

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 19 April 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, S Deinali, J Griffiths, B Kellett, J Nicholson (substitute for Councillor J Charlton), S Quinn, A Reed, K Rooney and A Savory.

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, Billie-Leigh, Luke, J McCarthy and W Taylor

Also Present:

Lesley Baldry – Service Manager (accompanied by Rebecca for item 7)

Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care

Molly Foster – Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health

Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager

Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children

Claire Kenny – Team Manager

Hollie Meadows – Senior Practitioner

Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer

Mairie Pratt-White – Service Manager

Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children’s Homes

Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School

Bernadette Toomey – Practice Lead, Safeguarding

Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

Dawn Wilson – Senior Commissioning Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton, L Mavin and M Wilson and from officer M Stenton.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor J Nicholson attended for Councillor J Charlton.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Number of Children Looked After and Care Leavers

The Head of Children's Social Care, Rachel Farnham, informed the Panel that the number of children in our care had reduced from 1,223 in March to 1,211. The figure included 77 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC) of whom 42 were care leavers. The total number of care leavers was 332.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care was pleased to report that the first Ofsted inspection of Maple House found the home to be outstanding. A celebration event will be arranged in due course, to which Members will be invited.

7 Know – What – When Project

Lesley Baldry, Service Manager and Rebecca, Investing in Children presented the Know What When guide (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the guide was developed as a result of discussions between young people of the Children in Care Council (CiCC), Investing in Children and Children's Services, on the benefits of knowing what to expect at different stages of the care journey. Copies of the guide were circulated at the meeting and the Panel viewed a short video produced to accompany the guide, which is available in print and online to all young people entering care. Rebecca explained that, when writing the guide, care experienced young people drew on the thoughts and feelings they had, when they entered care. Rebecca highlighted that the young people were particularly keen to include the section on young people's rights and she paid tribute to the hard work and dedication of the young people involved in the project.

Resolved:

That the recommendations be agreed.

8 Care Leavers Annual Survey

The Participation and Engagement Officer, Lee Peacock and Service Manager, Lesley Baldry, presented a report and delivered a presentation on the findings of the Care Leavers' Annual Survey (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The officers informed the Panel that the survey, which was carried out between February and March 2024, reported care leavers' views regarding the support they receive, including what they feel is working well and areas for improvement. Young Person's Advisers (YPAs) assisted to ensure the survey reached as many young people as possible, which resulted in a 22% return of completed surveys.

Ninety-five percent of those surveyed said their YPA did what they said they would do and the results of the survey reflected the findings of the recent Ofsted inspection of the Care Leavers' Service. Areas highlighted for improvement included that some young people were unsure how to access their health summary. It was also found that some young people felt there could be more support to understand why they could not live with their family and some felt the transition from being supported by a Social Worker to being supported by a YPA requires further development.

The Vice-Chair, Councilor Walton, asked what action was being taken to improve the support for young people during the transition from Social Worker to YPA and the Service Manager replied that the offer had been extended to enable young people access to YPAs from the earlier age of sixteen.

In response to a further question from the Vice-Chair as to the support for young people to understand why it is not possible to live with their family, the Participation and Engagement Officer explained that a young person's understanding of their circumstances can be subject to a number of factors. He stressed the importance of ensuring the conversation continues throughout a young person's pathway as their ability to process information develops. The Vice-Chair pointed out that frequent changes of Social Worker may hinder the ongoing conversation and officers reassured the Panel that the service places great emphasis on life-story work and Later Life Letters may be written for young people, by their Social Workers, to help the young person to understand their past, present and future.

Luke echoed the comments on the importance of the consistent narrative, and he added that dialogue between young people and their carers to plan for the future should start as early as possible, to prepare young people for the transition.

Jo McCarthy, Deputy Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children and newly appointed Co-opted Member introduced herself to the Panel and she welcomed further discussions as to how health practitioners may assist the service with access to health summaries, for example, whether the NHS app may be utilised. She also commented that she was looking forward to sharing information on the health offer for Durham care leavers, including those care leavers who live outside the county, to ensure that any gaps in provision are addressed.

Luke suggested that it would be useful to have a breakdown on how many young people are benefiting from the support available within the local offer, to identify what support is having the most impact. The Service Manager agreed that there was more work to be done to understand not only how many care leavers are aware of the local offer but also how many are making use of the support.

The Panel noted that a similar survey is being developed for those under the age of eighteen and its progress will be reported at a future meeting.

Resolved:

That the recommendations contained in the report be agreed.

9 Care Leavers Strategy and Action Plan Progress Report

The Panel considered the Care Leavers Strategy and Action Plan presented by Lesley Baldry, Service Manager (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted the Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities for looked after and previously looked after children as they exit care system and Durham delivers services to young people up to the age of 25, who fall within the eligibility criteria which was outlined in the report. The presentation provided progress on six principal areas of focus, namely Pathway Plans, Education, Employment and Training, Suitable Accommodation, Improved Health Outcomes, Preparation for Adulthood and Co-Production and the voice of young people. The recent Ofsted inspection highlighted the strength of Durham's offer and the collaboration with young people. The offer extends to young parents, young people at University and young people not in education or training. In addition, care leavers who are not engaged with the Care Leavers' Service are contacted, in order to promote the support.

Councillor Reed was pleased to see that a number of care leavers are studying at University and she asked if data was available on how many students return to Durham following their studies.

The Service Manager replied that some graduates remain in the area where they study as they often establish networks there, however, opportunities for young people studying locally are increasing and further information will be provided on the progress of graduates in the future. A number of young people have recently studied for a degree in Social Work and have been interviewed by Durham County Council for Social Worker posts.

In response to a question from Councillor Reed on the availability of accommodation for care leavers, the Service Manager clarified that the service is currently working to identify properties that may be ringfenced for care leavers. Additionally the Staying Close project aims to locate care leavers close to their existing networks.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

10 Care Leavers Service Local Offer

The Panel received an update on changes to the local offer including the development of the Care Leavers' Covenant (for copy of report and presentation see file).

Lesley Baldry, Service Manager, explained that the Care Leavers' Service is part of the Regional Care Leavers' Board which aims to achieve parity across all local offers. The Panel noted the recent developments in Durham's local offer including that every care leaver is entitled to a £3,000 setting up home allowance, a free bus pass and exemption or support with Council Tax.

Aspirations for the future are to continue to grow the local offer as well as strengthen the offer to individual groups such as care leavers in custody and those not in education, employment and training. Luke suggested that housing which is close to the Care Leavers' Hubs could benefit care leavers who need extra support.

Resolved:

That the recommendations be agreed.

11 Children in Care Council Update

Billie Leigh and Luke provided an update on the 'Next Venture Fund' which is an allocation of £10,000 per annum from DCCs CEO to develop ideas to improve outcomes for care leavers (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel heard that the Steering Group established a Panel of young people, representative of care leavers. The aim of the programme is to fund projects which meet key themes which include reducing loneliness; create opportunities; promote good mental wellbeing and inclusivity. The Steering Group allocates funding by applying the criteria whilst the Service Manager for Safeguarding and Professional Practice has overall responsibility for the budget. The Steering Group hold regular meetings with the Children's Services Senior Management Team to report on progress and fund beneficiaries are requested to provide examples of the impact of the funding. The vision for the future is that the project will seed other opportunities and build sustainability.

The Head of Children's Social Care congratulated the young people on their hard work to bring the project to fruition. She highlighted that the Chief Executive had requested that the young people use the opportunity to expand their governance and financial management knowledge. The young people had exceeded expectations and were demonstrating strong financial stewardship and due diligence.

12 Proud Moments

The Vice-Chair reported how proud she had been of Billie-Leigh and Luke when they delivered the Next Venture Fund presentation to the Regional Corporate Parenting Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs network meeting. Councillor Walton commented on how impressed those in attendance were at how Billie-Leigh and Luke delivered the presentation, with confidence and flair and she thanked them for being excellent ambassadors for Durham.

Bernadette Toomey, Practice Lead for Safeguarding spoke of a young person who has made her proud. In previous years the young person had coped with significant trauma. She was pleased to report that the young person was now thriving, working well with their Social Worker and had secured and part time job.

Robert Johnson, Project Manager for Investing in Children informed the Panel how he had been particularly proud of members of the Children in Care Council. One of the younger members of the CiCC wrote an article for the CiCC newsletter about the positive aspects of being in our care. Another young person had taken a big step forward and attended a CiCC meeting and shared his views.

13 Language Update

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to previous meetings during which the Panel had discussed appropriate language to use for care experienced young people.

She referred to the reforms underway as a result of the independent care review and the government's response, 'Stable Homes Built on Love'. The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of how she had observed a change in the narrative in the new policies from government, which could be attributed to care experienced young people influencing the agenda.

The Panel discussed words associated with 'Stable Homes Built on Love' and how they may be interpreted by young people. The Panel agreed that the same exercise should be carried out with the young people of the CiCC, for their interpretation of the words to be shared with the Panel.

14 Children with Disabilities

Bernadette Toomey, Practice Lead for Safeguarding, Claire Kenny, Team Manager and Mairi Pratt-White, Service Manager, presented the annual update on children with disabilities (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

It was reported that 27 of the total number of 292 young people the team cares for are children in our care. The officers explained that one of the main priorities of the work over the past year had been to reflect children's voices on their files. The Panel received information on how the young people are encouraged to participate in social opportunities through their Education, Health and Care Plans and short breaks and the provision of short breaks is an area of development, to increase the offer particularly for those young people with more complex needs.

The presentation included some examples of work done by Toni one of the young people cared for by the team which illustrated that Toni values her Social Worker who helps her to express her feelings and to see her family. The Project Manager for Investing in Children reported anecdotally on the positive impact the team is having on Toni and her family.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

15 Such other business

Councillor Quinn referred to concerns raised at a recent Governing Body meeting regarding the number of children, including children in our care, who are taken out of school, during term time, for holidays. The Head of Children's Social Care clarified that permission to take pupils out of school during term time is granted only in exceptional circumstances.

The Head of the Virtual School explained that schools are requested not to authorise holidays and when a child is taken out of school for a holiday, that it is recorded as 'unauthorised'.

The Panel noted that more stringent government regulations on school absence are due to come into effect from August 2024 and further information on the changes would be reported at a future meeting.

Councillor Reed, Chair of Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, informed the Panel that this issue had been a topic of focus at a recent meeting and Councillor Reed offered to provide further information to Councillor Quinn on the issues discussed at the meeting.

16 Exclusion of the public

Resolved:

That under Section 100(a)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

17 Regulation 44 Visits – External Children's Homes

The Senior Commissioning Officer, Dawn Wilson, presented an update on monitoring activity undertaken by the Integrated Commissioning Service in relation to Independent Children's Residential Homes in which Durham children and young people are placed (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.