survey: 30% of young people have been asked if they would like to co-chair their meeting.
2	Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All Chair's to ensure that family and professionals are fully included in the restorative process. To monitor the participation and gather feedback from Parents of their experience of Restorative Process. This is to commence from October 2019 Challenging the Local Authority and partner agencies to submit reports prior to conference dates. Update on report timeliness to be presented to Head of Service Safeguarding and Review each month from September 2019. Service to ensure monitoring and scrutiny take place for all children via consistent approach to midterm review 100% children open in Safeguarding and review service to have an IRO case note added to child's file between each review. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IROs have continued to promote Restorative Practice. A Restorative Practice Evaluation took place in February 2019 which recommended development to IRO practice and to the wider Children's Service workforce. These recommendations were not taken forwards by the LA as there was a reconsideration of the LA's practice model. Therefore, there was no further evaluation in October 2019. Challenging the Local Authority and partner agencies to submit reports prior to conference dates started in April 2020. There has been a continued expectation that IROs undertake Progress Review (the new phrase for mid-term reviews). As of June 2020, there is a case note for this

			activity that can now be reported upon.
3	Practice Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out a one-day evaluation and development of restorative conferencing. Training to continue to be rolled out across Local Authority and partner agencies. To be carried out by November 2019. • The IRO team and managers need to agree the overall approach to restorative conferencing. This to include language used, Report sharing and family involvement in developing the plan. To be in place by November 2019. • Set up a one day or series of half day workshops to develop restorative approaches within children looked after Reviews. To be planned by December 2019. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As outlined above the LA has reconsideration the LA's practice model. Therefore, there was no further developmental work to strengthen Restorative Practice.
4.	Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology to be introduced that enables IROs to sit with the restorative circle and input live information into large screen TV monitors by November 2019. • Contribute to the development of the Successor programme to ensure system supports the safeguarding and review function and generates accurate and timely reports and alerts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As outlined above the LA has reconsideration the LA's practice model. Additionally, Child Protection Conference were moved into the community venues over the Summer 2019. Therefore, plans to introduce technology were put on hold. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The IRO Service have continued to play an active role in the development of the Successor Programme
5	Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRO to ensure consistent and appropriate recording of escalations to improve outcomes for children. Monthly report to Head of Service Safeguarding regarding the number and progress of escalations from September 2019. • To ensure follow up and closing the loop of escalations by specific reference in minutes of conferences and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Quarterly Dispute Resolution Protocol Report is now in place. The first report reports on Quarter 4 (from 1/1/20-31/3/20) as outlined in the main body of this report. The Quarterly report is now produced each quarter and is shared with Extended DLT.

		reviews. Dip Sample Audit of IRO minutes in January 2020.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dip sample did not take place in January 2020. However, the Quarter report is now in place and includes data on timeliness and follow up.
6	Emerging themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service to develop a greater understanding of contextualised safeguarding and how it impacts upon their practice. IRO team training to be delivered by Centre for Professional Practice by November 2019. • The service to participate in the new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements by attendance at subgroups and work streams from April 2019. • IRO service to be included in Dip Sample audit from August 2020. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LA are still developing their response to contextualised safeguarding and the IRO Service will participate in the new arrangements once they are in place. • The IRO Service was audited in December 2019 and the learning and development was incorporated into the Service Plan. There was a further audit in May 2020, and another planned for September 2020.

Section 1: Development of the IRO Service

- 1.1 The IRO service in Dudley is located within the Safeguarding and Review Service. The service is managed within Children’s Services.
- 1.2 The Safeguarding and Independent Reviewing Service has two main responsibilities to ensure:
 - the right children are subject to the right level of intervention at the right time to ensure they are safeguarded from harm and;
 - the Local Authority comply with primary legislation, the Regulations and relevant guidance in order to achieve the outcomes for every looked after child that a conscientious and caring parent would seek for their own children.
- 1.3 The Service is made up of several distinct roles:
 - Two Service Managers
 - Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO’s) who undertake a dual role for reviewing children who are looked after by the Local Authority as well as children and young people who require a Child Protection Conference to decide if they are in need of a Child Protection Plan
 - Fostering IROs who undertake annual appraisals of Dudley’s internal foster carers
 - Local Authority Designated Officer

- 1.4 Additional roles and responsibilities within the team include:
- Link worker role with the social work teams
 - The Fostering Reviewing Officers has the responsibility of reviewing Dudley's foster carers.
 - All IROs are trained in allegation management and cover the LADO role when LADO not available.
 - Member of Access Resources Panel
 - Member of Legal Gateway Meeting
 - Member of Channel Panel
 - Member of Achieving Early Permanence Panel
 - Member of Adolescent Risk Management Panel
 - Member of Unborn Baby Network Meeting
 - Quality Assurance – auditing and moderating
 - 2 IRO Restorative Champions
- 1.5 The Staffing Compliment of the IRO Service:
- Head of Service permanent – FT
 - 2 x Service Manager – FT
 - 3 x IRO - PT – 2 permanent, 1 agency
 - 13 x - IRO FT- 11 permanent, 2 agency
 - 2 x Foster Carer IRO - 2 permanent
 - 1 x LADO – permanent (secondment)
- 1.6 In terms of diversity, the team consists of 15 female (68%) and 7 male (32%) members of staff in the service. Of those children and young people looked after on the 31st March 2020, 293 (47%) were female and 329 (53%) were male. Therefore, there are significantly more female IROs than there are male IROs whereas there is an even split between male and female looked after children. The Service can consider the need for more male IROs during future recruitment campaigns. However, it is noted that the social worker professional is represented by a predominately female workforce.
- 1.7 The team consists of 10 members of staff from BME backgrounds (45%). As at the 31st March 2020, 77% of the children looked after are described as White and 23% are from minority ethnic groups. The level of diversity in the team is positive and ensures children from BME backgrounds and their variety of needs are more likely to be understood by a diverse IRO staff group.
- 1.8 The IRO Handbook recommends that CIC caseloads for IROs need to be between 50 and 70 for CIC. That said the size of caseload alone does not indicate the total workload for each IRO. Currently IROs have an average caseload of 70 Children in Care and Child Protection Chairs (CPC) have a caseload of approximately 100 children.
- 1.9 On the 31st March 2020 there were 622 children and young people who were looked after. The number of Children and Young People Looked After at the same point last year was 659 and therefore the number of children looked after has reduced slightly. Every child who becomes a child in care is allocated an IRO within 48 hours of becoming looked after. The Service Manager oversees the allocation of the IRO's.

- 1.10 As at the 31st March 2020 there were 366 children subject to a Child protection Plan. As can be seen above there has been a slight decrease from 413 children in March 2019.
- 1.11 As can be seen, in Table 1, although the numbers of children open to the service have slightly fluctuated the combined numbers of children within the service area have remained similar at the start of the reporting year to the end.

Table 1: number of children allocated within the service

As at month end	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Total CP	377	332	325	300	326	306	303	326	327	346	348	366
Total CIC	647	644	635	637	632	625	614	613	616	617	620	622
Total	1024	976	960	937	958	931	917	939	943	963	968	988

Section 2: Participation of children and families

Children and young people's involvement in Service Development

- 2.1 A postal Survey was sent to all Children in Care (age 11-17) along with Children in Care Newsletter in December 2019. The survey was completed by 57 children and young people. The Survey asked children about their relationship with their IRO and how they were supported to prepare for and participate with their Review.
- 2.2 The IRO Handbook states IROs should *speak with* all children before their Review. 35% of young people said they are "always" and 28% "sometimes" offered the chance to *meet with* their IRO before their Review. This is supported by 38% of young people who reported they prepare for their Review by meeting their IRO. 68% of young people are asked who they would like to attend their meeting of which 30% of young people have been asked if they would like to chair or co-chair their meeting. This gives us baseline data about how children and young people are prepared and supported to participate in their Reviews. Children were also asked if they felt their Review "makes a difference to my life" and the average response was 6 out of 10 which means the majority of children feel the meeting is purposeful for them.
- 2.3 In addition to the postal Survey, a joint event between the Children in Care Council (CICC) and the Safeguarding & Review Service was held on 19th February 2020. The purpose of the day was to obtain more qualitative feedback about the relationships between children and their IROs and their views about how their Review meetings work as well as offering support and training to children and young people who wanted to chair or Co-chair their meeting. The day was attended by 12 young people and 4 IROs facilitated. Positive feedback obtained about the quality and nature of relationships with IROs. IROs were seen as an "authority" figure who had some power and control over their

“case” and who made things happen e.g. “permanency” and ensured “safety”. IROs were also seen as adults who were involved for a long time and who knew their “story”.

- 2.4 Both the Survey and Joint Event were successful in building relationships with the CICC and giving children and young people opportunities to contribute to service development and will be repeated in the new proposed Service Evaluation process (see recommendations).

Child Participation in Looked After Reviews

- 2.5 It is essential for the IRO to ensure that the voice of the child is central to their review process. Participation can take place in a variety of ways, through attendance, children chairing or co-chairing their own review, talking to adults who can convey their wishes and feelings or a written submission. In addition to this if a child or young person has a specific issue/complaint they are actively encouraged to use an advocate.
- 2.6 To promote participation IROs are required to:
- Speak with every child before their Review.
 - Discuss and offer support to young people in chairing their own reviews. This is raised at their review and when the IRO visits a young person.
 - Encourage young people to choose what order they want things to be discussed at in their review.
 - Record on CCM when they have met or spoken with a child/young person. If a young person chooses not to meet or speak to the IRO then the IRO ensures that the child is aware that they can change their mind.

Parental participation in Looked After Reviews

- 2.7 The IRO has a responsibility to gain the views of parents within the review process, this is important as it helps the IRO to understand the way in which the child is viewed by parents and to gain an idea of the life experiences of the child. If birth parents do not attend looked after review meetings, for example when a child is on a placement order and about to be placed for adoption, their views are sought and communicated to the meeting.
- 2.8 There are many ways a parent can be involved including:
- Attending the formal meeting.
 - Completing and returning consultation documents.
 - A separate meeting can be arranged with the allocated IRO.
 - Telephone or email communication with the allocated IRO.
 - Via a Social Worker and or Advocate

Children and Parents participation in Child Protection Conferences

- 2.9 There has been no service data collected or feedback obtained from children or their parents during this reporting period. However, children subject to Child Protection planning do have access to advocacy (see below advocacy information). This is a significant disadvantage to service development and is addressed within the analysis and recommendations section of this report.

Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service

- 2.10 It is the right of every child open to the service to have access to an advocate. The Advocacy Service Contract sits within the Safeguarding and Review Service and is provided by Black Country Advocacy. The service worked with 57 Dudley young people on 68 separate issues in the reporting year. This is 12 less children and 14 more issues than last year (see table 2). Referrals are received from a variety of sources with the child young person's consent (see Table 3).

Table 2: Dudley Advocacy reported issues

Advocacy issues	18/19	%	19/20	%
Care Placement	26	28%	28	41%
Education	7	8%	7	10%
Health	1	1%	1	1%
Housing	1	1%	0	0%
Legal	9	10%	5	7%
Personal Relationships	14	15%	6	9%
Professional Support	4	4%	8	12%
Social Care	30	33%	13	19%
Other	0	0%	0	0%
Total	92	100%	68	100%

Table 3: Breakdown of the referrals received in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Referrals received for Dudley	18/19	%	19/20	%
Child or Young Person	8	12%	4	7%
Education	1	1%	1	2%
Health Professional	1	1%	1	2%
Independent Reviewing Officer	2	3%	2	4%
Other (please specify)	7	10%	3	5%

Parent or Carer	15	22%	18	32%
Social Worker	35	51%	28	49%
Grand Total	69	100%	57	100%

2.11 The Independent Visitor contract also sits within the Safeguarding and Review service and is now provided by Change Grow Live (CGL) as a joint contract with the Black Country authorities. CGL has a target of 18 young people (at any one time) as an active match for Dudley. In March 2020 Dudley had 6 current matches with 8 waiting to be matched totalling 14. There was a total of 14 matches in 2018-19 period also.

Section 3: Timeliness of Reviews

Children in Care

3.1 Under provisions set out in the IRO Handbook local authorities are required to review the case of any child who is looked after or provided with accommodation within the following timescales:

- The first review must take place within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after or is provided with accommodation.
- The second review must be carried out no later than 3 months after the first review
- The third and subsequent reviews must be carried out not more than 6 months after the date of the previous review meeting.

3.2 The percentage of CIC reviews electronically recorded as being held within timescale is outlined in Table 4. Performance regarding timeliness of Reviews has improved in the last quarter of the year. The manual count required due to data error and recording practices in CCM evidences CIC reviews are held within timescales 98% of the time. To reflect this the current performance target has been increased to 100% in order further improve. The reasons that Reviews were held out of timeframe include:

- Lack of Social Work report
- Delay in notification to Safeguarding and Review Service
- Lack of attendees

Table 4: % of CIC Review completed in time

Month	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19
Value	92.5%	81.5%	93.9%	97.9%	94.3%	94.4%	93.8%	96.8%	96.7%
Target	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	100.0%

Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20
93.4%	95.7%	98.6%
100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

3.3 Child Protection

The percentage of Initial Child Protection Conferences electronically recorded as being held within timescale is outlined in Table 5. Performance regarding timeliness of Reviews improved during the last quarter of the year. However, remains below target of 90%. The reasons for delay include:

- Delayed notification is Social work teams informing the service of the need for an ICPC
- IRO and/or minute taker availability

Table 5: % of ICPC held within 15 days of the Strategy Discussion

Month	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19
Value	44.4%	59.7%	67.4%	72.5%	73.1%	74.9%	74.5%	77.8%	79.1%
Target	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%	80.0%	90.0%

Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20
81.8%	82.0%	81.19%
90.0%	90.0%	90.0%

3.4 The percentage of Review Child Protection Conferences electronically recorded as being held within timescale is outlined in Table 6. Performance regarding timeliness of Reviews improved during the last quarter of the year. However, remains below target of 94.3%. The reasons for delay include:

- Lack of Social Work report
- IRO and/or minute taker availability

Table 6: % of Review Child Protection Conferences held in time

Month	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19
Value	79.4%	86.9%	98.7%	91.8%	100.0%	97.2%	90.8%	91.2%	90.9%
Target	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%	100.0%

Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20
82.6%	90.6%	89.5%
100.0%	100.0%	94.3%

3.5 Progress Reviews

The IRO handbook outlines the duty upon IROs “to review the child’s care plan and progress between formal reviews”. In regard to child protection “the chair should also quality assure progress to secure improved outcomes for the child in between case conferences. This will include a follow up on the plan’s progress within the first month of any child protection plan” (WM procedures, 2019). In Dudley, there is a standardised approach to undertaking Progress Reviews to ensure progress takes place for all children and young people allocated within the Safeguarding & Review Service. This approach is outlined in IRO Practice Standards.

3.6 Minimum standards for Progress Reviews:

- Whilst every child’s circumstances are different, Progress Reviews should take place no longer than 1 month before fist review and 2 months for subsequent reviews.

- Include dialogue with the SW as well as evidence tasks were recorded on the child's electronic file.
 - IRO considered how the recommendations and decisions of the last Review were being actioned within timescales. This included reference to evidence the recommendations are/are not being progress.
 - Initially any areas of concern will be raised informally with the Social Worker and or Team Manager. If concerns about the progress persist a formal escalation should be completed.
- 3.7 The child's electronic file should evidence the Progress Reviews took place and what action if any was taken to follow up outstanding matters that required progressing.
- 3.8 During the reporting cycle there was no way to measure whether a Progress Review has taken place.

Section 4: Feedback to the Local Authority

Dispute Resolution Protocol

- 4.1 The aim of this dispute resolution process is to improve opportunities for our Children in Care and our Children subject to Child Protection plans. Demonstrating communication, good practice and challenge in a child focused way. Dudley has a formal process in place for the IRO to raise concerns and to ensure this is brought to the attention of the most appropriate manager.
- 4.2 The IRO handbook states (chapter 6) that "one of the key functions for the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process." Furthermore, the IRO Handbook states: 'the individual IRO is personally responsible for activating the dispute resolution process, even if this step may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings, but may, in the IRO's view, be in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child, as well as his/her human rights' (Section 6.4 IRO Handbook).
- 4.3 The individual IRO is personally responsible for activating the dispute resolution process, even if this step may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings. The IRO's view may be that instigating the process is in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child.
- 4.4 IROs continue to use the Dispute Resolution Protocol, ensuring that the service maintains a tracker and that there is evidence of challenges and resolution to challenges on CCM. IROs ensure that disputes are escalated within timeframes if the initial response is not satisfactory or has not been received. IRO's continually raise the aspirations for children and challenge continuous improvement in practice.
- 4.5 The Dispute Resolution process is embedded across the service. This year has seen a continued increase in challenges made from the IROs. At the end of the reporting year there had been 153 informal escalations and 78 formal escalations raised. The higher number of informal escalations is a strong indication that issues raised are addressed and resolved before having to initiate the formal process (see Table 7).

Table 7: Total number of DRPs each year

Financial Year	Informal DRP	Formal DRP	Total for Service
2019/20	153	78	231
2018/19	156	53	209
2017/18	85	27	112

- 4.6 4.6 The service collates the reasons for informal and formal DRP (see Tables 8 and 9). This information is shared with the Local Authority to help to support learning and development plans. During this reporting reason the main reasons for informal DRP were care or pathway plans not being completed or updated within statutory timescales, outstanding actions and child protection plans not being progressed. The main reasons for formal DRP were child protection plans not being progressed and outstanding actions.

Table 8: Reasons for informal DRP

Care / pathway plan not completed/updated	82
Outstanding actions	25
CP Plan not progressed	11
Unregulated placement / Progress with post 18 provision / placement move	7
Delay in allocation / Unallocated case	7
No final review before discharge	7
No supervision / outstanding actions (fostering team)	5
Adoption medical not updated / delay in adoption application	4
Review cancelled / no SW report	3
No CYPA	1
No LSW	1

Table 9: Reasons for formal DRP

CP Plan not progressed	27
Actions outstanding	25
No care plan / pathway plan	11
Delay in allocation	8
No CYPA	3
Care plan concerns	1
Delayed reports	1
Unregulated placement	1

Examples of Good Practice

- 4.7 The IRO service observes many areas of good practice on a day to day basis by a range of professionals and ensures that it is shared with the Social Worker and Managers. On the day the report was written the latest examples raised by an IRO were as follows.
- 4.8 A Social Worker in the CIC Service, Wendy Edwards produced a case summary for a child at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown that was written in the first person as if the child were sharing their life circumstances with someone who didn't know them. The case summary was written in clear, child focused and age appropriate language and gave

a very detailed and relatable summary of the child's likes, dislikes and circumstances. The summary would have been helpful to anyone reading the case file prior to having contact with the child and his carers.

- 4.9 A Team Manager in the CIC Service, Samuel Mehaffy responded to the IRO's decisions and recommendations following a CIC Review for a child. The response was clear, time focused and in line with statutory responsibilities and local procedures. Samuel's proactive approach is extremely positive to building working relationships between Team Managers and IROs at the same time as ensuring children's plans are progressed.
- 4.10 A Social Worker from the Duty & Assessment Team, Jess Davies has been the social worker for a looked after child longer than would usually be expected for a social worker in the D&A Team due to the child imminently turning 18 years old and not wanting the young person to have to get to know another professional. Despite having limited experience of working with looked after children Jess has been proactive in achieving the recommendations; an advocate for the young person by ensuring the young person was prepared prior to her review meeting. In addition, Jess has been proactive in networking with other professionals, finding out information she does not know about the needs of looked after children/care leavers, and balanced against the demands of working in a busy assessment team, Jess has remained focused on achieving good outcomes for the young person. This included weekly visits to hand deliver a weekly allowance, she secured a grant, laptop, sorted college course, applied for charities, furniture, Health passport, later in life letter, and NI number. This is testament to Jess' hard work and dedication and reflects the lengths our social workers can, and do go to, to support looked after children.

Section 5: Quality Assurance including resources

- 5.1 The IRO Handbook states "the local authority should provide sufficient administrative support to facilitate the delivery of an efficient and effective review process, enabling review meetings to take place in accordance with the Regulations and good practice. Invitations to reviews and consultation documents should be sent out to all those participating in the review at least ten working days before the meeting and the record of the review should be distributed within the required timescales. The manager of the IRO service should inform the local authority of any shortfalls in the provision of this aspect of the service".
- 5.2 The Business Support in Dudley provided to facilitate the delivery of efficient Review process includes:
- Sending out Convening Checklists for all our CLA reviews on a monthly basis to the Social Workers, when these are returned will then issue invitations along with consultation documents for the children and parents.
 - Managing an email inbox which involves processing emails from IRO's regarding new, changed and CLA reviews, this involves putting the CLA Review into the team diary and generating the CLA Review banner on CCM (child's electronic record)
 - New IRO allocations which involves updating the allocation spreadsheet, ending the CP plan if necessary and adding the new IRO involvement once allocated by Service Managers
 - Manages change of circumstances and updates the allocated IRO of such changes

- 5.3 All the above tasks are undertaken by one full time member of Business Support staff. Child Protection Conferences are minuted by Business Support Minute takers. However, IROs are expected to minute Children in Care reviews. The majority of the time this is achievable. However, there are times where a Review is for a large sibling group or the child's needs or circumstances are complex and the IRO would benefit from a minute taker while the IRO focuses on chairing the meeting. Business Support have agreed to trail minuting complex CLA Review meetings.
- 5.4 The minutes of Reviews are currently distributed by the child's social worker due to their being concerns regarding the parent's address being correct on the child's electronic case file and due to a lack of Business Support to facilitate the task. This task has recently moved to the role of the Business Support Unit. This will also ensure the tracking and monitoring of children and parents consultation documents bring sent out as well as copies of their meeting minutes. This will facilitate the effective management of children's Reviews.
- 5.5 The IRO Handbook states the IRO manager in each local authority should ensure that there are policies in place to ensure the quality of service delivery. This should include regular and routine feedback from parents, children and social workers and an audit of the records and direct observation of the IRO.
- 5.6 In order to achieve better outcomes for all vulnerable children in Dudley and drive forward practice development and improvement, there are a number of monitoring, evaluating and quality assurance arrangements in place to ensure that the Safeguarding and Review Service is effective. These include:
- Children, families and multi-agency professionals who attend Conferences and Reviews are invited to comment on the service they have received. Service Managers also chair quarterly Partnership Meetings to build relationships and develop practice across partnership agencies.
 - All staff are recruited through fair, transparent and equal opportunities process in accordance with safe recruiting practices. All staff have regular monthly supervision provided within the framework of a supervision agreement. All staff receive an annual appraisal where development and training needs are identified in addition the service Workforce Development Plan and specifically tailored IRO Development Days throughout the year.
 - All Children's Service managers are expected to undertake audit activity each month as part of the Council's Quality Assurance and Learning Framework; IROs and Service Manager's contribute to the audit cycle.
 - On a regular basis we review our performance against the government set targets. Efforts are made to maintain targets and reduce unnecessary delay for children without compromising the quality and stability and permanency.
 - All complaints are monitored by the Children's Complaints manager to ensure that remedial actions can be taken, and service improvements delivered.
- 5.7 A number of audits were undertaken in December 2019 that provided feedback regarding the IRO service. The themes for development from the audits were:
- Example of good practice where an IRO telephoned parent to ensure they received a consultation document before the CIC Review.
 - Progress Reviews are routinely undertaken by IROs.
 - IROs visiting children before LAC Reviews.

- IROs are not evidencing challenge (undertaking and recording use of informal DRP) when SW reports received on the day of the Review/Conference.
- Plans/Recs and Decs evidence tasks being repeated and not justified (e.g. if not significant impact for child and was not completed take it off the plan; if significant and needs to remain the fact it was not completed this needs to be challenged). Many cases have plans that do not change from review to review even though actions are said to be complete.
- Families are leaving Child Protection Conferences with a summary plan of what has been agreed.
- The role and involvement of fathers is variable.
- There appears to be drift and lack of focussed direct work with this 16/17-year olds.

Section 6: Analysis and Recommendations

- 6.1 The IRO team are a highly skilled and knowledgeable, long standing predominately permanent staff team as you would expect from a group of staff who are experienced team managers prior to undertaking the IRO role. The Annual Report demonstrates significant progress in regard children who are looked after participation. The completion of the CIC survey and the joint event with Children in Care Council are strengths of the service activity this year and demonstrates a strong commitment to working in partnership with and ensuring children have a voice in service development. The service seeks to capitalise and build on this work and plans to develop several working groups to further strengthen participation across the service with a range of stakeholders.
- 6.2 The service's use of Progress Reviews is another strength of the service. This model of practice is unique to Dudley and is evidenced by audits to play a role in effective oversight by the IRO in children's lives to ensure their plans are being progressed. This year has also seen an increase in IRO challenge as evidenced by the increase in the number of dispute resolutions raised.
- 6.3 The Annual Report highlights a number of areas of practice where the Service needs to develop. This includes strengthening the voice of children who are subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences and Child Protection planning. There has been no service data collected or feedback obtained from children or their parents involved in Child Protection planning during this reporting period and this is a significant disadvantage to understanding children and their family's experiences during a time of crisis and is required to inform service development. The numbers of children accessing advocacy services and independent visiting is also poor and requires significant investment from social workers and IROs to improve children's access to these services and the voice and opportunities this gives children.
- 6.4 The performance data also highlights the is Service are not meeting its targets for the timescales in which key meetings across the Service (ICPCs, RCPC or CIC Reviews). This is in part due to ambitious target setting. However, there are key areas where action can be taken to improve timeliness. This includes challenging individual social work teams where there has been late notification of a change in the child's circumstances and where the social work report has not been submitted within the required timescales.
- 6.5 The IRO Service has undertaken a limited role to drive learning and development across Social Work Teams this financial year. A Review of the IROs involvement with panels and

groups across Children’s Service and the link role with SW teams is required to further understand and remove any blockages to learning and development within the service and across Children’s Services. This will ensure requests for IROs to undertake additional tasks, which are not a part of the IRO role, do not hinder the IROs ability to advocate and achieve the best possible outcomes for children as set out in the IRO Handbook (Section 7.9) as well as ensuring IRO’s skills and expertise are effectively utilise to develop the wider workforce.

6.6 This annual report serves to provide a holistic evaluation of the service at this time that will enable IRO’s and S&R Service Managers to identify and prioritise areas for development and capitalise on the strengths of the service and individual IROs. The ability to strengthen the IRO’s independence, effective challenge, and contribution to wider Children’s Service improvement journey will depend on the support of Senior Managers and the day to day commitment and working relationships with Social Work Teams.

Service Objectives 2020/2021

	Need	Action
1	An annual Service Evaluation process including all stakeholders	<p>Annual process of stakeholder feedback spread across the year (one form of feedback activity taking place every other month):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feedback forms from partner agencies after Conference. - Feedback forms from parents after Conference. - Feedback forms from parents after CLA Review. - CIC annual survey. - One-month C&YP views after/involved in Conferences. Develop a feedback process for post Child Protection Conference. Interviews or focused groups with children (age 11 and above) who are subject to a child protection plan to understand how they are involved in their meetings and how they could be involved
2	Strengthened monitoring of administration processes to ensure effective meetings	<p>Business support to monitor, track and report on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The completion of the conveying checklist (completed by the social worker to ensure the right people are invited to the review) - That consultation documents are sent to children, parents and carers prior to the CIC Review - The completion of the social work report for both CIC Reviews and Conferences - The distribution of CIC Review minutes (this is already in place for Conference minutes) <p>Service managers to use this data to improve practice and challenge poor practice where appropriate through</p>

		service managers meeting with social work teams and collective dispute resolution.
3	Build upon children and parents Participation across the service	<p>“You said, we did” poster following January 2020 survey to be completed and ensure “Ingredients of a good review” are shared with relevant practitioners across Children’s Services as an outcome of the joint event with CICC in February 2020.</p> <p>A number of working groups to be set up by August 2020:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children’s participation in Child Protection Conferences - Consultation Documents for children and parents/carer to be updated - Writing child-friendly meeting minutes - Parents participation across the system (Child Protection and CIC services)
4	There needs to be an increase in the use of Advocacy (for subject to Child Protection Plans and Children Looked After) and Independent Visiting Services for Children Looked After	<p>Service Managers to ensure IROs have a consistent understanding of advocacy offer across the service and discuss this in IROs annual appraisal, supervision and team meetings.</p> <p>Use of advocacy (across CP AND CIC) and IV to increase.</p>
5	Further strengthen the IRO footprint, follow up and effective challenge	<p>Progress Review and DRP case notes to be devised within CCM.</p> <p>Performance indicators to be devised from the CCM case note data. Dispute Resolutions to be tracked for resolution/closure. To ensure follow up and closing the loop of escalations.</p> <p>The performance target for Progress reviews is 100%. IROs to follow guidance and expectations of a Progress review as outlined in the IRO Practice Standards.</p> <p>IROs to challenge where the social work report is not completed 3 days prior to the child’s meeting taking place.</p> <p>A consistency document to be agreed to ensure IROs are raising the same level of challenge for key issues in case planning on behalf of children.</p>
6	IROs to play a more significant role in the learning and development within the service and across Children’s Services.	Review of the IROs involvement with panels and groups across Children’s Service and the link role with SW teams is required to further understand and remove any blockages to learning and development.
7	Ensure IROs receive a learning and development	4 Development Days are held each year, including bespoke training from Centre for Professional Practice

<p>offer that strengthens their ability to carry out their key roles and functions</p>	<p>or external provider, to ensure IROs receive the right training and support to undertake their roles to the best of their ability.</p> <p>Service managers to complete observations of IROs practice - each IRO will have their practice chairing a meeting observed by their line manager once in a 24-month period.</p>
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Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 11th November 2020

Report of the Acting Director of Children's Services

Fostering and Permanence Service Update Report

Purpose

1. The report provides scope and detail around Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Service

Recommendations

2. It is recommended:
 - That the Committee note and comment on the contents of the update on the Fostering and Permanence Service.

Background

3. The Fostering and Permanence Service provides a family experience for children who are unable to live with their birth families.

In order to achieve this aim, the service is divided into three teams

- The Recruitment and Assessment Team.
- The Mainstream Fostering Support Team.
- The Connected Persons Team.
- The Fostering Panel recommends the approval, continued approval and termination of approval of foster carers.
- Permanence for children looked after is by Special Guardianship Order (SGO), long term fostering and adoption. Adoption for Dudley children is now located within the Regional Adoption Agency - Adoption@Heart (A@H).



- The Fostering and Permanence service provides the interface between DMBC and Adoption@Heart. The service holds regular panels (Permanency Monitoring Panel and Achieving Early Permanence Panel). Membership of Permanency Monitoring Panel includes the family finding manager from Adoption@Heart. The progress of children identified for adoption is tracked and monitored through this panel.

4. Of the 635 children who are currently in the care of Dudley MBC

- 4 children are in Foster to Adopt placements.
- 11 are placed for adoption.
- 182 are placed with internal mainstream foster carers.
- 118 are placed with Connected Persons foster carers.
- 195 are placed with Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers

The remainder of the children (125 in total) who are not placed with foster carers are;

- 42 children on Interim Care orders / or Care Orders are placed with their parents with a plan to discharge the orders safely.
- 2 children are in welfare secure units.
- 3 children are in youth offending institute.
- 1 child is placed with a residential school.
- 1 child is in a mother and baby unit with their mother.
- 7 children are placed in Dudley Children's Residential homes.
- 37 children are placed in external residential placements.
- 25 are in Semi-independent living and
- 7 are in independent living.

Therefore almost 50% of Dudley's Looked after children are placed in an in-house fostering provision. A substantial number of these children have a permanency plan of Special Guardianship Orders and progressing these children to this order would enable them to exit the care system. These children would therefore no longer have the interference of the Local Authority in their lives and their Guardians would be able to make important decisions for them allowing them to have a more normal family life.

The Fostering Service consists of three teams which all have discrete functions, although there are overlapping responsibilities and the team managers cover each other's duties;

1. The Recruitment and Assessment Team (R&A) is responsible for the recruitment, training and assessment of foster carers. There are currently three workers in this team who are undertaking ten assessments of people who wish to become foster carers for unrelated children. During the Covid-19 lockdown, pre-approval training and assessments were conducted virtually.

The fourth member of the team is responsible for all private Fostering cases and acts as the link for Non-Agency Adoptions. Private fostering arrangements exist when a child under the age of 16, who is not looked after, goes to live with somebody who is not a close relative. Non-Agency Adoption includes, for example step-parenting adoptions and occur because a carer makes an application to adopt a child.

2. The Mainstream Support team consists of eight social workers who hold cases of between 18 to 20 cases per full time worker. These workers manage and support the foster carers who care for non-related children. These social workers supervise the carers, ensuring that they are offering safe placements for children, are adequately trained and continue to meet fostering standards. One member of the team has lead responsibility for organising carer training. Of the 634 children currently Looked After by DMBC, 180 are cared for by mainstream foster carers. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the larger portion of supervision visits were undertaken virtually, although carers and children were still seen when necessary. Staff advised and supported carers through, sometimes challenging times and worked hard to minimise disruptions.

3. The Connected Persons team is the third team in the service. This team is currently understaffed, due to vacancies. The remit of this team is to oversee the assessment of Connected Persons to become foster carers for children who are known to them, and then to supervise these carers when they become approved foster carers. The plan is for most of these Connected Persons carers to become Special Guardians for the children in their care, and ideally the Connected Person worker would complete the SGO assessment. Post order support for special guardians will be offered by two social workers in this team when the workers have been recruited. Of the 634 children currently Looked After by DMBC, 118 are cared for by Connected Person foster carers. For some connected carers there can be a tension between being a family member and the requirements of being an approved foster carer, for example carers will often say "I just want to be a grandmother". For children living in these arrangements, progression towards a Special Guardianship order will alleviate the tensions between being an approved foster carer and a family member.



The Connected Persons team also receives Initial Viability Assessments (IVA) which is a brief report identifying whether a person may be appropriate for proceeding to assessment or not. This team has a high demand for assessments as well as the supervisions of approved Connected Person carers. Currently, due to staffing issues, most assessments are sourced externally. Permanent recruitment for these vacancies is now underway.

4. The Fostering Service also has a Fostering Panel function. The Panel is maintained and administered by the service, and in accordance with Statutory requirements this is independently chaired.

The Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator are DMBC employees. The Panel recommends the approval, termination and review of foster carers, prior to decisions being made by the Agency Decision Maker. Dudley MBC has not opted to use the flexibilities provided by the Adoption Coronavirus legislation, given that the quoracy of panel has not been affected by the pandemic. This has been shared and accepted by Ofsted at the recent Assurance visit. Fostering Panel continues to meet fortnightly.

5. Emotional Health and Wellbeing services are provided by Dudley Lighthouse Links via a Service Level Agreement. Services have continued virtually through the lockdown, with some face-to-face contact taking place in premises such as schools. It has not been possible to deliver virtual training during this period, but young people have been provided with boxes which included equipment and activities for improving their mental health and with ongoing virtual contact where appropriate.
6. The Fostering Service maintains the link between the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Adoption@Heart (A@H).
7. In order to monitor children whose plan is adoption, Dudley MBC have implemented Achieving Early Permanence meetings which will now take place weekly. At this meeting we consider all forms of permanence including Long Term Fostering and Special Guardianship. This includes ensuring that early notifications to the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is made for those children whose plan is adoption, to enable early adoption planning to commence timely.
8. In place is a Permanency Monitoring Meeting, attended by the RAA, which is moving to a fortnightly frequency to enable permanency to continue to be tracked and monitored. The purpose of this is to prevent drift and delay in adoption and ensure that both agencies are proactive in undertaking the required actions.
9. The Panel Advisor and the Family Finder from the RAA have regular interface meetings to pick up actions from the Permanency Monitoring Meetings. The



Panel Advisor role is to provide advice where foster carers wish to adopt children in their care.

10. The Service Manager attends the Operational group of RAA to ensure that there is management focus on permanency.
11. We currently have:
 - 15 children with Adoption Orders who are awaiting placements.
 - 9 children who have a SHOBPA (Should Be Placed for Adoption) waiting for Placement Orders
 - 4 children in Fostering for Adoption placements (Early Permanency)
 - 11 children who are placed for adoption.

Finance

5. There are no cost implications arising from this report

Law

6. There are no legal implications arising from this report

Equality Impact

7. The fostering service seeks to recruit foster carers from all backgrounds who are able to meet the needs of the children of Dudley. Applicants from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, sexuality, disability and marital status are welcome.
8. The provision of a resilient and diverse fostering service is essential to the wellbeing and stability of children and young people. We endeavour to recruit carers who are able to meet the needs of children who are in care and this includes carers who reflect the cultural background of the children.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

9. There are no organisational development/HR or transformational implications arising from this report.

Commercial/Procurement

10. There are no commercial/procurement implications arising from this report

Health, Wellbeing and Safety

11. Children who are placed in resilient, supported foster homes will have their needs met and will be enabled to fulfil their potential. A number of children will be able to achieve permanency by remaining with their current carers and exiting the care system via SGO.



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Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 11th November 2020

Report of the Acting Director of Children's Services

Children in Care and Care Leaver Service – Care Leavers Update Report

Purpose

1. This report is to provide scope and detail around Dudley's Care Leavers

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that:
 - The Committee note and comment on the content of the update on the Care Leaver's Service

Background

3. A Care Leaver is defined as 16 to 25 years old who has been looked after at some point since they were 14 years old, and they were in care on or after their 16th birthday. Care Leavers are entitled to ongoing support from Children's Services after they leave care at 18. Local Authorities are 'corporate parents' to children in care and to their care leavers. Dudley currently has 129 16 to 18 years old, and 231 18 to 25 years old, a total of 360 care leavers. These young people are referred to as care experienced adults.
- 3.1 The Care Leavers' strategy (2016) 'Keep on Caring: Supporting Young People from Care to Independence', outlined new ways of working with young people via 5 key outcome areas, that Dudley should seek to achieve for all young people leaving care:
 -
 - Be better prepared and supported to live independently
 - Have improved access to education, training and employment
 - Experience stability and feel safe and secure
 - Receive improved access to health support



- Achieve Financial Stability.

3.2 The Children and Social Work Act 2017 came into effect on 1st April 2018 and strengthened corporate parenting duties within LA's. There is now a requirement for all Local Authorities to publish a 'Local Offer to Care Leavers'. In addition, there has been an extension of the role and remit of a Personal Adviser, which must now be available to offer support to young people leaving care up to their 25th birthday at their request. There is also an annual keeping in touch duty to all who are now aged over 21.

3.3 In Dudley the Care Leavers team consists of 16 full time Young person advisor's (YPA), 1 Social worker and 2 team managers.

The functions of the YPA's role is clearly set out, and how it supports its care leavers. This is set out in statutory guidance meaning this is what the LA must do as a minimum requirement to support its care leavers.

Regulation 8 of the Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010 details the role of a Personal Adviser (YPA) and sets out its functions which are as follows: -

- To provide advice (including practice advice) and support
- To participate in the assessment and the preparation of the pathway plan
- To participate in reviews of the plan
- To liaise with the responsible authority in implementing the plan
- To coordinate provision of services to support the young person
- To keep informed about the relevant child's or former relevant child's progress and well-being
- To have a written record of contact with and of services provided by the relevant or former relevant child.

3.4 All care leavers should be aware of who their YPA is, so that they are able to rely on consistent support from their own key professional. It is good practice that they retain the same YPA, as when they were a relevant or eligible child. The transfer of support from the social worker to the YPA should take place in a planned and managed way when they reach the age of 18. Dudley aim to allocate a YPA to all Care Leavers at 16 years 5months, this YPA then remains with the young person post 18 years old.

YPA duties post 18 years include: -

- To Provide general assistance
- To Provide assistance with expenses associated with employment
- To Provide assistance associated with education and training
- To Provide vacation accommodation to care leavers in higher or further education
- To Provide a bursary (£2000) to care leavers going on to higher education

3.5 There are some very good initiatives in Dudley, for instance the Council Tax exemption policy for care leavers up to 25 if they live in Dudley, this sends a strong



message from elected members, the Chief Executive and senior officers. The corporate parenting strategy was recently updated to strengthen corporate parenting principles.

- 3.6 Dudley currently has 16 young people at university studying courses from Social Work Degree to Masters in advanced Chemistry. We have young people working in a variety of roles, Sales, children's nurseries, a lawyer, health and social care. Some of our care leavers have themselves become carers for their sibling's, offering their siblings a stable home environment, by working in partnership with social workers.

Each year several young people successfully enter into higher education, which could be via university or remaining at college and doing a course which can lead to entry to university. To enable young people to achieve this without being disadvantaged the following financial support is given to them: -

- Accommodation- which could be halls of residence or a flat and includes administration fees/ deposits and rent.
 - A television licence for the first year.
 - The cost of setting up their accommodation if not furnished.
 - Payment of rates.
 - Specialists books/equipment.
 - Travel costs if remaining at home by way of bus/train pass or petrol allowance if they have a car.
4. On average, caseloads last year for YPA's were around 29 to 31 but they are now working to around 23 to 25 maximum, which is allowing them to do meaningful work and maintain good performance around timeliness of pathway plans and visits to young people. We are working towards YPA's caseloads being around 20. We currently have 45 16 years old who are waiting to be allocated a YPA. Until then, they remain allocated to a social worker. Each team manager gives supervision and management oversight monthly to all the YPA's, and the social workers, this is at times a challenge for the two team managers in post.
- 4.1 The proportion of care leavers accessing Education, Employment and Training (EET) demonstrates 50% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 years old. This shows half of Dudley's care leavers aged 18 to 20 care leaver cohort is without education, employment or a training opportunity and likely to be reliant on state support or have increasing need to gain support from the leaving care service, which creates additional dependency and increased costs on budgets. The EET data 4 years ago showed that the national average was 45%; from the current return, nationally it is possible to see that this bar is raised. The figure for Dudley care leavers has fallen to 50% and is lower than the West Midland average of 51%.



- 4.2 The Black Country Impact is commissioned to work with 13 to 29 year olds. They do not solely work with care leavers nor do they work outside of the borough. This means that there is no dedicated EET worker / Careers Adviser to care leavers or such worker sitting within leaving care. There was a dedicated worker from The Black County Impact working with care leavers in 2018, when Ofsted visited and is clear from the data this position needs to be revisited and considered again. It is noted that due to the pandemic and issues relating to Covid-19 we predict more challenges ahead for our care leavers around this issue.
- 4.3 Prior to the pandemic, care leavers had a weekly drop-in service at the Switch building in the town centre. Since the pandemic it has been difficult to secure a venue to hold a drop-in service for care leavers, and this is currently being considered by the senior leadership team.

Care leavers would like to have a base they can use as a daily drop in to meet with their YPA or duty worker at times of crisis or challenge. A care leaver drop-in centre is somewhere that care leavers can access to have a hot drink, make a meal and have a chat or get advice. We are mindful that during the pandemic care leavers have needed the support of the care leavers team more than ever. Visiting to care leavers has increased, as at times they have needed the additional support, and we have also increased our virtual contact via WhatsApp, that was on all workers phones at the start of the pandemic. WhatsApp has proven to be a very popular way for care leavers to communicate with staff. We have noticed an increase in engagement and communication from the young people via this app. A drop-in centre would also prove valuable during these times for care leavers to be able to walk in and see a member of staff as and when they needed. This service is something that we want to get reinstated quickly.

- 4.4 Currently we are looking to review the Pledge and Local Offer for care leavers. We are considering for two care leavers to be employed to support the review of these important policies.

We believe care experienced young people would be the best voice to ensure these documents capture the needs of children in care and care leavers. We would like them to engage as many care leavers and children in the development work, to capture the current wants and views of the care leavers and children in care cohort, and to be the lead in engaging young people and children in all aspects of participation for a 3 month period. This will culminate in the development of an updated Pledge and Local Offer for Care Leavers. This would also give two care leavers work experience for 3 months, that they can then reflect on their CV's going forward.

Finance

5. There are no cost implications arising from this report.

Law

6. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Equality Impact

7. The Care Leavers Team provide support to the whole community including a range of diverse groups. Good quality practice will be more attuned to the equality issues experienced by individuals, families and communities. Effective oversight and challenge will assist with the development of high-quality practice.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

8. There are no organisational development/HR implications arising from this report.

Commercial/Procurement

9. There are no Commercial/Procurement implications arising from this report.

Health, Wellbeing and Safety

10. Good practice will support the health and wellbeing of children young people and families who access services. In addition, a positive organisational learning culture reduces staff burn out and sickness levels and increases general and emotional wellbeing.



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