

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on Friday 21 October 2022 at 9.30 am

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, C Bell, J Charlton, B Coult, J Griffiths, B Kellett, K Rooney, S Townsend and C Varty

Co-opted Members:

Billie-Leigh, S Neale and W Taylor

Also Present:

Laura Armstrong - Professional Practice Manager

Laura Caunce - Service Manager, Children and Young People

Sharon Davey - Strategic Manager (Looked After & Permanence)

Mark den Hollander – Independent Visitor Coordinator

Molly Foster - Lawyer (Children, Adults & Health)

Anne Haigh – Acting Centre Manager, Aycliffe Secure Centre

Rebecca Harrison and Lauren – Investing in Children

Hazel Ostle – Workforce Development Manager

Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children

Dave Summers - Youth Justice Service Manager

Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ivan Cochrane, Councillor Stacey Deinali, Councillor Olwyn Gunn, Councillor Ted Henderson, Councillor Cathy Hunt, Councillor Jake Miller, Councillor Angela Sterling, Craig Brown and Rebecca Woods.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 September were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Matters arising in relation to Regulation 44 visits would be picked up during the private part of the meeting.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

The Panel received a presentation on the support provided for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence, Sharon Davey, explained that the National Transfer Scheme enables the safe transfer of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people (UASC) from one local authority to another. Currently 31 UASC young people, predominately male, aged between 15 and 17 years and 20 care leavers are supported by the service. The Strategic Manager described activities to support these young people including translation services and access to Independent Visitors and advocacy services. Support is also provided within education settings and the Virtual School has a dedicated UASC caseworker. Foster carer support groups enable carers to share experiences and offer each other practical support and work is also carried out with strategic partners, young persons advisers, health practitioners, and in the community, to promote social inclusion. The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence agreed to advise on how many UASC have moved from Durham to other areas and to provide a breakdown of the home countries of the UASC.

6 Number of Children Looked After and Care Leavers

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children reported a slight increase in the number of children in care which stood at 1034.

7 Ofsted Updates

The Panel heard that the inspection of Coxhoe Children's Home which took place in September was very positive.

The full inspection of Aycliffe Secure Centre has now been completed and the outcome will be provided in due course. Members were advised that a further action plan has been implemented for Framwellgate Moor.

8 Children in Care Council Activity

The Chair welcomed Rebecca, Billie-Leigh and Lauren to the meeting, representing the Children in Care Council.

Lauren delivered a speech on behalf of Luke in which he spoke of his admiration for the foster carer training facilitated by the young people of the Children in Care Council and how their input has been a force for positive change. Luke commented that the impact of the lived experiences of children and young people themselves help foster carers understand how important quality of care is to a young person's future development.

Luke also referred to the experience of coming into care and the significance of this event in a young person's life. He highlighted his concerns regarding worries that children and young people have regarding being judged simply because they are looked after and he spoke of his commitment to continue to strive to combat negative perceptions of children and young people looked after.

The young people then led the Panel on an exercise which forms part of the foster carer training. During the exercise, one of the young people shared a real life account of the day a child came into care. In the account, the child was allowed to take one item from the family home to their foster home. Panel members discussed how they would feel if they were a child in this situation and how difficult it would be to decide which item to choose.

The young people then spoke about a project that they would like to launch, with the support of the Panel. They explained they would like to create care packs to be distributed to children and young people when they first become looked after. The packs would be age-appropriate and would include small tokens which would be relevant to the individual young person, to provide them with reassurance that they are supported. The young people explained the packs would be particularly useful when emergency protection measures are required. Supporting the suggestion, officers commented on the practical processes in place for those entering care and how changes are often implemented through feedback from the Children in Care Council, for example, the work undertaken to improve wi-fi in children's homes. The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence agreed to investigate how the project could be progressed. The Panel expressed their support and requested that officers look into whether contributions from Members' neighbourhood budgets could be used to fund the project.

9 Proud Moments

Officers reported the following proud moments.

A care leaver who has moved into a home of their own is part of the ‘staying close’ pilot and is making excellent progress, staying in touch with the key workers at their previous children’s home who are providing assistance and companionship as the young person gradually adjusts to the transition. One of the workers leaves her dog with the young person to provide company for them throughout the day.

A young person with disabilities was thrilled to be selected to star in the TV programme ‘Saturday Mash Up’ to fulfil their dream of becoming a police officer for a day.

Another young person with disabilities is hoping to go on a holiday abroad and they have been offered the opportunity to prepare for the flight by using a flight simulator to overcome their fear of flying.

A young person has been selected to join the Royal Navy and they paid tribute to their foster family for all their support.

A young person resident in a children’s home who had previously had anger management issues had benefited from the long-term support provided by their Independent Visitor. The support had helped the young person to address their issues, to feel more positive about their future and engage in education. Furthermore, the young person is showing empathy and is keen to help others with their welfare.

Councillor Varty expressed her pride at the young people and carers who had attended a recent event held at Durham Town Hall and commented on how impressed she had been at the artwork on display.

10 Aycliffe Secure Centre Update, including Maple House

The Panel received a report which provided an update on Aycliffe Secure Centre including the new transition home, Maple House (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Acting Centre Manager, Anne Haigh, spoke of how the Covid-19 pandemic had presented unprecedented challenges for the Centre. Despite this, the young people found innovative ways to overcome the difficulties of lockdown for example through writing letters to new residents to introduce themselves. Throughout the pandemic, the young people’s learning experience continued and online vocational courses were introduced.

The Panel heard that as young people often find the transition to a community placement difficult, a new transition home, Maple House, funded by the Council and the Department for Education had been built to provide a stepping stone, to ease the transition from the secure environment back into the community.

A further development was the Centre's participation in the Secure Stairs framework which supports young people and staff with trauma informed care. A recent annual review found the young people are receiving trauma informed care and the young people themselves report feeling safe and secure with the staff caring for them.

The Acting Centre Manager also explained the Centre has piloted a sleep/Fitbit project as many young people report difficulties with sleep. Information gathered on the quality of sleep is being shared with the psychological team and there are plans to extend the project across all the houses.

The Acting Centre Manager confirmed that 'My Space' had continued throughout the Covid-19 period, although it had been necessary to hold sessions virtually. This provided the young people with the opportunity to discuss issues with staff from Investing in Children.

The Panel congratulated all staff and young people at the Centre on their recent outstanding Ofsted achievements.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11 Youth Justice Service

The Panel received a report and presentation on the Youth Justice Service (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Youth Justice Service Manager, Dave Summers, informed the Panel that the service supervises all young people sentenced by the courts, those receiving a police caution and all those remanded in secure accommodation awaiting trial or sentencing. In addition the service delivers targeted work to prevent young people from entering the youth justice system and the Service Manager outlined the pre-caution disposal (PCD) process which provides police officers with an alternative to 'formal' police action. The Panel heard that there had been a 65% reduction in the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system and currently approximately 75% of the young people receiving a PCD do not go on to reoffend.

In addition, the Ministry of Justice had recently awarded funding to further develop the early help and pre-caution disposal functions.

The Youth Justice Service Manager outlined that approximately 13% of the cohort supervised by the service are children and young people looked after and a small number of those had become looked after due to being remanded in youth detention. Work is undertaken with the Children Looked After service to ensure that the young person's care needs are taken into account alongside the factors for their offending.

The Service Manager also referred to the service's engagement in research by Cardiff University to investigate criminalisation and children looked after. Further information on the research will be fed-back to the Panel in due course.

The Service Manager informed the Panel that close work is undertaken with the police, with police officers seconded to the Youth Justice service.

Of the 58 young people entering the youth justice system in 2021/22, approximately 83% of those were male and the age group most likely to offend had reduced from 16-17 years, to 15-16 years, and the service was seeing increasing number of 14 year olds.

The Service Manager explained that in recognition that not being in education, employment or training is a risk factor in offending behaviour, the service works with each young person in their education setting and the service is part of the Strategic Management Board which also includes representation from education establishments.

The Service Manager informed the Panel that the number of cases progressing to court had reduced over the past 10 years with the help of early intervention schemes and increasing opportunities for issues to be dealt with outside of court, however a slight increase had been observed during the past twelve months.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

12 Transfer of Young People from Police Custody to Local Authority Accommodation

The Panel received a report and presentation on the transfer of young people from police custody to Local Authority Accommodation under the Police & Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Youth Justice Service Manager, Dave Summers, explained that Police and Local Authorities are required to transfer young people who have been charged and denied bail to appropriate Local Authority accommodation which will be either non-secure accommodation, or, if the young person is deemed to pose an imminent risk of significant harm to the public, this will be secure accommodation.

Durham had been at the forefront of this protocol, when nationally the approach was varied, however over the last few years more young people have been detained in police stations. To address this, in Autumn 2021 the protocol / procedures were reviewed, refreshed and re-launched and over the past year, performance has improved with a greater understanding between agencies and there has been an increased number of referrals and the development of shared practice between the police, the Emergency Duty Team and the Youth Justice Service.

In response to questions and comments, the Service Manager informed the Panel that of the 28 transfer requests made since 2021, 20 of those transferred to appropriate accommodation and 8 remained in police custody. He explained that sometimes this may be the most appropriate and least disruptive option for the young person, especially if they are charged very late at night and need to be at court early the following morning.

Following the refresh of procedures staff receive regular training to ensure all parties understand their statutory duties and performance is subject to joint monitoring.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

13 Review of the Independent Visitor Service

The Independent Visitor Co-ordinator, Mark den Hollander delivered a report and presentation which provided information on the Independent Visitor Service (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Information was provided on the role of Independent Visitors (IV) who are trained volunteers who provide trusted and consistent relationships to children and young people looked after. The IV Coordinator explained the challenges faced by the service on its inception in April 2020, which coincided with the national lockdown and how working practices were reviewed in order to develop the service. The Panel heard that at the end of August 2022 there had been 93 referrals to the service for a match, with 70 matches being made and 37 matches concluded.

Focus for the future includes the continued development of the service and the aim to meet the National Independent Visitor Service target of 10% of children in care being matched by June 2024.

The IV Coordinator explained that the service requires that students who volunteer must be able to commit to the role for at least one year and preferably two years in order to provide continuity.

When transitions occur from one IV to another, these are managed very carefully in order to minimise disruption.

In response to a question, the IV Coordinator explained that training to become an IV takes approximately 5 weeks.

Resolved:

- a) That an update on the Independent Visitor Service be included in the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report.
- b) That the Corporate Parenting Panel receive biennial updates on the Independent Visitor Service.

14 Research in Practice

The Workforce Development Manager for Children and Young People's Services, Hazel Ostle, delivered a presentation and gave a demonstration of the Research in Practice partnership licence (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The licence allows all those with a Durham County Council email address to access a range of information and resources, including digital resources, podcasts, webinars, caselaw and publications which support evidence based practice with children and young people. The Panel received a 'walk through' of the website which enables the user to develop their knowledge by searching on specific topics.

15 Any other business

The Senior Partnerships Officer informed the Panel of a stakeholder event taking place on 27 October 2022 from 1.00 pm to 3.00 pm at Sherburn Hill Care Leaver's Centre and the Children in Care Council's Halloween event, also taking place on 27 October, from 1.30 pm to 3.30 pm. Members were encouraged to attend the events.

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 Maple House - Aycliffe Secure Centre Transition Home

The Service Manager for Children and Young People presented the monthly update on Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings and answered questions from Members (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.