



Corporate Parenting Panel

Date **Friday 19 July 2024**

Time **9.30 am**

Venue **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham**

Business

Part A

Items which are open to the public and press

- 1 Apologies for Absence
- 2 Substitute Members
- 3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 21 June 2024 (Pages 3 - 14)
- 4 Declarations of Interest
- 5 Number of Children in our Care and Care Leavers - Verbal update from Head of Children's Social Care / Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
- 6 Ofsted Updates - Verbal update from Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
- 7 Proud Moments - Verbal update, Strategic Managers
- 8 Experts Through Experience - Presentation of young people from the Children in Care Council (Pages 15 - 22)
- 9 Peer Mentoring Scheme - Report of Head of Children's Social Care (Pages 23 - 36)
- 10 Lifelong Links - Family Finding - Report of Head of Children's Social Care (Pages 37 - 48)
- 11 Youth Justice Service Update - Report of County Durham Youth Justice Service Manager (Pages 49 - 60)
- 12 Fostering Service Annual Update - Report of Head of Children's Social Care (Pages 61 - 90)

- 13 Such other business as, in the opinion of the Chair of the meeting, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration.
- 14 Any resolution relating to the exclusion of the public during the discussion of items containing exempt information.

Part B

Items during which it is considered the meeting will not be open to the public (consideration of exempt or confidential information)

- 15 Regulation 44 Visits - External Children's Homes - Report of Head of Integrated Commissioning Service (Pages 91 - 98)
- 16 Such other business as, in the opinion of the Chair of the meeting, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration.

Helen Bradley

Director of Legal and Democratic Services

County Hall
Durham
11 July 2024

To: The Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)
Councillor M Walton (Vice-Chair)

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, C Bell, S Deinali, J Griffiths, T Henderson, C Hunt, B Kellest, L Mavin, D Oliver, S Quinn, A Reed, K Robson, K Rooney, A Savory, P Sexton, S Townsend, C Varty, J Watson and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, C Brown, J McCarthy, E Reed, W Taylor, F Tweddle, R Woods and Children in Care Council representatives

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DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL
CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 21 June 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), S Deinali, L Fenwick, J Griffiths, C Hunt, B Kellett, L Mavin, A Reed, K Robson, K Rooney, A Savory, C Varty and M Wilson.

Co-opted Members:

Courtney, Luke and W Taylor

Also Present:

Lesley Baldry – Service Manager
Sarah Blenkinsopp – Virtual School and PLAC Manager
Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care
Paula Gibbons – Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Kate Lonsdale – Lawyer, Children and Adults Services
Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer
Rachael Riley – Operations Manager, Children Looked After and Care Leavers
Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children’s Homes
Tracy Shaw – Team Manager
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Adcock-Forster, C Bell, D Oliver and S Quinn; from Co-opted Members Billie-Leigh, Fiona Tweddle and Rebecca Woods and from officers M Stenton and M Stubbs.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor L Fenwick substituted for Councillor S Quinn.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 17 May 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of interest

Councillors A Reed and A Savory as serving Magistrates, declared interests in agenda item 10, the Care Leavers Custody Project.

5 Number of Children In Our Care and Care Leavers

The Head of Children's Social Care, Rachel Farnham, informed the Panel that the total number of children in our care continued to fall and currently stood at 1,201, including 27 young people placed for adoption and 76 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC), of whom 44 were care leavers. There were 334 care leavers in total.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that a local area SEND inspection was underway. Inspections had also taken place at Moorside children's home and Aycliffe Centre, with positive feedback. Further details of the outcomes would be provided to the Panel in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Strategic Manager for Children's Homes, Paul Rudd, spoke of how proud he was of the hard work by staff and young people at Moorside children's home which resulted in such a positive Ofsted visit.

The Participation and Engagement Officer, Lee Peacock, commended the 'Experts Through Experience' group of young people who had carried out enquiry work on brothers and sisters. The group presented their work, including well-considered recommendations, to senior management. The work will also be presented to a future meeting of the Panel.

The Service Improvement Manager, Rachel Harris, was pleased to report that Mind of My Own had achieved an outstanding organisation award which was well deserved recognition of the commitment from the staff and young people involved.

8 Care Leavers Service: My Plan, My Future

The Panel received the Care Leavers Service: My Plan, My Future report presented by Lesley Baldry, Strategic Manager (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager described how the My Plan, My Future tool enabled young people to review their pathway plans and Young Person Advisors (YPAs) use the tool with young people, in their direct work sessions. The Panel noted that the initiative was adapted by Durham's Care Leavers service using a model set up by another local authority and young people from the Children in Care Council were consulted in its design.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel:

- (a) considered this direct working tool developed alongside young people; and
- (b) agreed that the tool may be used for pathway plan reviews for young people who have left care.

9 Children in Care Annual Survey 2024

The Committee considered the Children in Care Annual Survey 2024, presented by Rachael Riley, Service Manager and Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The officers highlighted that surveys were one of the key tools used to ensure children and young people's voices were heard, to develop services and achieve the best outcomes for young people. Respondents provided their views on the support they receive, what is working well and areas for further development.

A total of 30 surveys were completed which was lower than the service had hoped for, however, the rate of return may have been impacted by the fact that a number of surveys were being conducted at the same time. Positive views included that 93% of the young people who responded said that their worker did what they said they would do; that they felt involved in decisions about their lives and that they felt safe. 90% of young people said their worker took the time to get to know them; 89% responded that they found their worker friendly and easy to talk to and 86% said their worker helped them to understand.

The responses included areas for further consideration, for example, only 83% of those who responded said their worker helped them to understand why they could not live with their family. Only 89% of respondents said they were helped to see their family and friends as often as they would like, 74% said school was good, 82% said their health and wellbeing was good and only 60% said they found it easy to understand their care plan.

Analysis of the survey found that broadening the survey questions may have led to greater context, for example. the survey asked how many workers young people had since entering care however it did not ask how long the young person had been in care.

Luke commented on the relatively low response rate and he stated the view that young people may need tangible evidence to believe that survey results lead to change. He added that whilst surveys which were quick and easy to complete may have a good rate of return, the information gathered may be too brief to be meaningful.

In response to the learning from the survey, Rachael Riley, Service Manager acknowledged that changes in the workforce greatly impact young people's relationships with professionals. She informed the Panel that 'About Me' profiles were to be rolled out across the Children in Care teams to ensure young people were provided with details of their social worker. In addition, there had been investment in 'Clarity and Confidence' to empower practitioners utilise tools to develop confidence to support young people during their journey through care.

The survey found that some young people were not happy with their education which highlighted the importance of young people's views being heard at their PEP meetings. Some young people reported that they did not understand their care plan, therefore the service would continue to improve work around communication and care planning. In addition, the service was planning to develop a consultation group with children and young people to collate questions for the next annual survey for children in care. Surveys for parents and carers were also being considered, to gain their views on services.

Courtney spoke anecdotally of young people in the care of independent foster agencies who had not been made aware of, or encouraged, to complete the annual survey. The Service Manager confirmed the survey was circulated through the Commissioning service, however, Courtney's comment would be followed-up.

Councillor Walton, Vice-Chair, was pleased to hear that local authority foster carers had promoted the survey and she asked whether there had been any follow-up work undertaken with practitioners and carers as to what steps they

had taken to encourage young people in their care to complete the survey. The Service Manager highlighted the competing priorities that exist for carers and practitioners and whilst the Vice-Chair recognised the demands, she stressed that the work warranted a high priority as young people's views were fundamental to inform the direction of travel in the future. The Head of Children's Social Care commented that there was more work to be done to review the range of tools available to ensure as many young people as possible share their views and to increase the reach of the 'you said, we did' messages to demonstrate to young people that their views make a difference.

The Panel noted that work was ongoing to explore how survey work could be incorporated into engagement activities.

Councillor Hunt that suggested that as the survey was an annual survey, there would be scope to broaden the questions in the future, to gain better quality information.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel:

- (a) Considered the content of this report.
- (b) Agreed with its recommendations.
- (c) Agreed that the survey should be repeated annually.

10 Care Leavers Service Custody Project

The Panel received a report and presentation on the Care Leavers Custody Project which was delivered by Tracy Shaw, Team Manager and Lesley Baldry, Service Manager (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that 13 Durham care leavers were currently in custody and care leavers in custody at HMP Durham included Durham care leavers as well as care leavers from other areas of the country. HMP Durham was a reception prison for those who were either awaiting sentencing or waiting to be transferred to other prisons.

The Team Manager explained the aim of the Care Leavers Service Custody Project was to engage with care leavers in custody, to offer support and promote awareness of the local offer which all care leavers were eligible to receive.

The project worked in partnership with prison staff to continue care planning for young people whilst in custody and a link had been established with the Care Leaver Lead at HMP Durham. Monthly drop-in sessions were being held at the prison which 38 young people had attended.

Training sessions had been held for prison staff, to support them to better understand the needs of care leavers in custody. Future plans included the establishment of a group for care leavers in HMP Durham to help inform the work of the Youth Offending and Probation services with regard to earlier interventions. In addition, work was ongoing to develop a peer mentoring scheme. The project was being replicated in other authorities and officers involved in the project were forging links with prisons in other parts of the country to ensure Durham care leavers in custody were offered support. An audit of young people in custody was due to complete in the near future, in order to establish a baseline custody offer.

The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of how proud she was of the work which had led the Probation Service to consider extending the scheme throughout the country. The Team Leader informed the Panel that a recent inspection of HMP Durham found the approach to be of a 'gold standard'.

In response to questions from Councillor Kellett, the Team Leader explained that links had been made with other prisons including female establishments and support was offered up to the age of 25, to align with Durham Care Leavers Service offer.

Councillor Walton, asked for further information on the training provided to prison staff and the Team Leader responded that approximately 30 prison officers had been trained which included providing information on adopting a trauma-informed approach. The feedback had been overwhelmingly positive and further training sessions had been offered. Councillor Walton commented that she would like to see the training being incorporated into the standard training programme for all prison staff.

In relation to a question from Councillor Walton as to the number of young people in custody who had been allocated a peer mentor, the Team Leader replied that at present the peer mentoring scheme was in the early stages of development and Durham's Peer Mentoring Service was investigating establishing a peer mentoring scheme within HMP Durham.

In response to a request from Councillor Walton, the Team Leader agreed that a summary of the audit of young people in custody would be reported to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Luke highlighted that young people in custody may be reluctant to inform staff of their care leaver status for fear of stigmatisation and he referred to discussions at previous Corporate Parenting Panel meetings on the subject of the possibility of Durham County Council adopting care experience as a protected characteristic as its adoption would provide further support for care leavers. The Team Leader agreed that whilst staff were sensitive to stigma and discrimination, the adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic would provide further protection.

Courtney asked whether support was available for young people in custody who were not care leavers and the Team Leader confirmed that a range of support was available including support for mental and physical health and drug and substance misuse.

Councillor Reed expressed concern at delays when care leavers enter custody who are not identified as care leavers for weeks or sometimes months thereafter. The Team Leader explained that the aim was to offer support as quickly as possible. Councillor Reed suggested that the question should be asked as soon as a young person comes into contact with the police, in order that prisons are aware, prior to young person entering prison. The Team Manager agreed to investigate whether there was scope to identify care leavers, within the initial screening process by the police.

The Panel congratulated the team on the work, recognising that the availability of the support provided by the Care Leavers Custody Project could be a pivotal moment for a young person when entering custody.

The Panel also congratulated the Team Leader on her nomination for the Social Worker of the Year award in recognition of the success of the project.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel noted the progress of the custody work of the Care Leavers Service and agreed the future plans.

11 Performance Report

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager, Stephen Tracey, provided an update on performance during the final quarter of the year in relation to children in our care and care leavers (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel heard that whilst the number of children in our care had increased since the same period last year, activity had slowed over the past six months.

The number of initial health assessments completed within 20 working days had decreased however performance in relation to new health assessments had improved. The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager highlighted that the majority of children looked after were fostered, within in-house provision. In respect of placement stability, there had been a slight increase in the number of young people having three or more placements within one year and this was slightly higher than the national average.

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager corrected data within the report, informing the Panel that the number of children in our care with a missing incident was approximately 12% and the number of missing incidents per children in our care who went missing was approximately 6%, which was broadly in line with last year's figures. The number of missing episodes had decreased over the previous six months.

The number of unaccompanied asylum seeker children in our care had increased in recent years, many of whom had transferred to the care leavers service and 50 care leavers were recorded as UASC when first referred. Performance relating to suitable accommodation compared favourably with statistical neighbours. The number of young people in education, employment and training was low compared with previous data, with some being NEET (not in education, employment or training) due to pregnancy, parenting, illness or disability.

Councillor Walton referred to care leavers who had chosen not to use the service and she asked if they could re-engage with the service, should the situation arise. Officers explained that the service continued to contact young people who decided not to engage, three times per year, to inform them of the local offer and they could re-engage with the service. The 'Always Here' policy provided signposting and advice for young people over the age of 25. In addition, information on young people who decided not to engage with direct services was regularly reviewed for indicators which may suggest that a young person may benefit from the offer of support.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2023-24

The Panel received the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report April 2023 – March 2024, for agreement, presented by Jayne Watson, Senior Partnerships Officer (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the Corporate Parenting Panel's Terms of Reference form part of Durham County Council's constitution. The Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report was developed and designed with the help of the young people of the Children in Care Council and representatives of the Children in Care Council will attend the full Council meeting on 17 July 2024, to present the report for endorsement.

Members commended the breadth of the work over the year and the Head of Children's Social Care commented that the achievements would not have been possible had it not been for the engagement of the members.

In response to a question from Councillor Hunt, the officers agreed that the Annual Report would be circulated to all schools through Head Teacher briefings and Virtual School network meetings.

The Chair agreed to share the report at the next regional meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel Chairs.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2023-24 be agreed.

13 Adopt Coast to Coast

The Committee considered the Adopt Coast to Coast report presented by Paula Gibbons, Head of Adopt Coast to Coast (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the cost of living crisis had affected performance in an increasingly competitive market. Since the previous presentation to the Panel in 2023, the number of enquiries, matches and adopters had fallen and whilst enquiries were on the increase, enquiries did not always come to fruition. There were 15 approvals during the year and one of the main challenges over the year was the lack of adopters which continued to be a national issue. The service was proactive to raise awareness of the Adopt Coast to Coast brand, including the strength of the support offer, to provide assurance to potential adopters that the service will be there to support families throughout the adoption journey. The Head of Service thanked members for continuing to be advocates for adoption, throughout their networks.

In response to a question from Courtney as to how the service uses real life stories and profiles of children and young people to market the service, the Head of Service explained that confidentiality is maintained by using anonymised profiles and the use of images was possible only if permission was granted.

Courtney then asked what process was in place when adoption placements did not succeed. The Head of Service informed the Panel that in those circumstances a meeting would be held with the adoptive family and professionals to identify the cause.

In reply to a question from Courtney as to what work was carried out to facilitate links with brothers and sisters, the Head of Service spoke of the drive to ensure opportunities exist for young people to connect with their birth family.

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that whilst the report being considered focused on marketing activity, a further report was to be considered at a future Panel meeting on adoption practice and Courtney was welcome to submit questions, for the answers to be included within the report.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel received the presentation and marketing activity update.

14 Such Other Business

Councillor Deinali reported that at a recent Planning Committee meeting it was apparent that some members were not familiar with the functions of unregulated care homes and she suggested that refresher training would be beneficial for all members of the Council.

The Senior Partnerships Officer highlighted that a refresher session of the Corporate Parenting Panel induction training will be held on 13 September 2024, following the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting.

It was agreed that the Senior Partnerships Officer would liaise with Members' Support with a view to arranging a member development session for all members on the role of corporate parents across the functions of the Council.

15 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.

16 Regulation 44 Visits: Durham County Council Homes

The Panel received a presentation from Paul Rudd, Strategic Manager, which provided an overview of Durham County Council's Children's Homes provision (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

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Experts Through Experience: Enquiry 1

**Brothers and Sisters:
Reasons for separating, critiques,
positives and improvements**

Who Are We?

We are a group of care experienced young people who are passionate about understanding how Durham's social care system for children operates.

As a group we underwent professional training (involving teamwork, communication and sensitivity training) to better prepare us for what we were going to do.

April 2023

We decided that as a first investigation we would look into why brothers and sisters are separated

October 2023

We interviewed and were approved by senior managers in County Durham who gave us the "thumbs up" to continue our investigation.

November 2023 to February 2024

We spent three months planning our interviews.

March 2024

Our interview session took place with young people, foster carers and professionals

June 2024

We showed our presentation to

Our Methodology

1 Planned what would be best to obtain the information we wanted

We discussed what would be the best way to obtain the information we wanted and agreed on interviewing young people and professionals.

2 Planned our questions and interview event

We created our questions that we were going to ask young people and professionals, while remaining sensitive.

3 Carried out our interviews at the YP's hub

We carried out our interviews on young people and professionals and made notes.

4 Gathered our information

This is where we collated our findings and sought out extra statistics from senior managers to support our case.

72% of children were in contact with at least 1 sibling and said their relationship with their sibling was in a better place now. There was an example of foster carers facilitating 'contact' which worked extremely well.



The Mocking Bird pilot got glowing reviews. Professionals/carers asked how do we find out more about it?

What is working well

60% of children said there was nothing they would like to change about coming into care.

Positively almost all children did not think their entry into care was a bad thing. They were able to understand this over time. "Time is a healer."

What we are worried about

Our research suggests most children and young people do not fully understand why they came into care or felt they did not have the opportunity to share their views.

RESOURCES- Professionals told us the main reason for sibling separations was lack of resources, not just locally but nationally, especially for larger sibling groups.

If children needed to be separated, could they be placed closer together? What things could we do better with the resources we have?

Only 50% of children/young people were happy with the amount of family time they had.

Children weren't aware they could ask for more family time.

Professionals said the effects of COVID still have had an adverse affect on resources.

It was raised that there needed to be more pre-emptive support to prevent sibling breakdowns, like that of Full Circle.

We were disheartened to hear that consistency of social workers remains an issue.

Some children were very mature in their approach to reconnection and didn't want to get involved with separated siblings to avoid them becoming distressed if they were settled.

Recommendations/Next Steps

- Extension of the Mockingbird approach
- The importance of life story work and words and pictures to help a child and young person retrospectively understand what happened when entering into care, to help with understanding and to rebuild relationships at a later stage. Ensure there's access to life story work and to audit the quality of the work that's undertaken.
- Later life letters – link in life story work.
- Hearing and responding to the voice of the child is critical and the foundation towards a successful outcome. Respect needs to be given to the wishes and needs of all within the sibling group so that it is the right thing for all.

Recommendations

- Children and young people placed real value in the relationships they have with their carers and felt that carers having the confidence and permission to speak openly about their past and their sibling relationships should be further encouraged.
- The importance felt by children for the social worker and the care team to give time and fully explore issues both now and retrospectively so that the child can understand, and relationships are given the opportunity to be reunified over time.
- The views of children in respect of family time arrangements need to be heard. A recommendation would be that greater preparation time is given with agreements in place so that children get the most from family time. Additionally children felt that the facilities in family time settings require upgrading so that they feel invested in – for example rooms designed by the children or an opportunity to bring along cherished items such as family pets. The Experts group suggest a process is developed to review children's views around family time on a regular basis including how much is offered and give children the choice as to who they would like to see.

Reflections by our Experts

- **“If I asked a question I gave them the space to answer...after all, that’s what I’ve been through myself.”**
- **The interactions that took place were relaxed, supportive and open conversations were emotionally warm, empathetic and mutually supportive.**
- **Professional observers saw a sincerity and a real value in care experienced children and young people interviewing one another.**
- **And our learning.....**
 - **“It has been difficult to analyse the data, what does it all mean?”**
 - **“It has been a stressful process as it relates to personal experience”**
 - **Observations from those involved indicate the value of a peer mentoring approach. The experts group would like to see more ways in which this approach can be approached, for example through the Children in Care Council.**

Corporate Parenting Panel**19 July 2024****Care Leavers Service – Peer Mentoring Scheme****Report of Rachel Farnham, Head of Children's Social Care, Children and Young People's Service, Durham County Council.****Electoral division(s) affected:**

None

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report is to explain the Peer Mentoring Scheme and update Corporate Parenting Panel on the progress of the scheme including future developments.

Executive Summary

- 2 One of the fundamental aims of the scheme is to benefit not only the young people being mentored but the young people and adults with care experience being the mentors. We hope the mentors themselves will feel more part of their local community, we hope that their own emotional wellbeing will increase alongside their confidence, and they will certainly build their CVs. The Peer Mentor Coordinator himself is an example of this as he has worked as an Independent Visitor.
- 3 The building of the scheme is rapidly progressing with ten mentors currently going through the recruitment process and seven young people waiting for mentors.
- 4 Training and development for mentors is now fully developed and all steps being taken are considered to be sustainable and to have little future cost. As the funding from the DFE ends in March 2025 our focus is to build a scheme which can then be funded by the Local Authority.
- 5 Moving forward we have the following aims for the next three months.
 - (a) A database to be built on which will be included the goals of all young people being mentored and their mentors and how we track whether these goals are achieved as part of the scheme.
 - (b) Continue to build our bank of mentors and increase the number of matches to young people.

- (c) Joint working with the Lifelong Links Project will take place to consider how the Peer Mentor Scheme can support a young person as part of that project and to ensure joined up working in terms of young people being supported.
- (d) An admin support worker to be in place supporting the team.
- (e) Continue to build the scheme in a sustainable way including building on the existing links within community, considering ways to bring the mentors and young people together as a group to build networks, increase support and confidence while being able to reduce activity costs and looking at resources and businesses so that the cost of activities is funded.

Recommendations

- 6 Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to:
 - (a) Note the progress of the Peer Mentoring Scheme and provide any comments.

Background

- 7 The Care Leavers Service Manager placed a bid with the DFE on 25th August 2023 to gain funding for the Peer Mentoring Scheme, this bid was placed alongside a bid for the Lifelong Links Programme.
- 8 The service was informed that the bids for both projects were successful on 1st December 2023.
- 9 The funding gained from the DFE is as detailed below and ends on 31st March 2025.
 - (a) Financial Year 2023/2024: £44,209
 - (b) Financial Year 2024/2025: £158,385
- 10 The focus of the scheme is to support young people transitioning to leaving care to have support networks, feel part of their local community and to increase their confidence and emotional wellbeing.
- 11 The service aims to measure success from the voices of young people linked to stability in their first homes, feeling part of their local community and knowing where to gain support as well as being in education, training, or employment.
- 12 A project plan has been in place since December 2023, the focus for the first funding period until March 2024 was the following:
 - (a) Ensuring the scheme was understood and publicised.
 - (b) The recruitment of the Peer Mentor Coordinator.
 - (c) The recruitment of Peer Mentors.
 - (d) Initial identification of young people to be mentored.
 - (e) The recruitment of business administration support.
 - (f) Development of the training for Peer Mentors.
- 13 During the period from December 2023 to March 2024, the Care Leaver Service Manager started to develop the project with support from the Coordinator for the Independent Visitor Scheme within the Youth Offending Service.
- 14 We have ensured that the project is known about by producing a range of leaflets for mentors, professionals, and young people. The team is also working with other service areas to ensure they are aware of the scheme as well as advertising on North-East Jobs and on social media.

- 15 A Peer Mentor Coordinator was appointed in March 2024.
- 16 The Peer Mentor Coordinator has driven forward the recruitment of care experienced young people and adults by linking with our Care Leavers Connect Group and Durham's Participation Worker as well as making links with local businesses such as Amazon and within colleges and universities.
- 17 There are currently five care leavers and care experienced adults going through the recruitment and training process. There are five other mentors' being explored.
- 18 The team is working closely with the Coordinator of our Staying Close Team to identify young people moving into their first home and to offer them Peer Mentoring Support. Two young people engaged with Staying Close have expressed a wish to have a mentor.
- 19 A further five young people have been identified who wish to have a mentor.
- 20 A part time Business Administrator has been appointed and is progressing through the recruitment process.
- 21 Nick Barwick has been commissioned to deliver training and development for the scheme. His Peer Coordinator is mentoring the team Peer Mentor Coordinator and two other members of his team are attending Durham on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of July to deliver training to internal mentors. Sessions will be delivered to Social Workers, Personal Advisors and young people within Staying Close and the Peer Mentoring Scheme. An aspiration session will be delivered with 16-year-olds. The training that Nick and his team are delivering will be replicated and delivered internally in the future.
- 22 In the interim period the initial cohort of mentors are using Durham's own safeguarding training. This will continue to support the work that Nick Barwick delivers.
- 23 The service is developing trauma training with the support of Full Circle and our Emotional Wellbeing Worker. Trauma training for mentors is critical to ensure that they remain emotionally healthy and are not impacted by the experiences of the young people they mentor.

Main implications

- 24 Young People will develop their networks and be supported to use resources within their local community to improve their emotional wellbeing.

- 25 Mentors who are care experienced will be able to increase their own confidence and build their CV's by supporting other young people using their own experience.

Conclusion

- 26 The Peer Mentoring Coordinator is able to ensure that Durham can offer opportunities to care experienced adults and young people to support them to meet their own goals. The Peer Mentoring Coordinator is supporting the recruitment process and guiding the build of the scheme.
- 27 Joint working is taking place between the Care Leavers Service, the Staying Close Coordinator and the Life-Long Links Project to ensure young people are supported with positive networks to enable them to achieve and maintain stability in their lives.
- 28 A sustainable programme is being developed with funding being used to create resources that will be used in County Durham to ensure the scheme will continue when the funding ends in March 2025.
- 29 Goals are being agreed with young people being mentored from the beginning of our involvement with them and progress will be measured to understand whether these goals are being met linked to the wider Care Leaver Service Development Plan.

Author

Lesley Baldry

Tel: 0771 754 1944

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications, this project has been funded by the DFE and is supported by DCC, including appropriate employment checks and training and development for mentors.

Finance

There are no financial implications as the scheme is DFE funded, however, we are already building a sustainable low-cost business case to continue the scheme beyond March 2025.

Consultation

Young people are being consulted throughout the development of the scheme, they are asked for their goals, views on the mentor match and how their goals should be reviewed.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

There is equal access to the scheme for all care leavers and children in care over the age of 16 years.

Climate Change

There is no impact on climate change other than the printing of leaflets and travel for mentors and young people being mentored, however, the intention is to keep activities very close to where the young person lives.

Human Rights

This fits well with the Human Rights, the Right to Life and the Right to Work and Education as a stable life with future aspirations is exactly what we want to achieve.

Crime and Disorder

The Peer Mentoring Project should ensure young people have a positive support network which should reduce offending and the risk of exploitation.

Staffing

Staffing of the scheme is limited to the coordinator and part time admin worker. The mentors are volunteers.

Accommodation

The staff are based within the Stanley Care Leavers Hub and Green Lane within the Care Leavers Team. Activities will take place in the community.

Risk

All mentor's will be DBS checked and carefully matched with young people. There will be safety plans in place, should they be required, dependant on the young people's needs.

Procurement

No implications.

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Progress so far!

Development of the project

- Building a database to track, enquiries, applications and progress of potential Peer Mentors, identifying personal information, training, matches, record of meetings.
- Building a database for referrals, identifying likes dislikes, targets, risks, recording meeting, and information affecting matches.

Advertising

- Building awareness of the Peer Mentoring Service.
- Building links with local Businesses, Colleges and Universities to promote the service and identify possible Peer Mentors. Attending EET Meetings to feedback progress of the service.
- Distributing leaflets, accessing community hubs, attending team meetings.

'You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending'

C.S. Lewis

Recruitment and Referrals

- Development of the application process, references, interviews.
- Referral data base updated to capture referral information

Training (Interim training schedule until the training is delivered by Nick Barwick on 1 & 2 July)

- Online training around Vicarious Trauma, Safeguarding, Hidden Harms, Information Sharing, CSE
- Face to Face Peer Mentor Training – Nick Barwick's Team
- Face to Face Trauma Training - Full Circle
- All mentors attended training by Nick Barwick on 1 and 2 July

Support

- Peer Mentor visit de-briefs created to support mentors within their role.
- 'About me' sheets created to inform mentors and care leavers about their match, likes, dislikes and ambitions.
- Monthly supervision sheet created to support Mentors and allow them a safe space to voice concerns

Ethos

- Empowering the mentors and young people to build a service that will be a benefit now and in the future.



Peer Mentors and Referrals

Number of Peer Mentors	Status
10	<p>8 Mentors Application process complete, DBS applied for (2), DBS back (2), applying (4).</p> <p>2 Mentors going through the application process.</p>
Number of Referrals	Status
7	<p>Coordinator making contact to build relationships, explain the service and build a pen portrait of the young person to pass on to potential Mentors.</p>

‘children are **one** caring
adult away from
being a success’

Nick Barwick

Corporate Parenting Panel**19 July 2024****County Wide Specialist Services:
Lifelong Links – Family Finding****Report of Rachel Farnham, Head of Children's Social Care, Children and Young People's Services, Durham County Council****Electoral division(s) affected:**

None

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report is to provide an update to Corporate Parenting Panel on the Family Finding Lifelong Links (LL) project, including future developments.

Executive Summary

- 2 The Lifelong Links Project is part of Durham County Council's commitment to achieving the reform set out in '*Children's social care: stable homes, built on love, put loving and stable relationships at the heart of children's social care*'. This includes the mission that by 2027, every care-experienced child and young person will feel that they have strong, loving relationships in place.
- 3 The DFE funding was to develop the existing successful Family Group Conference Service that sits within Countywide Specialist Services and the wider commitment to Family Networks being at the core of the work we do.
- 4 The Lifelong Links Project aligns to the Care Leaver Service Development Plan and with our Staying Close Project.

Recommendation

- 5 Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to:
 - (a) Note the progress of the Lifelong Links Project and provide any comments.

Background

- 6 The Service Manager for Countywide Specialist Services submitted a bid with the DFE on 25 August 2023 to gain funding for the Family Finding – Lifelong Links project, this bid was placed alongside the Peer Mentoring Scheme bid and submitted by Lesley Baldry, Service Manager.
- 7 We were told the bids for both projects were successful on 1 December 2023. The funding gained for the Family Finding from the DFE is as below and this ends on 31 March 2025.

23/24	24/25	Total
£56,524.00	£140,963.00	£197,487.00

- 8 Lifelong Links aims to ensure that children in care have a positive support network around them to help them during their time in care and into adulthood.
- 9 In January 2021, the report of the independent evaluation into Lifelong Links was published. The DFE highlight, stable support network and loving relationships are crucial to supporting children in care and care leavers to thrive. The report says:
- (a) 6% of care leavers report having no one at all providing emotional support
 - (b) nearly 10% of young people only had support from their leaving care worker.
 - (c) 22% of care leavers feel lonely always or often, compared to 10% of the general population.
- 10 The programme will enhance existing developments targeting young people in care who are repeatedly missing / exploited. Providing safe stable loving networks will improve the young person's emotional well-being and mental health, creating the conditions to access Full Circle, a specialised, integrated children's mental health service for those who have experienced complex trauma.
- 11 Improved stability for young people, will mean more young people in employment, education or training, creating cost avoidance through:
- (a) Reduced reliance on benefits.
 - (b) Reduced demand to adult mental health services.

- (c) Reduction in homelessness and demand on emergency temporary accommodation.
- 12 The principles the of lifelong links ensures all actions are guided through the young person's wishes. Therefore, the young person's views will be captured throughout the process and to measure success and future developments.
- 13 A project plan has been in place since December 2023, the focus for the first funding period until March 2024 was the following:
 - (a) Identifying key stakeholders and ensuring senior managers understood and promoted the scheme across Durham Children and Young Peoples Service and Partners.
 - (b) Recruitment of the Lifelong Links Coordinators.
 - (c) Promote the offer across the key teams such as Children in Care, IRO service, Fostering and Residential Services.
 - (d) Train the newly appointed and existing FGC staff in Lifelong Links via the Family Rights Group
 - (e) Develop criteria and begin to identify young people who would be offered LL.
 - (f) Recruitment of admin support.
 - (g) Developing key performance indicators and working with LCS systems team to capture outputs.
- 14 During the period from December 2023 to March 2024, we appointed two Lifelong Links Coordinators, from within the existing FGC team, and are currently recruiting to backfill these positions, one candidate has accepted full time temporary post and is currently completing the onboarding process and we have readvertised for the part-time temporary post.
- 15 Training by the Family Rights Group: seven FGC staff are trained in the Lifelong Links Project, leaving three to complete. One-day Manager awareness training has been delivered to eight managers and three members of Lifelong Links staff have completed one-day care leavers training.
- 16 Promotion and Publicity: we have delivered awareness sessions as part Team Managers Briefing, Head of Service monthly briefing and weekly e-mail, IRO team meeting, CiC site briefing, 2 x Families First team meetings, Fostering Team Meeting, Children's Residential Team Manager Meeting, Teenage Foster Care Support Group, Lunch & Learn

Must Do: We will help families to find and use their networks and 3 x Children's Residential Homes team meeting. We have further sessions at team meetings booked in with the Staying Close Team, Care Leavers Teams and other Families First and Residential homes and are to contact external residential homes in Durham, linking in with neighbouring local authorities that also offer Lifelong Links so the information about Durham's offer is available in residential homes in Gateshead, Darlington and Stockton where are young people may be living. We have developed a face book profile, young person's guide, professionals guide, webpage on wider DCC website and development of webpage on the DSCP website.

- 17 Young People: we currently have five children in our care allocated to our Lifelong Links coordinators for their LL programme, a further 19 identified as suitable to progress to consultation. To date four young people have declined the offer to have Lifelong Links and a further three are currently too young for this cohort.
- 18 We have recruited a full time admin who will support Team Leader and Team Manager with Lifelong Links programme. Main tasks include creating and updating Lifelong Links target list, update Lifelong Links referrals spreadsheet, administer and update Circles social networking tool, create and monitor Facebook profile for Lifelong Links, coordinate and minute LL Stakeholder Group, coordinate and minute weekly LL/Peer Mentoring catch-ups, research (e.g. Facebook pages for other LAs), coordinate and minute LL Stakeholder Group, coordinate and minute weekly LL/Peer Mentoring catch-ups, research (e.g. Facebook pages for other LAs).
- 19 LL team leader and peer mentor coordinator have met to discuss linking the two projects and have established a data sheet to track our young people across the projects. They will continue to meet on a regular basis to share learnings and information to embed the joined up working between the projects.
- 20 A dedicated LL email address has also been set-up.
- 21 Moving forward we have the following aims for the next three months:
 - (a) Ongoing FRG training for LL coordinators, FGC staff and senior managers.
 - (b) Continue to identify young people that may be appropriate for lifelong Links through NEET data, PRP, FGC, CYPS Teams, IRO's etc.
 - (c) To have backfilled the FGC posts and have trained firstly in FGC and then Lifelong Links

- (d) Ongoing LCS systems data base development, to support the performance management and impact of the LL project.
- (e) Joint working with the Peer Mentoring Scheme to consider how a Peer Mentor can support a young person through the LL process, providing additional support where required.
- (f) Continue to build the Lifelong Links project in a sustainable way, to achieve the vision of Lifelong Links being available to all of our children in care.

Conclusion

- 22 The Lifelong Links Project is starting to be rolled out, and we are seeing the increased awareness, training and workshops are encouraging social workers IROs and Managers to identify young people who they feel will benefit from the project.
- 23 We are building a sustainable project and performance and impact is captured through LCS case management system. Building a system and resources through the DfE funding that we can continue to use post March 2025.

Author

Deb Loraine

Tel: 07884 753 119

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications, this project is being funded by the DFE and is supported by DCC, including appropriate employment checks and training and development for mentors.

Finance

There is no financial implications currently as the scheme is DFE funded however we are already building a sustainable low cost business case to continue the scheme beyond March 2025.

Consultation

Young people are consulted throughout the development of the scheme, they are asked for their goals, views on the mentor match and how we should review their goals.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

There is equal access for all care leavers and children in care over 16 to the scheme.

Climate Change

There is no impact on climate change other than the printing of leaflets and travel for mentors and young people they are mentoring however the intention is to keep activities very close to where the young person lives.

Human Rights

This fits well with the Human Rights, the Right to Life and the Right to Work and Education as a stable life with future aspirations is exactly what we want to achieve.

Crime and Disorder

The Peer Mentoring Project should ensure young people have a positive support network which should reduce offending and the risk of exploitation.

Staffing

Staffing of the scheme is limited to the coordinator and part time admin worker.

The mentors are volunteers.

Accommodation

The staff are based with the Stanley Care Leavers Hub and Green Lane within the Care Leavers Team and the activities will take place in the community.

Risk

All mentor's will be DBS checked and carefully matched with young people.

There will be safety plans if required dependant on young people's needs.

Procurement

No implications.

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Lifelong Links Programme

May 2024 Update

Deb Lorraine

Service Manager, Countywide Specialist Services



Durham's story so far:

- Appointed 2 Lifelong Links Coordinators
- Meetings held with teams across CYPS
- 7 Family Group Conference Coordinators now trained by Family Rights Group to deliver Lifelong Links – more training to follow
- One-day managers awareness training sessions delivered – more to follow
- Started working with young people and continuous identification of young people that may be suitable for Lifelong Links

Next Steps:

- ❑ Deliver Lifelong Links to our young people on the programme
- ❑ Continue to identify young people appropriate for Lifelong Links and offer them the opportunity to develop their Lifelong Links.
- ❑ Continue to engage with the Golden Triangle of key stakeholders and the promotion of Lifelong Links.
- ❑ Remaining Family Group Conference post to be backfilled and new staff trained in both Family Group Conferencing and Lifelong Links
- ❑ Continue joint working with Peer Mentoring scheme
- ❑ Ongoing LCS systems database development to support the performance management and impact of the Lifelong Links project

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Corporate Parenting Panel

19 July 2024

Youth Justice Service Update (Children in Care in the YJ System, First Time Entrants to the YJ System & Transfers from Police Custody under PACE)



Report of Dave Summers, County Durham Youth Justice Service Manager

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report provides an update on the work of County Durham Youth Justice Service (CDYJS), with a focus on young people who are also in care, our work to prevent young people from entering the youth justice system for the first time (FTEs) and transfers of young people from police custody to Local Authority accommodation under the Police & Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE).

Executive summary

- 2 CDYJS supervises all young people sentenced by the courts, all young people receiving a police caution and all young people remanded in secure accommodation awaiting trial/sentence. In addition, CDYJS also operates a Triage process and a Pre-Caution Disposal process which provide police officers with an alternative to 'formal' police action. All young people falling into any of these categories (with the exception of Triage) are fully assessed to ascertain their risks of reoffending and/or harm to others and their needs. An intervention plan is then produced which, in the case of young people looked after, is developed and delivered in partnership with colleagues in Children's Social Care and elsewhere.
- 3 The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 requires the transfer of children who have been charged and denied bail, pending their first court hearing, to more appropriate Local Authority accommodation, with a related duty in the Children Act 1989 for Local Authorities to accept these transfers. Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 requires both police and Local Authorities to have regard to the welfare and protection of

children, and in 1991 the UK ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, agreeing that custody be used “only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time”.

- 4 On average, around **15%** of the cohort of young people supervised by CDYJS are in Care. At the end of May 2024, that amounted to **25** young people out of a total cohort of **162**.
- 5 ‘First Time Entrant’ (FTE) refers to those young people receiving a caution or conviction for the first time. The latest available data shows **115** young people becoming an FTE in 2023/24. This is a rate of **252** per 100,000 10-17 year olds and is a 40% increase on the previous year. This compares with the Northeast average rate of 178 and a ‘Family Group’ rate of 201. An Improvement Plan has been developed with partners to work to reduce the number of FTEs.
- 6 During 2023 - 2024, Durham Constabulary made 17 requests to DCC for the transfer of young people, detained awaiting hearing in Remand Court, to local authority accommodation. 13 of those requests were met by DCC, the remaining young people being held in police custody until their court hearing.

Recommendation

- 7 Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the content of this report

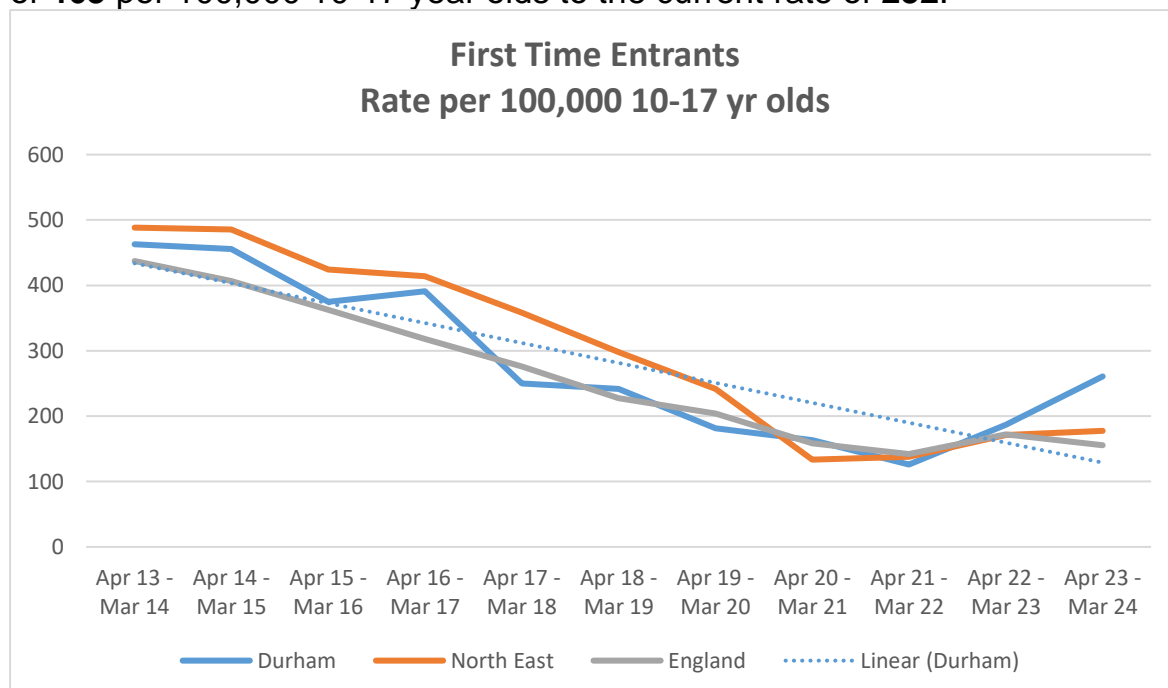
Background

8 County Durham Youth Justice Service (CDYJS), a statutory multi-agency partnership, is part of Children and Young People’s Services, Durham County Council, and is managed by them on behalf of the statutory Management Board. A range of agencies second or deploy staff to CDYJS, these are:

- Durham County Council
- Durham Constabulary
- Probation Service, County Durham & Darlington
- Tees, Esk & Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust (Funded by ICB, PCC)
- Harrogate & District NHS Foundation Trust (Funded by Public Health)
- Humankind (Funded by Public Health)
- North Tees & Hartlepool Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (Funded by ICB).

First Time Entrants (FTE)

9 Between April 2013 and Mar 2024, we have achieved a **43.6% reduction** in first time entrants to the youth justice system, from a rate of **463** per 100,000 10-17 year olds to the current rate of **252**.



10 This compares to a North-East average rate of 177.7 and a National average rate of 155.7 per 100,000 10-17 year olds.

- 11 As can be seen from the above graph, there has been an increase in FTEs in the past two years and the development and implementation of an improvement plan is a priority for the partnership in 2024/25.
- 12 In order to ensure improvement in performance in respect of first-time entrants to the youth justice system we have:
- Reviewed, amended and embedded our out-of-court processes in conjunction with Durham Constabulary and One Point Service (Early Help).
 - Developed an escalation process for disagreements in decision making
 - Ensured greater coordination between ‘on-street’ restorative approaches by police and CDYJS interventions.
 - Implemented a new YJB assessment tool.
 - Undertook a review of service structure and restructured, including greater collaboration with early help colleagues.
- 13 CDYJS takes the view that whilst diversion from caution or prosecution of young people, when appropriate, is the preferred option; this can only be justified if there is a meaningful intervention, by CDYJS and other agencies working together with the young person which aims to reduce the risk of reoffending. Therefore, CDYJS provides the Pre-Caution Disposal (PCD), under which a full assessment of the young person is undertaken, and an intervention programme implemented. Currently, around 75% of young people receiving a PCD do not go on to reoffend.

Young People in Care

- 14 Currently, 15% of the cohort of young people supervised by CDYJS are young people in Care. These include young people who are in Care because of their involvement with the youth justice system through being remanded to youth detention accommodation (secure) whilst awaiting trial or sentence.
- 15 During 2023 – 2024, Remand bed nights (Remands to Youth Detention Accommodation) at **464 nights** (10 young people). Each case where a young person was remanded to youth detention, has been reviewed and in all cases the remand to youth detention was considered appropriate due, mostly, to the seriousness of the offences but also due to the offending history of the young person.
- 16 Case Managers from CDYJS, including Social Workers, assess and plan in respect of young people, jointly with colleagues from Children’s

Social Care and other agencies when a young person is looked after. The aim of joint planning is to ensure that decisions taken in respect of the care of a young person, in a looked after review for example, consider the impact that decision may have on the risk of reoffending and to ensure that the care needs of looked after young people are given full consideration in sentence planning.

- 17 We previously undertook a quality audit/review, jointly with colleagues in Children's Social Care and lead by a researcher from Cardiff University, of our work in respect of young people who are looked after to ensure that they are not unnecessarily criminalised for their behaviour compared to young people who are not looked after. This provided us with assurance about processes and practice and resulted in improvements in our joint working.

Transfer under PACE

- 18 Under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, the detention of a child in Police custody, after charge and whilst awaiting their first court hearing, is permissible only where exceptional circumstances prevent movement (such as extreme weather conditions) or where the child is deemed to pose a risk of serious harm to the public between being charged and appearing at court and no Local Authority secure accommodation is available.
- 19 Once a Custody Officer has determined that a child is to be charged and detained pending their appearance at court, they must decide whether the child poses 'an imminent risk of serious harm to the public'. If it is decided this applies to the child, then they must request the Local Authority accommodate the child, until the court hearing, in secure accommodation. If the Local Authority is unable to identify any available secure accommodation (or it is 'impracticable' to transfer), then the Police may detain the child in Police custody. If the Custody Officer decides that the child does not pose an imminent risk of serious harm, then they must request the Local Authority accommodate the child in 'none-secure accommodation'.

Conclusion

- 20 The numbers of First Time Entrants to the youth justice system has shown increases locally, regionally and nationally however not to the same extent as seen in Durham. Having reviewed the causes of this increase, we believe it is largely driven by a focus on dealing with 'neighbourhood crime' in localities, resulting in greater number of arrests of young people. The impact of a criminal record on the prospects of a young person, should not be under-estimated and is never positive. The aim of our work to reduce first time entrants is to ensure that only those young people for whom there is no acceptable

alternative (due to the seriousness of the offence and/or offending history) are those who are cautioned or prosecuted at court.

- 21 In respect of our work with young people who are looked after by the Local Authority and those transferred from Police custody to secure accommodation under PACE, the evidence suggests that we are operating processes that meet the needs of young people as well as manage the risks they may present to communities.

Background papers

- County Durham Youth Justice Plan 2024 - 2025

Authors

Dave Summers

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

None

Finance

None

Consultation

None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None

Climate Change

None

Human Rights

None

Crime and Disorder

The statutory duty of County Durham Youth Justice Service is to prevent offending by children and young people.

Staffing

None

Accommodation

None

Risk

None

Procurement

None

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County Durham Youth Justice Service

First Time Entrants, Children in Care, Transfers
from Police Custody

Dave Summers

Manager

County Durham Youth Justice Service



Children in Care

- **15%** of CDYJS cohort are Children Looked After (25/162)
- Remand 'Bed Nights': **464** nights (10 Young People)
- Joint planning: impact on risk of reoffending & care needs considered
- Criminalisation of Children in Care: Research - assurance

First Time Entrants

- **115** young people (2023/24)
- Rate = **252** per 100,000 (10-17)
- National average rate, Regional average rate & Family rate all increased
- **44%** reduction since 2013
- Increases in last 2 years – post Covid restrictions, focus on neighbourhood crime
- **75%** of young people kept out of YJ system (below caution) do not reoffend

Developments

- Reviewed, amended and embedded our out-of-court processes in conjunction with Durham Constabulary and One Point Service (Early Help).
- Developed an escalation process for disagreements in decision making
- Ensured greater coordination between ‘on-street’ restorative approaches by police and CDYJS interventions.
- Implemented a new YJB assessment tool.
- Undertook a review of service structure and restructured the service, including greater collaboration with early help colleagues.

Transfers to Local Authority from Police Custody

- 17 requests from Police
- 13 transferred to Secure (Aycliffe)
- Processes reviewed 2022
- HMI Probation 'Remand Thematic': CDYJS largest number of transfers

Corporate Parenting Panel**19 July 2024****Annual Report of the Fostering Service
2023 - 2024****Report of Rachel Farnham, Head of Children's Social Care, Children and Young People's Services, Durham County Council****Electoral division(s) affected:**

None

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2023-2024 outlines the work of the Fostering Service during the period 2023-24 and the activity of the Fostering Panels.
- 2 The annual report is attached at appendix 2 of this cover report.

Executive Summary

- 3 The report provides a summary of the placement of children showing the usage of inhouse foster carers and increasing numbers of family and friends carers, as well as the use of independent fostering agencies.
- 4 There is an overview of recruitment and retention activity, exploring Foster with North East and the new Pathfinder Hub and how this has impacted on our recruitment performance.
- 5 As we are aware of the importance of retention of foster carers, the report provides a summary of the support provided to foster carers. In acknowledgement of the need to retain the best foster carers for the children of County Durham, the report includes information regarding the review process for our foster carers and fostering panel activity over the last 12 months.
- 6 The report also provides details of the Mockingbird model and how it has expanded over this period.
- 7 The report provides an update on progress against key priorities of 2023 and highlights key priorities for 2024/2025.

Recommendations

- 8 Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to:
- (a) Note the content of the Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2023-2024;
 - (b) Consider the ways in which they can actively undertake their responsibilities as Corporate Parents and aid the retention and recruitment of the best foster carers for Durham's children; *and*
 - (c) Acknowledge the challenges in recruiting and retaining foster carers and the direct impact on the lives of children in our care.

Background

- 9 This report provides an update in relation to the activity of the fostering service over the last 12 months.
- 10 The report covers the Placement Stability and Sufficiency strategy, fostering panels, fostering and Liquid Logic and Signs of Safety, the continued focus on the voice of a child and the Mockingbird Model.

Conclusion

- 11 The report highlights key priorities for the 2024/2025. Progress against these priorities will be reported in next year's annual report.
- 12 The information provided within the attached report fulfils this duty and is intended to provide the Corporate Parenting Panel with an overview of the service provided to children in care and their foster carers.

Author

Anne Middleton

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Children Act 1989 requires a local authority who are looking after a child, to place that child with a foster carer if it is not possible to arrange for the child to live with a parent or family member.

The local authority's duties in relation to the fostering service are set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011; the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and the Statutory Guidance contained in Volume 4 of the Children Act Guidance. The Regulatory Framework for the inspection of fostering services by Ofsted is contained in the Care Standards Act 2000.

Finance

This report has no direct financial implications on the planned activity and potential expenditure of this area of the service but the success of the inhouse fostering service ensures children services can minimise the financial impact of having to source suitable externally provided placements at a higher cost.

Consultation

None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None

Climate Change

None

Human Rights

None

Crime and Disorder

None

Staffing

None

Accommodation

None

Risk

None

Procurement

None

Appendix 2: Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2023 - 2024

Attached as separate document



Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2023-24



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1.0 Introduction

This report provides a description of the structure, an overview and summary of the activity of the Fostering Service during 2023-2024.

In Durham, we pride ourselves on knowing our children and young people well and supporting our foster carers to be the best they can. We understand that it takes a special person to be a foster carer and with the right support, encouragement, commitment, and passion together we can achieve something great. Our fostering service is the driving force to ensure this happens and that all our foster carers and the children and young people in their care, benefit from a range of people who are as passionate and committed as they are. We are exceptionally proud of our foster carers and the children and young people in their care. It is amazing when we can talk about and show case the great work people do.

Durham County Council Fostering Service is responsible for:

- The recruitment and assessment of foster carers and connected foster carers.
- Ensuring support is provided as well as supervision and training to all our foster carers including connected foster carers.
- Ensuring the provision of safe and supportive foster families for our children and young people who have a wide range of different needs and providing the opportunity to keep brothers and sisters together wherever possible and appropriate.
- Providing a range of homes with foster carers with a varied skill and experience base.
- The range of foster homes offered includes: respite; placements with foster carers who have particular experience and skills in transition to permanence through adoption; return home or placement with family; foster carers providing permanence through long term fostering, providing a family-based model of care to support children and young people through to independence and beyond, as part of our Staying Put offer. We also now have 3 Mockingbird Constellation with a Hub Home carers supported by a Liaison Worker.
- Promoting placement stability and providing the appropriate help and support when things get difficult.
- Providing ongoing advice and support to our Special Guardians from the making of the SGO through to the child becoming an adult.

In 2023, we set out to achieve some key priorities to help our current foster carers and the children and young people in their care. These were:

- To increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers across the board.
- Review the marketing strategy for the first part of the year to attract and retain a wider group of fostering families, who are able to offer a range of fostering options for our children in care.
- Continue to work with the other 12 Local Authorities to make the Pathfinder Pilot a success to increase our recruitment of foster carers.

- Continue to improve the timeliness and quality of family finding across the service.
- Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and continue to strengthen the matching arrangements for them.
- Use reporting data to better understand how our fostering service is performing and prioritising key areas of activity across the service.
- Evidence the good work we do in ensuring the voice of children and their carers informs the service we provide.
- Continue to build on the success of our first Mockingbird Hub and launch our second hub in the summer of 2023.
- Expand the capacity within the Connected Carers team to improve our offer to connected foster carers pre and post panel.
- Align the Kinship Care and Support Team more to our Connected Carers Team to improve the offer and support to our SGO/CAO carers both pre and post order.
- Review the policy in relation to SGO/CAO carers.
- Review and improve our training offer to our Connected Foster Carers.

2.0 Fostering Service



All mainstream and connected foster carers are supported and supervised by a qualified social worker (Fostering Social Worker) meeting regulatory visiting and supervision requirements. The Service continues to have a Strategic Manager and a Service Manager, who oversee and manage the running of the service, driving it forward.

The Recruitment and Assessment Team, work with marketing to attract and recruit potential foster carers. They assess them and provide the initial support to new foster carers. They continue to hold Question and Answer sessions across the county and attend events such as Pride, Durham Regatta and Bishop Auckland Food Festival, to try and raise the profile of fostering and to support the recruitment more foster carers.

Carer through assessment:

Once again, thank you ever so much for all the help you gave us. You made something that was very difficult so much more bearable. I can't praise you highly enough, I really can't. Any family and potential fosterers that find themselves working with you in the future are very, very lucky. We always felt you were there for us, were a wonderful guide, and most importantly, genuinely cared. It made all the difference, it really did.

When the Homefinder Team was launched in April 2023, the Supported Lodgings Team also moved over to the Fostering service and joined the Recruitment and Assessment Team. The team assess and support our Supported Lodgings Providers for young people aged 16+. They work closely with the Children in Care Teams and the Leaving Care Service. They attend all of our recruitment events, and we have a recruitment strategy mapped out for the coming year. The major change for this part of the service is that we now have to be registered with Ofsted and inspected in the same way as the rest of the service. We were successful in our application in October 2023 and are waiting for the visit from Ofsted. As part of our preparation for registration we looked closely at the regulations and how we could improve the service we offer to our Supported Lodgings Providers and also the young people who live with them. We reviewed our process for approving providers and have linked this into the Mainstream Fostering Panel. We also now provide all our young people with their own packs which includes their own bedding, nightwear, toiletries etc. and these packs are provided to any young person who moves into Supported Lodgings. The Supported Lodgings team also support carers who offer Staying Put arrangements, where the carer is no longer a foster carer.

There are two Fostering Support Teams, one for the North of the county and one for the South. They support all our foster carers ensuring they get good quality supervision and have all of the support they need, when they need it. They also now organise and run the events across the year for our foster carers and children and young people to show our thanks for all of their hard work. This is a critical part of our retention strategy.

The Connected Carers Team has one Team Manager, and we were able to secure a second social work consultant. The volume of assessments has continued to increase over the year, and we were able to recruit 3 permanent social workers to the extra 6 posts secured and 3 agency social workers. The permanent posts have been advertised again and we are hoping to fill the remaining 3 posts with permanent staff in 2024. Due to the expansion of the number of workers within the team and volume of assessments completed and carers needing support, it has been agreed for temporary Team Manager to join the team for 6 months. This will enable the service to assess the necessity of this being a permanent post, depending on improvements in performance and then there will be consideration given to securing the funding to make this a permanent post.

As agreed, the connected foster carers in the two mainstream teams have been allocated to social workers within the Connected Carers Team who will support them until a SGO is

granted or until the child/ren in their care reach adulthood, depending on the plan for the child/ren. This has reduced the caseloads in the mainstream teams enabling performance to improve and enabling them to offer a further enhanced package of support to our foster carers.

The Homefinder Service was launched as planned in April 2023 and consists of Homefinder – Fostering Team, Homefinder-Residential Team and was also joined by the Supported Accommodation Co-ordinator, who sources supported accommodation for our 16+ young people. The Homefinder Teams continue to work with the Families First, Pre-birth, Children with Disabilities and Children in Care Teams and the Fostering Teams to find the best match possible for any child or young person who needs to live with foster carers, in a residential home or in supported accommodation. Whether this be when they initially come into care or if they need to move for any reason and this can be either in a planned way or on an emergency basis. They work closely with our In-House Residential Homes and our Supported Lodgings Team. The referral form has been streamlined and enables the Social Worker to use one referral form irrespective of which service/type of home they need for a child/young person. The service are working with the Systems Team to embed the form onto LCS to streamline the process even further and to reduce any possible delay when starting the search for a new home for our children and young people.

In relation to financial support for our foster carers, the increase to both payment for skills and age-related fostering allowance was progressed and this has had a positive impact on our foster carers as they feel more valued, and that the local authority recognise the work they do.

The service supports our foster carers through regular supervision. In addition to this regular support groups are held and following on from the success of the virtual ones, we operate a hybrid model. The service has continued support for new foster carers with the Launch Pad group. We restarted our Teenage Support Group, as this had stopped during covid, at the request of our foster carers and they have given us really positive feedback about , how beneficial it is to be able to get ideas from each other and support. As Drop-in sessions at Hubs in the north and south of the county have continued to be successful. Staff attend the Hubs one day per month and are available for carers to drop in for a coffee and a chat or if they have any questions. This also allows an opportunity for peer support between themselves.

Training has progressed to hybrid models as virtual training allows a lot more people to participate at any one time. The Workforce Development Lead has delivered a comprehensive training package over the last 12 months. Work has been completed with the Systems team to enable our foster carers to access all training via the Durham Learning & Development Hub. This allows the service to keep a record of all their training in one central place and supports more effective foster care reviews etc. Over the year we run a total of 25 courses, 7 Mandatory, 3 Core and 15 Optional courses and we offer from 2 to 7 separate dates for each course, depending on the subject. 427 foster carers attended the virtual training sessions over the year and 247 foster carers attended the face-to-face sessions over the year. Our most popular training course this year was Relationships, Sex &

Health Education (RSHE) Awareness Session for Foster Carers, with 46 foster carers attending the virtual session.

We continued to run our Skills to Foster Training up until the Pathfinder Hub was launched in September 2023 when they assumed responsibility for this training. Connected Carer foster carers are supported with a similar package of training when the plan is for the child/young person to remain looked after rather than the carers securing a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). The first course is starting in April 2024 and successful completion of this will enable our connected carers to be paid the Accredited payment for skills level.

Our Kinship Care and Support Team, who offer support and advice to our connected carers post SGO/Child Arrangement Order (CAO) are now more aligned to the Connected Carers Team and this will continue over the coming year. Connected Carers are offered a package of training pre and post order, including training with Full Circle. They are introduced to the Voluntary Sector and well as out Early Intervention Teams. Support is in place to ensure that they are accessing all the benefits they are entitled to, and a dedicated Welfare Rights Officer is attached to the team who can assist with this. Regular consultation meetings are held at least twice yearly, two carousel events have been held over the past year, where voluntary agencies attended to give advice and support or signpost our carers to the most appropriate service.

The teams work closely with the IRO service, which is independent to the Fostering Service. The main service they provide is one of ensuring that our foster carers are reviewed every year by an Independent Reviewing Officer in line with the fostering standards. There are two dedicated Independent Reviewing Officers, and they ensure that the foster carers have the best support possible and that they continue to meet the fostering standards. The IRO regularly praises our foster carers for all the work they do, the training they are offered and their commitment to the children they care for. As the IRO said in one review

‘Their love and passion for the boys is clear to see and they, along with everyone else, are delighted with the progress the boys have made.’ A child’s social worker in their report for another foster carers review wrote ‘

I just wanted to say thank you to you and to the foster carers for making this the most positive transition for children I think I have ever done. It couldn't have gone any better. I just wish all introductions for long-term children could be coordinated like this. Thank you for all your hard work.’

The support offered by the fostering social worker’s is also regularly recognised.

2.1 To Increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers.

The major challenge during 2023-2024 for Durham Fostering Service and nationally for other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies remained the recruitment of new foster carers to the service. This was recognised by the Government and the 12 North East Local Authorities were part of a pilot scheme in relation to coming together to pool resources to recruit foster carers. The Pathfinder Hub was led by Together for Children (Sunderland) and the name chosen was Foster with North East. The Hub commenced in late September 2023 and all 12 local authorities have signed up for 2024-25. Part of the plan was also to promote the Mockingbird Model as a way of retaining foster carers and the grant from the DfE to promote this, has been extended for 2024-25. This has enabled Durham to not only launch a 3rd Mockingbird constellation, but we are in the process of the recruitment of a Hub Carer for our Fourth Mockingbird constellation.

Foster with Northeast has worked well for Durham County Council Fostering Service as we have had more enquiries than any of the other Local Authorities. The hub matches people with the Local Authority they live within unless they specifically ask for a particular Local Authority. We have continued to recruit from outside of out county boundaries, as a result of the positive publicity and the 'word of mouth' from our current carers, about the support they received and how we value you them and their skills. Durham was also the first Local Authority to have foster carers approved at fostering panel, who had made their initial enquiry through the Pathfinder Hub.

Table 1 – Foster with North East overview

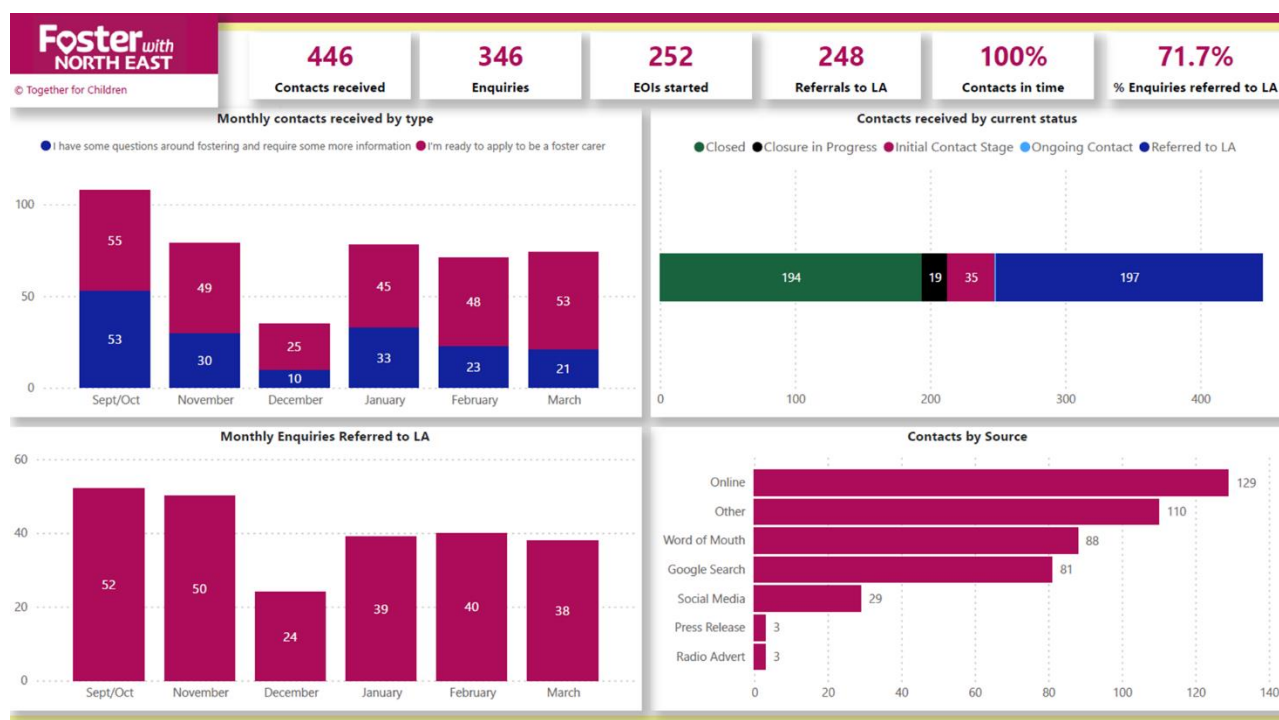


Table 2 – Foster with North East breakdown of referrals per Local Authority

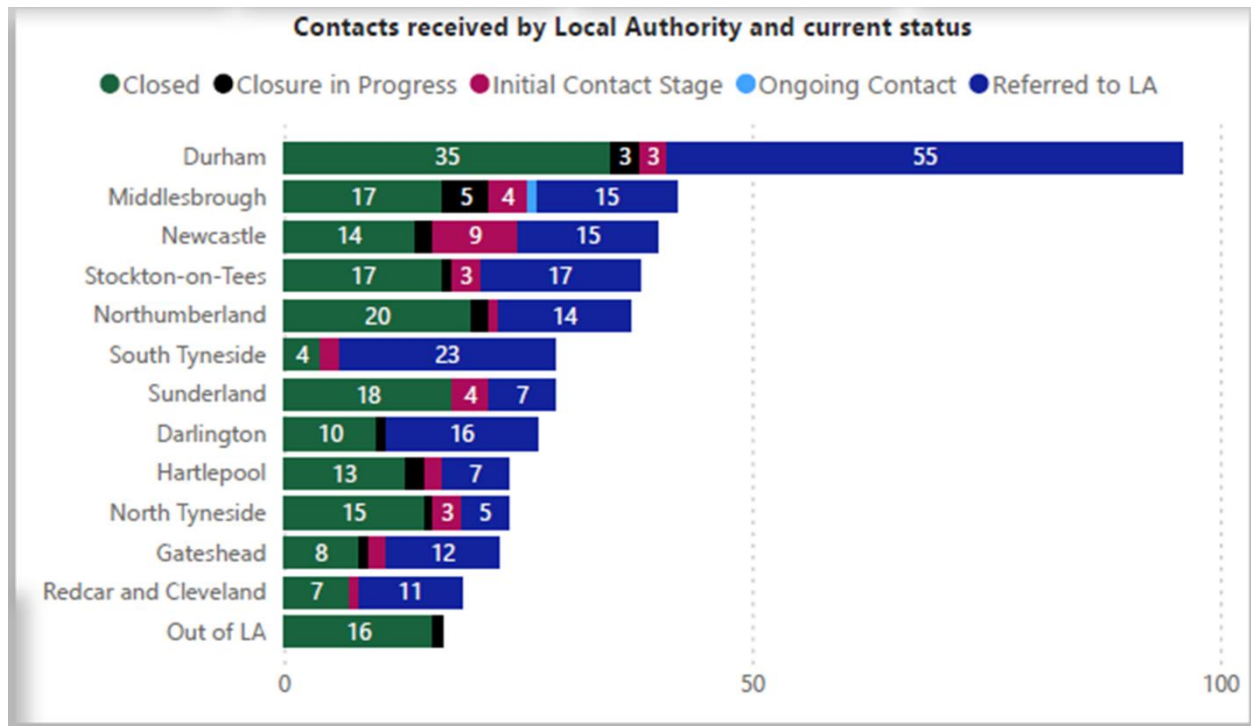


Table 3 – Recruitment and Retention figures for 2023/24

	Expressions of Interest	Foster Carers Approved
2020-2021	88	25
2021-2022	146	29
2022-2023	112	12
2023-2024	176	23

Expressions of Interest were increased due to an advertising campaign at the beginning of April 2023 in relation to foster carers to care for babies. This resulted in a spike in enquiries and the subsequent spike in expressions of interest for that month. When the Pathfinder Hub launched in September, there was an increase in expressions of interest over the first few months through to the new year. However, from January this has slowed down. This is a reflection of the experiences of the other 12 Local Authorities in the Pathfinder Hub.

In 2023-24, 13 foster carers were de-registered leading to an overall increase of 10 mainstream foster families. This is a huge improvement on 2022-2023 when 33 foster

families were de-registered. We had 7 foster carers who retired, 5 who no longer wished to foster and 1 where there was a change in their family circumstances which meant they were no longer able to provide a home for our children. This is an area that continues to be monitored and examined closely, so there is an understanding of the demographic of our carers, including age, where they live etc so we can use this moving forward for our recruitment campaigns. We also look at any lessons we can learn from our carers when they leave us i.e. were they recruited during Covid so the assessment and training was mostly completed virtually and has this made a difference, did they have any gaps in allocated fostering social worker or child's social worker and did this impact on the support they received in general and also when things were not going well. We use this information to try and improve the service moving forward.

2.2 Review the Marketing Strategy to attract and retain a wider group of Fostering Families who are able to offer a range of fostering options to our children looked after.



There has been a continued focus on the marketing on social media campaigns, digital campaigns, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), local magazines etc. Since September, the Pathfinder Hub have been promoting Foster with North East and they have been to a variety of settings across the whole of the North East including the Metro Centre and Eldon Square. There is now a full kit of merchandise with the Foster with North East branding.

The teams have continued to hold face to face Q&A sessions across the county and we attended Pride and other events, particularly prior to the Pathfinder Hub launching. There is a new marketing strategy both in house and via Foster with North East for 2024-2025 which will include radio and television adverts as well as representation at events across all 12 Local Authorities. Some of our foster carers have been used in the campaigns ran by ourselves and those by the Pathfinder Hub. We continue to have the full support of the

Children's Portfolio Holder and the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board and its members and they champion fostering whenever they can.

We have a number of unique strengths in Durham Fostering Service which includes:

- A wide range of children requiring foster families.
- Full Circle and Clinical Psychologist.
- The benefits of being a large Local Authority with all the support this provides.
- A comprehensive training package.
- Support Groups including a one solely for new foster carers and one for those who solely care for teenagers.
- A competitive financial package.
- Fostering Family Retention events.
- M8's group for carers own children.
- An active Children in Care Council providing training for prospective carers, and involvement in recruitment activities, highly valued by prospective carers.
- The involvement of existing foster carers in supporting/ mentoring prospective carers
- Independent Advice and Mediation Service.

Retention events are invaluable as they are our way of thanking our foster carers for all of their hard work. In 2023-2024, a number of events were held. We celebrated Foster Care Fortnight at the Ramside Hotel where our children, young people and carers challenged the Great Pottery Throwdown, with some amazing pottery. The annual Foster Carer Awards ceremony took place on 13th June at the Gala Theatre, and it was a huge success with some emotional stories shared about how our foster carers go above and beyond to help and support and give our children the best possible care and opportunities they can. We have also thanked our carers by having afternoon tea and relaxation sessions at some of our support groups across the year. This year the Halloween party was held at Nettlesworth Community Centre and was spooktacularly good, with lots of ghosts, witches and zombies present.



A Christmas party was held on Sunday 10th December at Coxhoe Leisure Centre, and it was very special. The children were able to jump around in a huge blow-up snow globe, visit Santa Claus in his log cabin at the North Pole and were entertained by his elves and they enjoyed snowball fights and a foam party. We had some very excited but happy children by the end of the afternoon.



The Easter Event took place on 4th April and included a Mad Hatters Tea Party and petting zoo, so lots of fun for all!



3.0 Placement Stability and Sufficiency Strategy

3.1 Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and strengthen the matching arrangements for them.

Ideally, we would want our children to remain in the care of their parents and if that was not possible, the care of their family. If a child cannot initially live with their parent/s, then we look to family/friends first before looking to a foster family to care for them. By placing within their family/friend network it is hoped that if they cannot return home to live with their parent/s, they will be able to remain within their family/friend network therefore enabling them to sustain those important relationships and supporting their identity.

It is always our aim for our children to lead as normal a life as possible with no input from anything other than universal services and therefore the teams work with the families/friends to enable them to secure the child/ren with them via Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Focussing on there has been an increase in the number of staff in the Connected Carers Team over the past year to enable us to progress Form C assessments in a timely way and offer those carers consistent support once they are approved at panel, particularly if they are to remain as connected foster carers.

The number of connected carers has continued to increase over the year however our children have continued to exit care from our connected carers by either returning to their parents or because their future has been secured via a Special Guardianship Order. From 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, 65 connected foster carers were de-registered, 39 of these was due to the granting of a SGO, 12 were de-registered because the child/ren returned to

parent’s care and the remaining 14 were for a variety of reasons including change in family circumstances and safeguarding concerns.

At the beginning of April 2023, the service supported 235 foster families at the end of March 2024 this increased to 245. Over the year the number of all children looked after, rose from 1067 on 27th March 2023 to 1214 on 25th March 2024. This fluctuates on a week-by-week basis, however what has remained consistent throughout the year is that despite the increase on number of children in our care, 72% continue to live with foster carers.

It is accepted that the number with IFA’s has increased significantly, but this is due to a nationwide shortage of local authority foster carers and it is anticipated that the Pathfinder Hub and other such projects across the country will improve this picture and encourage more people who are considering becoming foster carers, choose their local authority over an independent agency. The table below shows that the number of children living with in house foster carers, IFA carers and connected carers.

Table 5 – Foster Carers Across the Country by Type

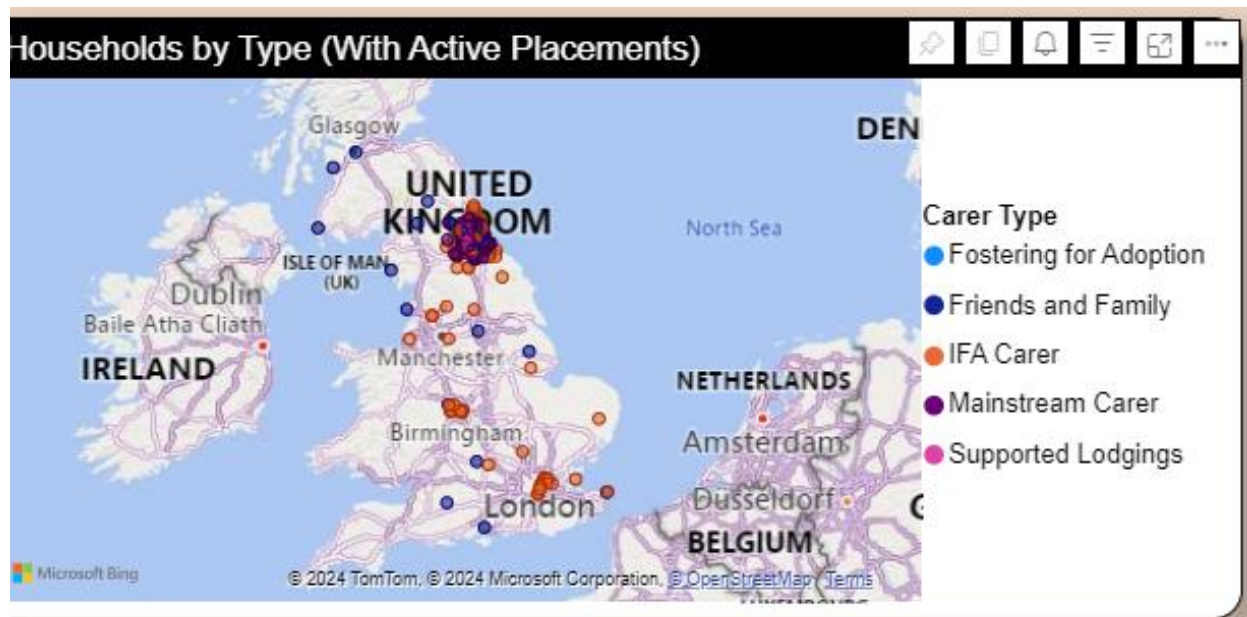


Table 6 – Number of children in placement type 2023/24

Date	Total Number of Children in our Care	Children with In House Foster Carers	Children with IFA Foster Carers	Children with Connected Foster Carers	Total Number of Children with Foster Carers	% of Children living with Foster Carers
27 th March 2023	1067	382	202	182	766	71.79 %
31 st October 2023	1187	387	236	230	853	71.86 %
25 th March 2024	1214	388	272	217	877	72.24 %

3.2 Improve the timeliness and quality of family finding across the service.

Over the last year there has been a continued focus on family finding and ensuring we help our children and young people to live in the right family for them. A family finding clinic continues to be held every week. The focus of the clinic is on finding appropriate permanent foster carers for children and young people in line with their plan for permanence.

Recruiting foster carers to offer a permanent home is also part of recruitment campaigns and all new foster carers are assessed and approved at panel for permanence, even if at the beginning of their fostering journey their preference is short term placements. This reduces delay if a child or young person bond with their carers, and it develops into a permanent arrangement.

When our children in care cannot remain within their family/friend’s network, our aim is to find them the best foster family possible to meet their needs and if their plan becomes one of permanent foster care, we aim to have them matched with their permanent foster carers within 12 months of the plan being approved. We have worked hard over the past year to find the right family for our children and have had 33 matches approved.

To ensure we keep on track with the plans of permanence for our children, whether that be through a Special Guardianship Order, permanent foster carer, return to birth parents or adoption, the Permanence Monitoring Group (PMG) was established. This group reviews a different cohort of children each week with a view to tracking the child or young person’s plan of permanence and ensuring it is achieved in a timely way.

4.0 Fostering Panels

The volume of Connected Foster Carers has continued to increase over the past year and the team are getting involved in assessments earlier in the process. This means assessed carers are assessed and ready to go to panel as children need to be placed, as well as those where the children are placed under Reg 24 in an emergency.

Over the past year we have had 3 connected carers panel each month and 1 mainstream panel per month. The connected carers panel purely approve family and friends who have been assessed as connected foster carers for a particular child/ren. The volume of carers being assessed as connected foster carers has meant at times, we have had to arrange an extra panel, and over the last year we have held 11 extra panels.

The mainstream panel considers and approves our mainstream foster carers and also reapproves any carer, either mainstream or connected foster carer, after their first review. This panel has remained busy and we have presented 23 foster carers to panel with for their first review. With the number of first reviews and the number of newly recruited carers increasing this year we have had to hold 1 extra mainstream panel.

Our panel chairs are very experienced and manage the panels well. All panel chairs and members have a yearly appraisal, are kept up to date with the service and any changes and have at least 1 training day over year. We continue to have a Panel Advisor who advises on all of the panels, which provides consistency across them all.

As a service we are always looking at how to improve and therefore feedback from panel members and the panel chairs is very important to us, as well as feedback from foster carers in relation to their experience of panels.

Our Mainstream Panel chair has stated that “Quality of assessments is generally good”. However, any issues that are raised about the quality of any assessment is shared with the service via the Panel Advisor.

The Panel Chair also commented on the number of connected carers in the Local Authority, as they attend Mainstream Panel following their first Review. She recognised some of the issues within the service around support for our connected carers but also the changes that have been made to address these and ensure our connected carers are fully supported. She did say that “Panel is routinely astounded at the many amazing kinship fostering families that Durham has, they have shown their resilience by navigating tricky systems to access support for children and have shown unwavering ‘stickability.’ “

In relation to our Connected Carers Panels the chairperson stated that “The quality of carers attending panel has been outstanding with an increase being noted in non-family members stepping forward to care for children with whom they are associated by other means.” The panel has also had one young person attend panel and this is something the panel hope

they will see more of over the coming twelve months. She also commented on the Connected Carers Team saying “It is widely acknowledged the significant pressures that the Connected Care Team face in respect of demand and tight timescales. Despite this, there is an obvious passion for safeguarding children across the team along with a dedication to achieve positive outcomes.”

Both Panel Chairs commented on the need for panel membership to be more diverse and there is a rolling recruitment and a number of new panel members have been recruited over the latter part of the year.

Feedback from foster carers of their experience of the panels is positive with the following feedback shared via the feedback questionnaire:

“ The whole experience was relaxed....friendly and we were given the chance to ask questions.”

“...yeah I felt very listened to, everyone was really welcoming which really helped as i was feeling nervous. I was asked if I had any questions at the end.”

“...yes everything during the panel was explained well and clearly”

5.0 Fostering and Liquid Logic and Signs of Success

5.1 Liquid Logic and the Fostering Module

In 2023 - 2024, the fostering management team have continued to work with the systems team and performance team to improve the system and our understanding of our performance data.

The service continue to use Liquid Logic and now have access to updated performance data daily via the BI reports. This covers the work of the North & South Support teams and the Recruitment & Assessment Team. This has enabled management to understand at a glance which foster carers have had a supervision within the last 6 weeks, an unannounced visit with the last 12 months and also that their Foster Carer Review has been held within the last 12 months in line with statutory timescales. It allows managers to drill down into the data and cross reference with the Fostering Social Worker if there are any issues so that they can be resolved quickly.

It also allows for a better understanding daily of what foster carers are available to look after a child, whether they are on holiday, if there are matching issues and no other child can live with them at any one time. It provides an overview of what type of foster carer is available, i.e. short term, permanent, respite, etc. This is used by the Homefinder team alongside their own systems to ensure that we contact all our available in house foster carers first, before considering referring out to an Independent Fostering Agency.

It also means there is a better understanding of the data around recruitment, and a better understanding of the reasons why people do not progress through the full process, what stage they end and the timeliness of the assessment process.

There has been some delay in the connected carers information being fully available on the Bi system due to the demands on the Systems team, however this is now progressing with some pace and it is hoped that we will be able to have a full set of performance indicators available by the end of May 2024.

5.2 Signs of Safety/Success

The Signs of Safety/Success model is more established now in the Fostering Service. There are practice leads in each team as well as practice champions. All of the forms used in Fostering are written using the signs of safety/success language and model, including the supervision documents, foster carer review documents and family finding form.

The practice leads and practice champions attend workshops and meetings across the year and feed back to their individual teams. Monthly group supervisions are now well established across the service in all teams, including the management team.

All Fostering Social Worker's conduct foster carers supervision using this model. Foster carers understand the language both in relation to themselves and their documents and forms but also in relation to the child/young person in their documents, including their safety plan and care plan.

A Signs of Success development day is planned for North and South Support teams and the Recruitment and Assessment team for May 2024. There will then be a development day for the Connected Carers Team and Kinship Support team before the end of July. This is to build on the knowledge of all the workers and focus on the Signs of Success.

6.0 Continued focus on the voice of the child and carers



This is something that is central to the whole service and every individual part of the service from beginning to end. To ensure there is a full understanding of what children need and

what they are wanting to tell us, the teams involve them and listen to them every step of the way.

The service work very closely with the Children in Care Council, and they are heavily involved in shaping the service moving forward from the language we use, to the training of new and existing foster carers.

The Children in Care Council work alongside the teams in our retention events such as Halloween and Christmas. Young people are involved in the recruitment of new staff to the service, as they sit on the interview panel. They also attend our recruitment events when they are able to, such as Pride.

The teams promote the use of the Mind of My Own app with all children and young people who we work with. This is to enable all children and young people, not just those involved in the Children in Care Council, to share their views and worries at any time. They can share their views in readiness for their own reviews, also for the foster carers review and they can contact their SW at any time with a query or worry. All fostering social workers have been trained to use it and support and encourage children and young people to use it when they talk to them. It has improved the feedback we get from our children and young people, in relation to the care they receive, for the foster carers annual review and the fostering teams get an average of 31 contacts from children and young people per month via MOMO.

In addition to the strong focus on the voices of the children in our care, the service also works with, and supports, the children of our foster carers. During the training of prospective foster carers, a training session is offered specifically to carer's sons and daughters which is age appropriate. This offers children the opportunity to meet other children and young people whose parents are undergoing the assessment process, to share their views, ask questions and talk about any potential concerns.

When a child goes to live with a foster family, the carer's own children must adapt and adjust as much, or more than the carer. They must share their parents with someone they have never met before, accept them into their home and lives and this can have a significant impact on them. To enable them to talk to and share their experiences with other children and young people in the same situation, the M8's group was developed. This was designed by the birth children and young people of our foster carers to support them and allow them to have some time and space away from the home. The children decided how they wanted their group to function, and they decide what they do for each session. This has been very successful and we have approximately 16 children attending any one session, which they all seem to enjoy.

To ensure we get the voice of our carers as well as the support groups we offer, we have also held a focus group in January 2024, which was very productive. The group discussed the following ideas; supporting each other through a buddying system in relation to new foster carers when they are approved; giving potential foster carers the chance to experience fostering first hand via linking in with one of the mockingbird constellations and being involved in an activity; babysitting for those carers with limited support networks; and looking at a community parenting programme where their skills and knowledge can be

shared with our families, to try and enable children to remain in the care of their parents ; a central library both on line and possibly physical books that carers can access. Some of the ideas need to be looked at in more depth before they could be started, however we are looking at prioritising and progressing these ideas moving forward.

Another way we understand and learn from our foster carers is through any complaints we receive and from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 the service received 5 complaints. One was about drift and delay, two were due to disagreements with the assessment completed in relation to connected carers and two were due to finance issues. All were investigated fully and any lessons learnt taken back into the service to help improve practise.

7.0 Mockingbird Model

In January 2022 we started our journey with the Fostering Network in relation to introducing the Mockingbird Model to Durham. This is a model that was developed in America and is based on the family network model.

Our first Mockingbird Hub was launched on in September 2022. This first constellation was very successful and had a significant impact on the children and carers involved. Due to the success, the service launched a second one in June 2023 and a third Hub in February 2024.

The second Hub has included carers who have children with disabilities and the third Hub has focussed on teenagers. They have both been very successful, having a positive impact on the children and the carers alike. The hub carers organise activities and events individual, but they also are able to attend the activities run by the Fostering Network. We have been able to link in foster carers who are caring for children who previously lived in residential homes and new foster carers and carers who have limited support networks. These have proved invaluable in the advice, support, and time out they have given to the children, young people and carers.

"CJ, 14 yrs, has been in crisis recently, experiencing a move to his (newly approved) carer J and still trying to navigate the death of his father and uncle. As such his mental health has been very wobbly and he has talked about wanting to end his life. This has resulted him in going out of school and seeking refuge at his girlfriend's house for a few hours over the last few weeks.

J, his carer, felt out of his depth and sought support from the Mockingbird carers. They looked after CJ overnight when J was feeling overwhelmed, J and the carers contacted the crisis team and managed to get CJ urgent support.

All have continued to maintain contact as a support network, to reduce anxieties and ensure CJ's carer felt supported and able to facilitate his return to him the carers have said – "Can I thank you all so much for your support. We greatly appreciate it."

When looking at children exiting residential care and moving on to living with foster carers, we offer all of these carers the opportunity to be part of a mockingbird constellation or linked in, to offer them extra support as and when needed.

Due to the success of our current hubs, we are in the process of establishing a fourth hub and will be one of only 3 local authorities in the North East to have 4 mockingbird constellations and one of only 16 in the country to have 4 or more constellations.

8.0 Conclusion

Over the past twelve months a lot has happened not only in Durham but across the country. It has been recognised that demand for foster families far outstrips the number available and this is not just in Durham but a national issue. The number of children in our care has increased significantly over the past 12 months and unfortunately the recruitment of new foster carers is not in line with that demand.

However, we continue to support our foster carers well, offer them a thorough training package, especially when starting on their journey, ensure the voice of the child is embedded in all areas of practice including the voice of the children of our foster carers. We work closely with the Children in Care Council and listen and take on board their views and ideas. We work closely with our experienced foster carers and share their experience across the service and also in our recruitment campaigns. We have continued to embed Signs of Safety/Success and we are using our performance data to enable us to improve our recruitment strategy and improve the support and service we give to our foster carers. We have been very successful over the past year in finding families for our children with a plan of permanent foster care. We recognise the importance of assessing and supporting family and friends to care for our children whenever possible and have increased our capacity in the Connected Carers Team to meet demand. We have launched a further two mockingbird constellations with a further one planned for 2024/25, taking our total to four.

Our challenges have been and remain around recruitment, especially for brothers and sisters, teenagers, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children with complex needs, however this is a national issue and something which is top of our agenda moving into 2024-2025. We will continue to work with our partners in Foster with North East to recruit new foster carers who can meet the needs of our children in care.

We await the outcome of the government's response to the Care Review particularly around Special Guardians. We also recognise the increase in connected foster carers and the impact of this on the team and service and will continuously review our Connected Carers Team and whether we have the right staff to meet demand. We will also continue to work to improve the offer of support to our SGO/CAO carers.

9.0. Key Priorities for 2024-2025

- To increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers.
- Continue to work with the other 12 Local Authorities to make the Pathfinder Pilot a success to increase our recruitment of foster carers. This will include a comprehensive marketing strategy.
- To retain our foster carers and support them to provide the best care possible to the children in our care.
- Continue to improve the timeliness of progressing children's permanence plans in all areas.
- Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and continue to strengthen the matching arrangements for them.
- Use reporting data to better understand how our fostering service is performing and prioritising key areas of activity across the service.
- Evidence the good work we do in ensuring the voice of children and their carers informs the service we provide.
- To continue to enable our Mockingbird constellations to support the children and young people in their care and launch our fourth hub.
- Ensure we have capacity within the Connected Carers team and Kinship Support team to continue to improve our offer to connected foster carers pre and post panel as well as post SGO/CAO.
- Review our policy in relation to SGO/CAO carers in line with the recommendations of the care review.

Appendix 1

The Children Act 1989 requires a local authority who are looking after a child, to place that child with a foster carer if it is not possible to arrange for the child to live with a parent or family member. The local authority's duties in relation to the fostering service are set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011; the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and the Statutory Guidance contained in Volume 4 of the Children Act Guidance. The Regulatory Framework for the inspection of fostering services by Ofsted is contained in the Care Standards Act 2000.

The work undertaken by the Service is governed by legislation which include:

- Children Act 1989
- Children Act 2004
- Children & young Persons Act 2008
- Care Standards Act 2000
- Fostering Services Regulations 2011
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 2011
- The Children Act Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, placement and case Review 2010 & Updated 2013 & Updated 2015.

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