

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 15 December 2023** 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, L Mavin, J Nicholson (substitute for J Charlton), S Quinn, A Reed, K Rooney, A Savory, S Townsend, M Wilson and C Varty

Co-opted Members:

Billie-Leigh, J Gamble, Luke and W Taylor

Also Present:

L Baldry – Service Manager
L Dodds – Team Manager
K Dudding - Safeguarding Nurse
R Farnham - Head of Children's Social Care
R Harris – Service Improvement Manager
James, Demi and Zoe (foster family)
T Lovell – Solicitor, Children, Adults and Health
C Murray – Operations Manager
L Peacock - Participation and Engagement Officer
P Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children's Homes
Sarah Jane (care leaver)
T Shaw – Team Manager
M Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
S Tracey – Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager
J Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer
D Wilson – Senior Commissioning Officer

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors J Charlton, T Henderson, C Hunt, Co-opted Members J Bell and C Brown and from officer M Stenton.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor J Nicholson was in attendance for Councillor J Charlton.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

With regard to matters arising, the Head of Children's Social Care updated the Panel on the proposal for care experience to be made a protected characteristic and she explained that since the Children in Care Council had brought the issue to attention, a survey of the broader group of children and young people looked after had been carried out which found overwhelming support to take the matter forward. An update is expected to be brought to the March meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel, to outline the next steps.

4 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

5 Number of Children in Our Care and Care Leavers

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that the current number of children looked after had increased slightly on the previous month and stood at 1,202 which included 28 young people placed for adoption, 306 care leavers and 81 unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people (UASC).

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the Ofsted visit to Durham on 14 and 15 November 2023 which focused on the Care Leavers' Service. The initial feedback was positive and the letter from Ofsted will be published on 12 January 2024. The Head of Children's Social Care thanked all those involved in hosting and participating in the visit.

The Panel noted that an assurance visit had taken place at Aycliffe Secure Centre, which also resulted in positive feedback and further information will be provided to the Panel, on the findings, in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Head of Children's Social Care introduced this month's proud moments by reminding the Panel that Luke is an ambassador for the Children's Commissioner for England. As part of his role, Luke took part in a podcast in which he gave a candid interview about being a care leaver and he shared his thoughts on initiatives to support and nurture young people.

Members were encouraged to view the full interview which is available on the Children's Commissioner's website. The Head of Children's Social Care commented that the podcast illustrated why Luke is such an excellent ambassador and she added that Durham is proud that Luke is engaged in the national agenda. The link to the podcast was circulated to Panel members:

[The IMO Podcast: open and honest conversations with care leavers - IMO \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/podcast-open-and-honest-conversations-with-care-leavers-imo)

The Head of Children's Social Care explained that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Panel had established a regional Corporate Parenting Chairs' and Vice-Chairs' network, to share good practice between local authorities in the north east. At the most recent meeting, a film was shown of Billie-Leigh presenting her 'Megaphone' poem at the Council meeting. Those in attendance at the meeting had been so impressed by the beauty of the poem that they had asked that their thanks be conveyed to Billie-Leigh.

Rachel Harris, Service Improvement Manager, concluded the proud moments by thanking the young people for the positive comments they made at the recent Ofsted visit. The Service Improvement Manager informed the Panel that the inspectors met with a group of young people and the young people agreed that staff could observe the meeting. A particularly proud moment came for the staff when the inspectors asked the young people whether they had heard of, or, were involved in, the Corporate Parenting Panel. The positivity and enthusiasm displayed by the young people when answering the question was overwhelming for the staff to hear and the Service Improvement Manager thanked the young people for their kind words.

8 Use of Language for Children in Care

Kelly Dudding, Safeguarding Nurse, delivered a presentation on the work of the NHS trust in relation to the use of language for children in our care (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that an audit was carried out on 10 health assessments chosen at random, in order to assess the language used. Overall, the findings were positive, the voice of the child was clear in assessments and the assessments acknowledged young people as individuals. However, there were some areas for improvement including adding the full description when using acronyms / abbreviations, and that phrases such as 'contact' and 'decline' should be replaced with 'family time' and 'choose not to accept.' In one assessment, text had been copied and pasted from one assessment to another, in error.

In response to a comment from the Vice-Chair who sought assurance that the issues were being addressed, the Safeguarding Nurse confirmed that following the audit, the 'cut and paste' error had been brought to the attention of the staff member and regular deep-dive audits of health assessments are carried out, with inaccuracies being followed-up with the staff members concerned.

9 Children in Care Council Update

The Panel welcomed foster carer James and his foster daughter Demi and daughter Zoe, to the meeting. The young people explained that they regularly attend the Art Café and they had received money from the Education Fun Fund to buy a sewing machine, to set up their own business embroidering cards. They had completed an order of cards for Investing in Children and at the meeting, they presented the Chair of the Panel and the Head of Children's Social Care with Christmas cards they had made.

Members commended the work and Councillor Quinn suggested that Demi and Zoe could consider taking orders from the Panel members for Christmas cards for 2024 which they could work on throughout the year. The Senior Partnerships Officer offered to link with James to discuss if Demi and Zoe, would like to take-up the project.

Luke and Billie-Leigh then presented highlights of the work of the Children in Care Council over the past month (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes). They updated the Panel that the Education Fun Fund has received over 150 applications to date, of which over 100 were from care experienced young people. The presentation included examples of the application forms completed by the young people themselves and case studies on how the young people have used the money which demonstrated that the fund is making a difference to the young people.

Rob Johnson, Project Manager for Investing in Children, commented on the benefits of the Education Fun Fund which was a grass roots idea by the young people and its success was helped by the support of practitioners. Melanie Stubbs, Head of the Virtual School, commented that practitioners had listened to the young people and one of the recurring themes had been their concern at their lack of input into how pupil premium plus is spent. The practitioners explained to the young people that pupil premium plus funding is required to be used to address the wider needs of pupils rather than being ring-fenced for individual young people. For this reason, the Head of the Virtual School built on the idea to develop the Education Fun Fund so that young people could apply for funding to help to fulfil their ambitions. The application process is important for the young people for empowerment and to develop life skills such as money management and decision making.

Members were heartened that the young people were asking for the amount of funding that they felt they needed, rather than the full amount and in some instances, young people were using the funding to support others less fortunate than themselves.

Billie-Leigh reminded Panel members that they are welcome to attend all Children in Care Council meetings, not only the joint CPP/CiCC meetings, to join the conversations.

10 Care Leavers Service Positivitree

Tracy Shaw and Lindsey Dodds, Team Managers, provided an overview of the Positivitree initiative which is part of the national leaving care benchmarking forum Positivitree campaign (for copy of report and presentation see file).

The Panel heard that Durham is part of the forum which provides benchmarking standards for services to care leavers throughout the country. The Positivitree signifies growing the local offer for care leavers and part of this work is concerned with raising awareness. Durham Care Leavers' Service management team met to consider how to put the work into action in Durham by improving the local offer through actions such as creating more training and employment opportunities and increasing the offer in Care Leavers' Hubs. A 'touring' Positivitree will be used when practitioners visit businesses, employers and leisure facilities to encourage agencies to think about what they can pledge to care experienced young people. Ideas from the pledges will be taken to the regional board to consider whether they can be taken up regionally.

Members spent time at the meeting making their own pledges and If Members had any additional pledges, following the meeting, they were asked to forward them to the Senior Partnerships Officer.

Resolved:

That members of the Corporate Parenting Panel note the Care Leavers' Service work with the Positivitree and made pledges of their own.

11 Performance Report Quarter 2

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager, Stephen Tracey, delivered a report and presentation on performance (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel noted a net increase in the number of children and young people in our care as the number of children entering care has increased and the number of young people leaving care has remained steady. The age cohorts of 5-10 years and 10-15 years had seen increases in those entering care and starts for the pre-school age group had seen a slight reduction.

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager updated the Panel that analysis of data indicated that the number of UASC referred through the national transfer scheme attributed to approximately 70% of the increase in those entering care.

There is evidence of pressures on performance with a reduction in the timeliness of initial health assessments and review health assessments although this may be partly due to delays in receiving the necessary paperwork.

Comparisons with statistical neighbours show that Durham has more young people in foster care and utilises its own provision more frequently than neighbouring authorities. The Panel noted that short term placement stability had improved and the number of children living with friends and family had increased.

Missing episodes continued to increase and the issue was being closely monitored.

With respect to care leavers, it was reported that the vast majority are in suitable accommodation.

Councillor Reed expressed concern at the high number of UASC and she asked for further information on funding and support offered to UASC young people. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that, under the national transfer scheme, every local authority receives an allocation of UASC, which is based on the percentage of young people in the population. The majority of UASC that Durham cares for enter through the national transfer scheme, however, there are some spontaneous arrivals. As Durham is the largest local authority in the north east, it receives a large allocation. Funding is allocated by the Home Office which is used to provide accommodation, which in most cases for those under 16 will be either foster or residential placement and those over the age of 16 will be supported into accommodation. In Durham, resources have been used to set up a dedicated UASC team. Where possible, the service aims to match children and young people with communities where they have connections. The Panel noted that UASC are provided with the same services and support as all looked after children and young people.

The Head of Children's Social Care suggested that the Panel may wish to consider an update on the work of the UASC team, in the new year. This was agreed and the topic will be added to a future agenda.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

12 Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service

Carmel Murray, Operations Manager, presented the annual report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service, covering the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The manager explained that IROs have a dual role and work as Independent Reviewing Officers for children looked after and they also chair Child Protection Conferences. The annual report covered the work undertaken in relation to both roles.

The report highlighted what is working well, areas for improvement and it identified priorities for 2023/24. During 2022/23, a high level of performance was maintained, including 85% of initial child protection conferences and 95% of review child protection conferences being held within timescales. Over 90% of young people participated in their reviews by attending themselves or through their social worker or carer.

One of the primary roles of the IRO is to scrutinise care planning for young people, with regular meetings being held with social workers and young people to ensure that permanent plans are reached as soon as possible and that the plans are in the best interest of the young person. The IROs visit young people before their reviews to ensure the young person's wishes are given appropriate weight in the care planning process. IROs are required to provide oversight and quality assurance and challenge the service, when it is appropriate to do so.

In the future the service will aim to increase pre-conference visits to young people and continue to promote the voice of each young person in their care experience. IROs have arranged to meet with a group of young people on a quarterly basis to ensure ongoing consultation, including discussions on how young people would like to contribute to their reviews. The IRO service will work with partners regionally and nationally in response to recommendations from the care review, to align with regional models.

The Vice-Chair referred to the reference in the report to an increasing volume of rearranged meeting requests and she asked the reason for this.

The Operations Manager explained various reasons for rearrangements which may be at the request of the young people or practitioners and it was noted that some meetings are rearranged for reasons of good practice. The Head of Children's Social Care added that whilst flexibility is required, the work is ongoing to reduce rearrangement of meetings, when avoidable.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

13 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.

14 Regulation 44 Visits

The Senior Commissioning Officer, Dawn Wilson, presented the Regulation 44 Visits report which provided information on monitoring activity undertaken by the Integrated Commissioning service in relation to Independent Children's Residential homes where Durham young people are placed (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.