

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 25 October 2019** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor P Brookes in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors B Bainbridge, J Carr, J Charlton, J Considine, J Grant, I Jewell, O Milburn. C Potts, E Scott, M Simmons, H Smith and C Wilson

Co-Opted Members:

W Taylor and a young person representative of the Children in Care Council

Also in attendance:

Kelsey Clayton (Legal Services Manager)

Helen Fergusson (Head of Children's Social Care)

Andrea Houlahan (Strategic Manager, Children and Families)

Robert Johnson (Project Manager, Investing in Children)

Clare Kitson (Social Work Assistant)

Claire Morris (Strategic Manager, Looked After Children Resources)

The Chair also welcomed to the meeting an adoptive parent, and, young people of the Children in Care Council.

1. Adoption Services Update

Andrea Houlahan, Strategic Manager for Children and Families, presented the Adoption Services Update report and delivered a presentation on the service which included information on achievements during 2018-19 and outlined key priority areas for the future (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Members remarked on the decline in the number of adoption orders and the Strategic Manager advised that this reflects the national picture. The Legal Services Manager commented that following recent judgements, more children are being placed with extended family members as an alternative to adoption.

Further to a request for clarification on the Adoption Support Fund, the Strategic Manager clarified that the fund is a central government fund for therapeutic support for post-adopted children and their families. In Durham, this support is delivered by the Full Circle therapeutic team.

The Panel welcomed an adoptive parent to the meeting and thanked her for attending to give her views on her experience of the adoption service. She commented very positively about the service saying she could not fault the adoption process, adding that she feels that her family is perfectly matched.

The adoptive parent referred to how rewarding adoption is, which, like all parenting, comes with challenges and she added that the keys to successful marketing are openness and honesty. She emphasised the excellent support received from her social workers and the Full Circle team.

In response to a question as to whether she would change anything about the process she replied that, initially, she found the advice provided by the Full Circle quite complex, however, with time and her increased experience, she now finds their advice and support invaluable.

Clare Kitson, Social Work Assistant, provided information to the Panel about life story work which is a social work intervention which helps to provide children who have been separated from their birth families with a sense of identity. The work includes the production of life story books which contain information to remind children of people, events and feelings. The Social Work Assistant provided examples of life story work for the Panel to view and explained that the information includes that gathered from a range of people including birth parents, foster carers and teachers. In response to a question from the Chair, the Social Work Assistant responded that great care goes into the wording in the books which are age-appropriate and tailored to the individual child's level of understanding.

The adoptive parent present commented that her children keep their books in their rooms and they are able to access the books at any time. She finds her children will read them in times of change or uncertainty and the books are a useful and relevant tool to help adoptive parents to alleviate anxiety and provide reassurance.

In response to a question about the difficulty of gathering information when birth parents have disengaged, the Social Work Assistant responded that efforts are made to obtain information as early as possible and she stressed the important role that the Families First teams and foster carers play in this.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

2. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Crathorne, Jopling, Reed and Richardson, from co-opted Members C Baines, N Harrison and R Watson and from officers F Callaghan, M Stenton and J Watson.

3. Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 27 September 2019 were agreed as a correct record. The following matters arising were reported by the Chair:

- Fiona Callaghan is now in post as the Acting Head of the Virtual School;
- Referring to item 3 of the minutes, the Chair referred to the vacancy on the fostering panel and asked if another member would be willing to fill this vacancy due to logistical difficulties for Cllr Jopling. Members requested clarification on which panel it is and where the meetings are held;
- Referring to item 10, more detailed information on children and young people missing from care, and, in out-of-county placements will be included in future quality performance updates;
- A regular update on fostering will be included on the work programme;
- An initiative to use dog-walking bandanas to market the fostering service is being progressed;
- The Children in Care Council is undertaking a sponsored 400,000 step challenge from 1 October to 14 November. To show support, Jayne Watson, Senior Partnership Officer, is participating in the challenge.
- Members were reminded to consider the Care Leavers Challenge which will be held next year, from 10-16 February. Councillor Smith has agreed to take up the challenge.
- Councillor Milburn tendered apologies for the September meeting.

5. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

6. Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that the number of looked after children had increased to 890, a figure which was below the regional average but above the national average.

In response to a request from the Chair for information on the age range of looked after children, the Head of Children's Social Care explained that recent changes in recording may account for an increase in the number of older looked after children who are now included in the figures when previously they were not classed as looked after.

The number of looked after children under the age of 1 had reduced.

Councillor Charlton asked whether more children were entering the looked after system from the more deprived areas of the county. The Head of Children's Social Care responded that a detailed analysis of trends in relation to the characteristics and demographics of looked after children will be brought to the Panel within the quarter 2 performance report.

The young person representative of the Children in Care Council asked whether there was adequate Social Work provision in place to cope with the increase in looked after children. The Head of Children's Social Care responded that the number of Social Workers had increased, that caseloads are closely monitored and the size of individual caseloads remains stable.

Councillor Grant referred to a newspaper article which reported that costs of providing foster care and residential care are often higher than private boarding school fees and referred to the case of a looked after child, who was placed at a private boarding school, assisted by the Buttle trust, and then progressed to study at Oxford University.

The Head of Children's Social Care commented that all types of placement should be considered, however, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' and the best interests of the child must be paramount.

7. Ofsted Updates including ASC and ILACS feedback

The Head of Children's Social Care provided an overview of the recently published Ofsted inspection report of the Children's Social Care Services. The report on Aycliffe Secure Centre was to be published later that afternoon and details on this would be shared at the next meeting. It was agreed that links to the reports would be circulated to the Panel.

8. Update from Investing in Children

The following update was provided by the Children in Care Council:

- Safety Plans have been updated to include a comment box for young people;
- Health Visitors have attended the Children in Care Council meetings;
- Work has been done on PEP reviews;
- Consideration is being given to gaining accreditation for older young people to be involved in Regulation 44 visits.

9. Any other business

Members were asked to consider filling a vacancy on the School Sub-Group at Aycliffe Secure Centre. Councillor Jewell commented that he would be interested, however, he would need to ensure the meetings did not clash with those in his already busy diary.

10. 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 items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

11. Regulation 44 Visits: Summary Report

The Panel considered the monthly update on Regulation 44 visits and outstanding responsive repairs (for copy see file of minutes). Members commented on the high cost of some repairs.

Resolved:

That the report be received.

At the conclusion of the formal business, the Children in Care Council delivered a Care Leavers' training session.