

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on Wednesday, 29 March 2023 in the View Room, Margaret McMillan Tower, Bradford, BD1 1NN

Commenced 4.40 pm
Concluded 6.33 pm

Present – Councillors

LABOUR	CONSERVATIVE	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT
Duffy Thirkill Alipoor	Pollard	Naylor

NON VOTING CO-OPTED MEMBERS

Sue Lowndes

Bradford Education

Observers/others in attendance:

Claire Bonner	Bradford Council – Independent Review Officer
Lisa Brett	Bradford Council – Head of Service, Early Help
Gemma Caroll	Bradford Council – Children’s Social Care
Helen Cliffe	Bradford Council – Service Manager, Safeguarding and Review, Commissioning & Provider Services
Jonathan Cooper	Head, Virtual School (HT/VS)
Caroline Dolan	Virtual School
Amandip Johal	Bradford Council – Interim Assistant Director Safeguarding and Review, Commissioning & Provider Services (iAD/SRCP)
Mick Nolan	Bradford Council – Participation Team
Filiz Osman	Bradford Council – Children in Care Service Manager
Helen Osman	Helen Osman Governance Services (Clerk)
Emily Rhodes	Bradford Council – Participation Co-ordinator, Safeguarding and Reviewing Team
Heidi Thomas	Bradford Council – Care Leavers Service

Apologies:

Councillor Susan Knox and Jude MacDonald
Louisa Kay – Service Manager Care Leavers Service
Ali Jan Haider – Bradford District and Craven Integrated Health and Care Partnership
Jude MacDonald – Bradford District and Craven Integrated Health and Care Partnership
Catherine Murray – Consultant Paediatrician and Designated Doctor for Children Looked After

Councillor Duffy in the Chair

Summary of actions arising from this meeting

Action No.	Action	Person	Timescale
1	E-mail to children and young people the link to the entitlements information on Coram Voice	E Rhodes	15-04-2023
2	Ensure that the link to the entitlements information on Coram Voice are easy to find	H Thomas	15-04-2023
3	Participation Team to gather feedback from young people on the entitlements information on Coram Voice and pass to the Care Leavers Service to arrange for the information to be more easily found.	E Rhodes H Thomas	30-04-2023 31-05-2023
4	Virtual School to review drop-in sessions for children and young people to separate them from sessions for adults, and make them available at times when they were not at school.	J Cooper	31-05-2023
5	Children and young people to let Emily Rhodes or Mike Nolan know if they wished to attend the Virtual School consultation at 10.00am on Friday 14 April 2023.	Children & young people	13-04-2023

46. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

No disclosures were received.

47. INSPECTION OF REPORTS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

No requests were received to inspect reports and background papers.

48. BUSINESS ITEMS - AGENDA

Introduction and welcome by Young Person

Emily Rhodes welcomed participants to the meeting, which would focus on contact time. Discussion of contact time could sometimes be intense, so she asked children and young people to look out for each other and to approach her, Helen Cliffe or Amandip Johal if anyone became distressed.

Feedback regarding outstanding actions

Entitlements – Heidi Thomas Service Manager Care Leavers Service

Emily Rhodes said that a paper on entitlements was ready to be presented to the Council Executive Committee. She introduced Heidi Thomas from the Leaving Care Service, who would explain how Coram Voice was being used to make information about entitlements more user-friendly.

Heidi Thomas showed a slide that set out the Financial Offer for different categories of children and young people. The categories (Eligible, Relevant, Former Relevant etc) were not easy for most people to interpret, so the information had been embedded in Coram Voice, which would take young people through it in a more user-friendly way. Attempts to demonstrate the link to the information were unsuccessful but she assured young people that the link was easy to find and use. Emily Rhodes said she would e-mail the link to children and young people.

Action: Emily Rhodes

Heidi Thomas said she would make sure that the link was easier for other children and young people to find.

Action: Heidi Thomas

Heidi Thomas explained that the Coram Voice link took users through a series of questions and then showed which category they belonged to for the purposes of the Financial Offer (eg Eligible, Relevant, Former Relevant etc), so that they could look up the entitlements for their category in the Financial Offer document.

Asked what a young person should do if they went through this process and found that they were not receiving everything to which they were entitled, Heidi Thomas said that they should raise it with their social worker, IRO or carer so that their pathway planning could be reviewed.

Young people said that the process of finding this information needed to be more straightforward. It seemed that the system, once they had the link and had answered the questions, would only tell them whether they were Eligible, Relevant, Former Relevant, etc – they would then have to find the Financial Offer to look up the entitlement for members of that category. This was over-complicated: the system needed to show their entitlements directly, without them having to move back and forth between different documents.

Young people **asked** how the information on entitlements would be made available to young people who did not have access to the internet. Heidi Thomas said that they would all have personal advisers, who would make sure that they had the information they needed.

. Amandip Johal informed children and young people that all websites were being transferred from the Council to the new Children and Families Trust. Her team was looking at developing a Young People's app to provide information on the local offer and eligibility criteria. The Trust website had sections for children and young people, adults and professionals – children and young people should find it a lot easier to find the information they needed once this website was up and running. **Asked** whether the website would work in the same way when the Trust took it over, she said that it would: some of the logos would change, but navigation would remain the same.

. Heidi Thomas said that young people should try out the link to the entitlements information and let the participation team have notes and questions on how it could be improved: that feedback could then be passed on to the people who could make the system easier to use.

Action: Participation Team

Savings Policy

. This policy was now ready to be presented to the Council Executive Committee.

Takeaway themes from previous meeting

1. **Ensure all Young People know about their 25 hours' entitlement and the availability of additional tutoring.**

- . Caroline Dolan from the Virtual School showed slides on the educational offer for children and young people in care, which included tutoring, and described the steps that the Virtual School had taken to ensure that they knew about their educational entitlement:
 - An app had been commissioned to provide easier access to educational pathways.
 - Personal Education Plan (PEPs) had been revised to include a recorded discussion of tutoring.
 - Drop-in sessions were available for children, young people, carers and staff to speak directly to Virtual School staff.
- . **Replying to questions**, Caroline Dolan said that the drop-in sessions were on Thursdays, up to 5.00pm. A Teams link was open from 10.00 am to 3.30pm. **Asked** whether this timing would work for young people, who would be in school at that time, she said that there was a Teams link to a webinar. The Head of the Virtual School added that communication could be through text, if that worked better for children and young people. He explained that the Teams link to the drop-in sessions was for everyone, not just for children and young people.
- . Cllr Duffy, Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel, said that drop-in sessions for young people needed to be for young people only and available at times that they were not in school.

Action: Virtual School

- . Caroline Dolan circulated a hard copy of a draft pyramid diagram of the Virtual School offer for children and young people
- . ***Establish the proportion of Bradford's young people in care that achieve the grade 5 "good pass" threshold in English and Maths GCSEs. Narrow the gap between this proportion and the proportion of non-looked after children who achieve this standard nationally (40.1% in 2021).***
- . Caroline Dolan explained that outcomes for children in care were monitored and reported to the Corporate Parenting Panel in an annual report. For the 2022-23 annual report, a young person's version would also be produced. The 2022-23 report showed that outcomes for Bradford's children in care had improved but that more needed to be done to narrow the gap with other children.
- . ***Minimise the need for children to switch schools when they move house and, where a change in school is unavoidable, make the change at the start of the school year. Mid-term changes of school should be avoided at all cost.***
- . Caroline Dolan said that the Virtual School understood how important it was for children and young people to remain at their existing schools, where they were happy, settled and achieving, when they moved to a new placement. If a decision was made to change a child's school when that was not in the best interest of the child, the Virtual School would challenge the decision, so it was important that children and young people shared their feelings about school moves with their social workers and carers.
- . Social workers were expected to follow clear rules on school changes, particularly when children and young people were due to sit exams. Where a change of school was unavoidable, the Virtual School asked that they take place at the end of the school year wherever possible.
- . The views of children and young people on school moves should be recorded in their PEPs.
- . Emily Rhodes said that a consultation with the Virtual School would take place during the Easter holidays, from 10.00am to 1.00pm on Friday 14 April 2023: if any children and young people wished to attend they should let her or Mike Nolan know.

Action: Children and young people

to 5 Contact time – table discussions

One of the co-Chairs introduced the theme for the table discussions. She explained that seeing their families was an important part of the lives of children and young people in care, and one that most children could take for granted. Children in care called this “contact”. They had discussed calling it “family time” but, for today’s meeting, they would refer to it as “contact”.

The thoughts that children and young people would share today were very important to them. Some of their experiences of contact were really good, and some things needed to be made better. Children and young people would share their experiences with the Corporate Parenting Panel today in the hope of making things better not just for themselves but for other children and young people in care as well.

The meeting split into table discussions which focused on different aspects of contact, with a break for pizza. The following points were made in feedback from these discussions.

Timings and Length of Contact

- Contact arrangements need to be flexible and to reflect the current circumstances of the child or young person.
- Children and young people should be able to see their families at weekends and holidays, and for longer at these times.
- The duration and frequency of contact is different for everyone and the reasons for these decisions are not explained.
- Children and young people do not know who decides when and how often they should see their families and they do not understand the rationale. They should have a say in their own contact arrangements.
- The timings of contact are too prescriptive.
- Contact time needs to be shorter but more frequent: this would be better for building relationships.
- It’s better to have contact weekly for half an hour than a whole day every two months.
- Children and young people would like more contact with siblings – those relationships are important.
- Contact is sometimes changed without any explanation – for example, from weekly contact to school holidays only.
- Contact seems to reduce as children and young people get older: social workers should explain this to them.

Lack of consultation and communication with children and young people about the timing and frequency of contact was mentioned frequently throughout this discussion.

Most frequent comment: “I just want to be asked”.

Location / Venue of Contact

- Unless there is good reason why not, children and young people should be able to see family at their parents’ houses where they can just chill.
- Can we have sleepovers at our mum and dad/s house?
- If contact at parents’ houses isn’t possible, could they see family at a relation’s home?
- It would be good to have contact in different houses, instead of always in the same place.
- Contact should take place in activity settings – eg:
 - Cinema

- Swimming
- Museum
- Bowling
- Play gym
- Can we go to theme parks with our families?
- Contact should take place in rooms with:
 - TV
 - Speakers (sub-woofer!)
 - Karaoke
 - X-box
- Family centres are too small and childish.
- Contact should not be held in:
 - An interview room
 - A blank room
 - A clinical room
- Transport to contact should be decent – not a car held together with duct tape.
- The venue should be appropriate for the ages of children and young people:
 - 0-4 years – somewhere safe
 - 4-10 years – a play area: somewhere with an activity
 - 11-17 years – wherever, and with whatever activities, the child wants (within reason)
- Children aged about six or older should have a say in the venue for contact.
- The venue should be easily accessible.
- Venues for contact should change so that the child or young person doesn't become bored.
- If a child or young person lives a long way from their family, contact should take place halfway between so they can see them more often. "I can't see Dad as much because it's too much money".
- There needs to be frequent contact with family by telephone and text in between contact sessions – some suggested daily. This is necessary for relationships and so children don't feel so different.
- Everyone is different – social workers and parents need to understand that not all children and young people want the same thing.
- Who chooses where contact happens?
- Children and young people should be able to choose.

Lack of communication and understanding of contact was mentioned frequently through discussion.

Most frequent comment: "Why can't we choose?".

Cancellation of Contact

- This is the most troublesome thing about contact.
- We aren't told why.
- No-one explains why contact is cancelled or why it is increased or reduced
- We turn up, but the others don't.
- Cancelled contact sessions are not re-arranged.

- Why can't contact go ahead with other family members if one cannot make it?
- Increases in contact need to be carefully planned.
- Not having enough contact, or enough time at contact sessions, is damaging to relationships.
- There needs to be improved communication and compromise between professionals and children and young people.

Supervision of Contact

- Unless a child is in danger, unsupervised contact is better: supervision can make children feel different.
- Contact should not be supervised unless essential.
- If supervision is necessary:
 - the reasons should be explained.
 - the child should be able to choose who supervises their contact – it should be someone with whom they have a good relationship.
 - having a foster carer present may damage the child's relationship with their carer.
 - it shouldn't be by a social worker – most children don't like them.
- Contact time is family time. Having a foster carer there isn't a good idea – it causes tensions.
- It feels unfair when there are different rules for different people.
- Choice is important.
- Some children are more comfortable when contact is supervised. A child should be able to ask for contact to be supervised if it isn't.
- Supervision needs to be discreet.
- If supervision is necessary: seen but not heard [*It was not clear whether the supervisor should be seen but not heard, or whether the supervisor should be able to see, but not hear, the child and their family.*]
- Supervision should not include:
 - Writing down everything we say
 - Wearing ID badges
 - Searching our presents
 - Following us whenever we do things together
- Contact centres should be improved:
 - Older games
 - More things to do
 - More equipment and resources
 - Bikes
 - Outside spaces
 - There should be no small children's toys at contact for older children and young people
- Why can children and young people not decide where contact happens?
- There should be different options for different people, even family members.
- There should be opportunities for children and their families to do things together without anyone else there.

- Perhaps CCTV could be used if supervision is necessary so people can feel they have some privacy. [*Suggested by a member of the Participation Team*]

Other comments

- Contact plans should be transparent, concrete and reflected in care plans and pathway plans – young people need to know what’s going on as much as the professionals do.
- The IRO should review the contact plan at every review (ie every six months).
- We don’t get asked who attends contact.
- Virtual contact is better than nothing, but face-to-face is much better.
- Sometimes the rules feel different for different people.
- For some children and young people, contact time is their only contact with their culture and language – this doesn’t seem to be given the importance it should by some social workers.
- Children and young people need to be able to attend family events – eg an auntie’s wedding, birthdays. If this has to be supervised, the supervision needs not to be obvious.

Take Away Themes

- . Emily Rhodes thanked children and young people for their feedback. It was very clear that children and young people wanted clearer communication and consultation about their contact arrangements. They especially wanted to have their views taken fully into account. It might be useful to provide them with a “who, what, where, why, when and how” sheet before each contact.
- . The other really big point was that children and young people wanted to be able to do things with their families on their own. This could be tricky when professionals needed to keep them safe, so Emily’s team would explore how this could be done without someone in the room – for example, by using CCTV – so that they and their families could have some sense of privacy.
- . The following takeaway theme was agreed:
 - Contact arrangements to be clearly stated in the Pathway or Care Plan of every child and young person and reviewed every six months as part of the six-monthly IRO review, or more often if there are changes (eg a change of placement).

Chair

Note: These minutes are subject to approval as a correct record at the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.