

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 31 March 2023 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor M Simmons (Chair)**

### **Members of the Panel:**

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, J Charlton, S Deinali, J Griffiths, C Hunt, B Kellett, K Robson, K Rooney, A Sterling, S Townsend and C Varty.

### **Co-opted Members:**

J Bell, J Gamble, Luke and W Taylor

### **Also Present:**

Laura Counce – Service Manager for Children and Young People  
Sharon Davey – Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence  
Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care  
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager  
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children  
Deb Loraine – Service Manager  
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School  
Michelle Summerbell – Team Manager, The Full Circle  
Stephen Tracey – Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager  
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer  
Julian Wilson – Lawyer

## **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Bell, I Cochrane, B Coult, O Gunn, T Henderson, J Miller and A Reed, Co-opted Members Billie-Leigh, C Brown, S Neale and R Woods and from officers J Henderson and M Stenton.

## **2 Substitute Members**

No substitute members were in attendance.

## **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 February 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The following matters arising were reported:

- The Head of Children's Social Care invited Members to a separate meeting, to be arranged, to discuss views on the government's strategy and consultation on children's social care, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'. Suggested dates for the meeting will be circulated to Members in due course.
- A progress update on the meeting with the Marketing team regarding the 'Don't Forget Us' campaign will be brought to the next Panel meeting.

#### **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 informed the Panel that the total number of children looked after stood at 1,067, including 29 young people placed for adoption, 57 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC) and 293 care leavers.

It was reported that whilst the number of children looked after had increased, Durham's figures compare favourably regionally. Durham continues to receive a significant number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people as part of the national transfer scheme.

#### **6 Ofsted Updates**

Ofsted rated The Manse as 'good' following the recent visit and outcomes were awaited in respect of two further inspections completed during the month. The Head of Children's Social Care thanked all those involved for their hard work to deliver the good outcome.

#### **7 Proud Moments**

The Service Manager for Children and Young People spoke of her pride in the progress of a teenager who was new to care. The young person had engaged well with staff and experts to receive help and during a recent Ofsted visit, the young person spoke to inspectors about how much they valued the care they received.

Members were delighted to receive a progress update on Caitlyn who is now in the first year of a social work degree and achieved 75% in her first assignments, which is equivalent to a first class degree.

The Mockingbird fostering hub recently supported a young person when their main carer was admitted to hospital. The young person, who has learning difficulties, had settled well in the care of another foster carer in the hub and had benefited from the familiarity which had helped to maintain routines.

It was reported that the Director of the Fostering Network in Scotland had visited Durham to gather information on Durham's Mockingbird model, with a view to replicating the model.

The Chair announced that Laura Counce, Service Manager, was leaving the Authority and the Panel placed on record their thanks to Laura for being instrumental in the transformation of children's homes and they wished her well for the future.

## **8 Children in Care Council Update**

Luke of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) delivered a presentation on the Care Day event which took place on 17 February. The event was facilitated by the young people and celebrated the care experience (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Project Manager spoke of how proud he was of all the young people who had contributed to make the event a success and he recognised that some young people had overcome confidence challenges in order to participate in the day. One young person had written a particularly poignant piece about their social worker and this will be included in the weekly staff briefing by the Head of Children's Social Care.

The Panel discussed how much they had enjoyed the day and they asked Luke to thank all the young people who had made the event so special.

Luke then referred the Panel to previous discussions with regard to creating starter packs for young people on entering care, to remind them that they are cared for, noting these would be particularly useful in times when children and young people enter care in emergency situations. Examples of the care packs will be brought to a future meeting.

The Panel acknowledged the value of Care Day and suggested ways to raise funds for future celebrations and events.

## **9 Performance Report Quarter 3**

The Panel considered the Performance Update presented by Stephen Tracey, Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager, which provided an overview of performance in relation to looked after children and care leavers to the end of December 2022 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted the increase in the number of young people entering care aged 14-17 years and the impact of the national transfer scheme. It was reported that placement stability continues to be an issue, with fewer young people in long-term placements. A decrease in missing incidents was reported during the quarter and the number of care leavers not in education, employment and training continues to increase, following the Covid-19 pandemic, an issue which is reflected regionally and nationally.

With respect to Social Worker caseloads the Panel was pleased to see that the majority of Social Workers have a caseload fewer than 25 cases and none have more than 30 cases.

In relation to missing incidents, the Service Manager for Countywide Services explained that a dedicated team had been established to investigate missing incidents and to implement strategies and disruption plans.

The Head of the Virtual School informed the Panel that all young people looked after in year 10 are linked with DurhamWorks to provide support with pathway plans. In response to a question as to whether education, employment and training outcomes were better for care leavers who remain with their carers, the Head of Children and Social Care spoke of evidence to support the theory that young people who are safe and happy achieve better educationally. Members also referred to the importance of ensuring that young people are aware of key milestones such as deadlines for applications for college and university courses. Luke commented that the young people had discussed extending the care starter pack, to design a pack for care leavers which could include relevant information. The Head of Children's Social Care suggested that it may be useful to undertake a survey of care leavers to gather their views on the type of information that would be of benefit.

The Panel also discussed that care leavers may benefit from a care leaver mentoring scheme. Officers highlighted the role that Young Person's Advisers and Social Workers play in helping young people through the transition. The Care Leavers' Hub in Sherburn provides for care experienced young people to meet, socialise and access practical support and information on employment and training opportunities.

There are plans to open similar hubs in other locations across the county and steps are being taken to identify suitable accessible buildings which are fit for purpose.

**Resolved:**

That the content of the report be noted.

**10 Health Update (including Mental Health)**

**a NHS - Report and presentation by the Designated Nurse for Children in Care**

The Panel received the Annual Health Report presented by the Designated Nurse for Children in Care, Jo Gamble (for copy of report and presentation see file).

The Panel noted information on local health indicators, the challenges faced during 2021-22 and key priorities for the future. Whilst the number of children looked after had continued to increase and figures for Durham remain above the national average, only 9% of children in care were placed beyond a 20 mile radius of Durham, which was below the national average.

One of the key challenges was the reduction in the number of children being seen by a dentist which was a trend reflected nationally, however the current position for 2022 -23 showed an improving picture with regard to dental checks. Data up to end of quarter three showed that compliance for the completion of health assessments had significantly improved. Other challenges reported during the period included the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of the national transfer scheme and the lack of specialist mental health provision. Areas for development include improving access to health assessments for those young people placed out of the county and supporting the local authority with recruitment of foster carers.

The Vice Chair referred to barriers with regard to carrying out initial health assessments within the required timescales. Officers responded that there had been challenges with regard to health providers obtaining appropriate consents however this had improved during the first quarter of the current year and when the appropriate paperwork was in place, approximately 80 to 93% of young people were offered an appointment within 15 working days.

Moving forward the quarterly performance reports provided by the Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager will include additional information in relation to Initial Health Assessments, Review Health Assessments and dental updates to ensure members continue to receive timely information.

## **b Full Circle Annual Report 2021-22**

Michelle Summerbell, Team Manager of The Full Circle presented the Full Circle Annual Performance Report (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Providing background, the Team Manager explained the therapeutic team had provided an integrated children's mental health service since 1995. In addition to providing therapeutic support to children and young people, advice and guidance is also provided to parents, carers and professionals on issues such as attachment and the impact of trauma.

The Team Manager explained that the young people of the CiCC worked on a design project for the Full Circle's new premises, which included using their artwork and poetry to decorate therapy rooms and include in the visitors' book. In the future, the service plans to increase the offer in respect of residential homes and offer more bespoke training sessions and develop drop-in sessions for care leavers. Outcome measures identified that 95% of young people who had been open to the Full Circle had improved outcomes and the Team Manager highlighted feedback from Ofsted in 2022 reported that the team provides highly effective support for young people's emotional needs.

The Panel commented that the report provided a valuable insight into the scope of the work and Members referred to anecdotal evidence from within their wards as to the benefits of the work.

### **Resolved:**

That the report and presentations be noted.

## **11 Language Update**

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the powerful impact of words written by practitioners when recording information in young people's files, and how the choice of words may unintentionally misrepresent what young people are experiencing at the time.

Members recognised that language is constantly evolving and some words and phrases that were common parlance in previous years are no longer acceptable in the current climate. Officers spoke of the good quality social work practice in Durham and the steps taken to use less jargon and move towards a trauma-informed approach.

The Service Improvement Manager explained that when access requests are made, those wishing to review their records are offered assistance and practitioners can help to explain why particular words and phrases were used.

Whilst records cannot be amended, discussions about records can be added to the file. The Manager commented that recordings are increasing being written to the young person, as opposed to writing about the young person.

It was agreed that the film from which the quotes were taken, will be shown as part of the next language update, depicting the young person's perspective of what they were experiencing at that time in their lives.

## **12 Protected Characteristics Update**

The Head of Children's Social Care provided an update on the progress of the request made by the CiCC for Durham County Council to adopt care experience as a protected characteristic. The advice from the Monitoring Officer was that the process should go through a motion to full Council. The CiCC were asked to survey the larger group of young people for their views on what it would mean to them and what the implications would be of having care experience included as a protected characteristic, and for a report to be brought by the CiCC (supported by Investing in Children) to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel, for discussion.

## **13 Such other business**

The Panel agreed to send a 'good luck' card to all children looked after who are about to sit SATs and exams and it was suggested this should be done annually at exam time. It was agreed that the card would be printed from a design chosen from the artwork produced by the CiCC and the Head of the Virtual School agreed to progress this over the Easter holiday period.

The Chair suggested that consideration should be given to setting up a group of Chairs and Vice Chairs of local Corporate Parenting Panels to share ideas and good practice.

## **14 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.

**15 Regulation 44 visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Durham County Council's Children's Residential Homes**

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

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.