

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 25 October 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton in the Chair

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, J Clark, S Deinali, J Griffiths, B Kellett, L Mavin, S Quinn, K Robson, K Rooney and C Varty.

Co-opted Members:

Cory, Courtney, Luke and W Taylor.

Also Present:

Barbara Arbon – Adoption Service Manager

Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager

Anita Harvey - Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health

Paula Jemson – Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence

Robert Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children

Helen McAloon – Strategy Team Leader

Holli Meadows – Senior Practitioner, Quality and Performance

Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer

Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children’s Homes

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

Melanie Stubbs – Virtual School Head

Bernadette Toomey – Practice Lead, Children and Young People

Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Simmons, C Hunt, A Reed and A Savory, co-opted members J Bell, M Johnson, J McCarthy and R Woods and officer, R Farnham.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 13 September 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

5 Number of Children in our Care and Care Leavers

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children, Martyn Stenton, informed the Panel that the current number of children in our care was 1183, with 36 children placed for adoption, 76 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and 357 care leavers.

6 Ofsted Updates

Paul Rudd, Strategic Manager for Children's Homes reported that an Ofsted inspection had been carried out at Coxhoe Children's Home.

7 Proud Moments

Examples of some of the proud moments during the month were provided by Service Leads. Bernadette Toomey, Practice Lead for Children and Young People, spoke of how proud she was of the development of the Children in Care Service, in particular the work done by the Experts through Experience group to promote sibling relationships. The Practice Lead informed the Panel that 21 children currently had plans for reunification with their families and she commended the work carried out to reach these positive outcomes.

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence, Paula Jemson, informed the Panel that she had attended a successful event to celebrate the launch of the new Mockingbird Hub which brought carers and young people together to have fun and build relationships. She added that she was looking forward to seeing the relationships flourish.

8 Annual Adoption Service Report 2023-24

The Adoption Team Manager, Barbara Abron, was welcomed to the meeting to present the Annual Adoption Service Report for 2023-24 and information on service priorities (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the annual report outlined the performance of the Adoption Service as a spoke of the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt Coast to Coast. The Adoption Team Manager commented on the financial challenges over the past year including the cost of living crisis which had led to fewer adoption enquiries than in previous years.

Information was provided on the range of the work carried out by the service which included adopter recruitment, the matching of children with adopters, early permanence, adoption panels, post adoption support and access to adoption records.

An area of focus during 2023/24 which was highlighted was the enhancement of keeping-in-touch arrangements for adopted children and their birth families to enable relationships with birth families to be maintained, when possible. The Team Leader referred to the valuable work carried out by the Adoption Support Worker to facilitate keeping-in-touch arrangements and she also thanked Courtney for sharing her lived experience which had helped to redesign the letters sent out by the team. The Panel heard that, at present, 76 children in our care had brothers or sisters who were adopted and there was a focus on work to establish whether their communications were ongoing.

With regard to performance, the Panel heard that during 2023-24, 15 families were approved for adoption, 41 matches were approved, 83 children had a plan for adoption and 713 children had keeping-in-touch arrangements in place.

Up-to-date figures were provided which were as follows; there were 59 enquiries from 1 April 2024 to the end of September 2024. 34 initial visits had taken place up to end of September, which compared with 39 initial visits, in total, during 2023-24.

Key priority areas going forward included supporting relationship-based practice between enquirers and social workers to build trusting relationships and prevent enquirer drop-off. The provision of high quality adoption support was also highlighted, including for those children who had experienced trauma with funding available to develop a multi-disciplinary therapeutic service.

The presentation concluded with examples of positive feedback received about the quality of work undertaken by the service. The Practice Lead also pointed out that survey work with adopters was used to inform and develop practice and drive improvements.

The Chair thanked the Team Manager for the informative presentation and she informed the Panel that questions previously raised by Courtney in relation to sibling adoption and contact will be included in the next update report to the Panel and that Courtney will be invited to the meeting, to participate in the discussions.

The Chair referred to the request for more members to join the Adoption Panel and she commented that members may be hesitant about bearing that responsibility.

As a member of the Adoption Panel, Councillor Adcock-Forster stressed that whilst it was a responsibility, it was also an extremely rewarding experience and he added that he would be happy to discuss his experience with any members who were considering joining the Panel.

Cory asked for the definition of the term RAA and the Team Manager explained that RAA was the acronym for the Regional Adoption Agency which consisted of multiple local authorities, working together, to approve adopters and match children. In response to a further question from Cory on the definition of early permanence, the Team Manager replied that early permanence occurred when a child in our care was placed with adopters who were also approved foster carers, who initially fostered the child with a view to becoming the child's adopters, therefore the child was placed with their potential permanent family at the earliest opportunity.

Luke asked for further information about the matching process and the Team Manager clarified that the adoption assessment explored all avenues. Social workers compiled information on prospective adopters by developing an open and honest relationship to identify what needs they felt the prospective adopters could and could not meet. A child's permanence report contained all the essential information required to plan the child's future such as all the factual information on the child and the significant people in their life. All the information in relation to the prospective adopters and the child was considered by professionals and discussions took place with the child's foster carers. The professionals would then visit the prospective adopters and all the information gathered would be shared with them. If this identified a possible match, the adopters and child would meet and interact at a 'chemistry meeting' which would then be taken forward, if a match were established. The process was carried out at a pace which was appropriate for the child.

Cory asked how much involvement foster carers had in the matching process as, in his view, foster carers had the greatest amount of knowledge about the children they cared for. The Team Manager explained that foster carers' views were essential to the process. Foster carers and adopters would spend time in each other's homes and they would share information daily, which would include not only the positives but the negatives too.

The Head of the Virtual School highlighted that the member of the Virtual School team responsible for children who were previously looked after, was a member of the Adoption Panel and provided support for the education of children who were going through the adoption process.

The Team Manager highlighted the importance of having that focus on education and she pointed out that each and every panel member brought their own insight, knowledge and experience which was invaluable as it enabled every match to be looked at through a number of different lenses.

Courtny commented that she had met with the Adoption Team Manager to discuss the questions she had raised on the adoption process at a previous meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel. Courtny was happy that her questions had been answered and her suggestions for changes to the wording of letters to siblings, had been accepted. She added that she had considered different aspects of the adoption process, including training and she felt that training should include looking at the process through different perspectives of all those involved. Courtny gave the example that siblings who were not adopted may feel that they were to blame and she informed the Panel that she was in the process of writing a script which could be developed into an animation, to be used in adoption training.

Councillor Deinali asked what efforts were taken to keep siblings, who were adopted separately, in close proximity, so that contact could be maintained, when it was appropriate to do so. The Team Manager replied that whilst efforts were made, the priority was to ensure children were placed with their best adoptive match. The Practice Lead commented on the role that the Adoption Panel played in terms of scrutiny and challenge as to how the service was promoting the importance of birth families and maintaining the child's identity. Councillor Varty gave an example of how distance need not be a barrier to maintaining sibling relationships and she added that regular reviews were important, as relationships inevitably changed over time.

In reply to a request from Luke, the Team Manager said she would be happy to help to extend the 'Supply Packs' project and she would pick this up in a conversation with Luke, following the meeting.

The Panel noted that Adoption Panels were held approximately every two weeks and the Team Manager would welcome any expressions of interest from members wishing to join the Panel.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted and the priorities agreed.

9 Mind of My Own

The Panel received a report of the Head of Children's Social Care which provided an update on the Mind of My Own app and how it was being used within the Children and Care Leavers Service (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Holli Meadows, Senior Practitioner for Quality and Performance, explained the use of the apps across the Children in Care and Care Leavers Teams which was re-launched in June 2023. She explained that Mind of My Own co-produced the apps with children and young people, to reflect topics that were relevant and useful to them. The Panel noted the apps catered for different ages and needs, with the 'One' app aimed at older children and the 'Express' app for younger children and children with additional needs. The Senior Practitioner highlighted that Durham received an award at Mind of My Own's annual awards for 'Standout Organisation' in May 2024.

The apps had been well received, with young people commenting on the benefits of being able to write their emotions down and how they found the apps to be fun. The Panel noted that, in general, the use of the apps declined in the summer months and peaked during winter and Christmas time. However, data had found that the apps were not being used as effectively as they could be and measures had been put in place to address this, which included monthly meetings of the Mind of My Own Project Groups and the use of Voice and Change Champions, to drive practice. Staff were encouraged to take refresher training and app training was also offered to foster and kinship carers.

In response to a question from Luke as to what assurance was given to young people that confidentiality will be maintained. The Senior Practitioner clarified that, if the young person chose to send a statement, the statement would be sent to a service portal and the statement would then be directed to the trusted professional that the young person had nominated, with a privacy notice included. There was an option to use the app simply to write thoughts down and if young people decided that they did not want to share their thoughts, they could use the option to send the statement to themselves.

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence stressed that Mind of My Own was only one method of many, used to gather young people's thoughts and views, as it was acknowledged that all young people had unique needs and preferences, therefore creative ways, such as the use of apps enhanced accessibility.

Resolved:

That the content of the report and presentation be noted.

10 Performance Update

The Panel received the quarter one performance report, presented by Helen McAloon, Strategy Team Leader (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Strategy Team Leader delivered a presentation on quarter one performance from April 2024 to June 2024, with performance being measured against the Local Government Association's Key Lines of Enquiry. The Panel noted that whilst the number of children in our care had increased, compared with the same period last year, activity had slowed since April 2024 and there had been an increase in the number of under 1s entering care as a percentage of all starts. The number of young people receiving an initial health assessment within 20 working days of entering care had increased to almost 75%. The majority of children looked after were fostered, within in-house provision and, with the number of young people having three or more homes in one year being just above benchmarks, placement stability remained an area of focus.

The number of young people going missing and missing episodes had decreased in May and June which opposed the usual trend which observed a higher volume of missing episodes during the summer. The proportion of care leavers who were in suitable accommodation was above benchmarks, however, the proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training was below benchmarks.

Cory asked why it was necessary to compare performance, locally and nationally. The Strategy Team Leader clarified that benchmarking data was used to set key performance drivers. The data was also used to compare Durham's performance to that of neighbouring authorities and also how Durham's performance compared to local authorities in other parts of the country which were considered to be statistical neighbours, in that they were considered to have similar characteristics to Durham. Benchmarking data was also used by the government to hold local authorities to account.

Cory expressed concern at the 45% of 19-21 year olds who were not in education, employment or training and he asked what action was being taken to improve their outcomes. The Panel noted that reports would be considered in the new year on the Virtual School and the work being undertaken to increase opportunities for care leavers in terms of education, employment and training.

Councillor Deinali asked how the data contained in the report was used to plan ahead and the Practice Lead highlighted that the information was used to inform quality assurance, future improvement plans and the Corporate Parenting strategy.

Courtney raised concern about young people who go missing during the winter and she asked what was being done to tackle the issue.

The Practice Lead responded that a dedicated team of staff work with those who go missing from home and guidance stated that young people should be offered a return home meeting with an independent person, within 72 hours of their return home. Information gathered from the meetings was used to analyse how the service could provide the appropriate support to young people and it may reveal wider issues. Courtney questioned why return to home interviews were carried out by an independent person rather than someone known to and trusted by the young person. The Practice Lead responded that the guidance specified that the meetings should be with an independent person who was trained to take an objective view and therefore could support the young person, whilst remaining independent.

Councillor Varty asked whether the service linked with transport providers as she had heard reports that transport workers were not reporting young people who they suspected were missing from home, to the necessary authorities. The Practice Lead clarified that transport providers were contacted in advance to help to locate missing children. In addition, meetings were held with representatives from external agencies to share concerns and information from the police and other agencies was used to identify hotspot areas and specific issues.

Resolved:

That the content of the report and presentation be noted.

11 Such other business

Councillor Adcock-Forster referred to the discussion earlier in the meeting with regard to the chemistry meetings held during the adoption matching process and he highlighted that foster carers played a vital role in the process. He also commented on the benefits of early permanence and he added that at a recent kinship carers event, the carers spoke of how much they appreciated the recent improvements to the service.

The Chair informed the Panel that due to time constraints, the motion to Council relating to care experience being adopted as a protected characteristic had not been considered at the last Council meeting. As a result, the motion will go forward for consideration at the next Council meeting.

The Chair reminded members that feedback on the key comments and questions raised during the discussions following the Corporate Parenting Panel training session held in September, should be sent to the Senior Partnerships Officer.

The comments / questions were provided as follows:

- Are you aware of the profile of the children in care / care leavers in your wards? If not, please make yourself aware of this.
- How can we raise the profile of 'universal responsibility' across all councillor roles?
- How do you consider corporate parenting responsibilities across all key decisions e.g. financial / housing etc?
- How can elected members make links across services and businesses in their corporate parenting / elected member capacity to support children and young people.
- Councillors / school governors were unsure how to ask for information relating to children in care / care leavers in their school, to be assured that they were being supported.
 - The Head of the Virtual School highlighted that training was offered to school governors and she offered to share a training document. She added that all schools had a designated governor for children looked after.
- Is anything more needed on the Key Lines of Enquiry? If so, can this be strengthened in Corporate Parenting Panel meetings.
- There was an invitation from Investing in Children for members to attend Children in Care Council meetings at the Sjovoll Centre. The next meeting of the younger group will be held on 20 November and the meeting of the older group will be held on 28 November.
- The Children in Care Council asked elected members to attend their events, to make themselves known to the young people e.g. Care Day / arts events etc.
- As part of the Children in Care Council's update to the Panel in December, the young people will deliver a presentation to say what they think the Corporate Parenting Panel could do better.

12 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 involved the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

13 Regulation 44 Visits – Internal Children's Homes

The Panel received a presentation from the Strategic Manager for Children's Homes which provided an update on Durham County Council's Children's Homes Regulation 44 visits and the resulting recommendations (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Members were asked to consider whether they could fill a vacancy that had arisen for a member representative for High Etherley Children's Home. Subsequently, the representative for Moorside requested to cover High Etherley, therefore a representative was now required for Moorside at Spennymoor.

Resolved:

That the content of the presentation be noted.