

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a remote meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held on **Friday 23 October 2020** at **10.00 am**

Present:

Councillor I Jewell in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors B Bainbridge, J Charlton, J Considine, P Crathorne, P Jopling, M McKeon, J Makepeace, O Milburn, C Potts, S Quinn, A Reed, E Scott, M Simmons, H Smith, T Tucker and C Wilson

Co-opted Member:

C Baines

Also in attendance:

Kelsey Clayton - Legal Services Manager

Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care

Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children

Heather McFarlane - Designated Nurse Safeguarding and Looked After Children

Selwyn Morgans – Centre Manager, Aycliffe Secure Centre

Claire Morris - Strategic Manager, Children Looked After Resources

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

Melanie Stubbs - Head of the Virtual School

Stephen Tracey – Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager

Jayne Watson - Senior Partnerships Officer

Dawn Wilson - Senior Commissioning Officer

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor G Richardson.

2. Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 28 February 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

The Chair thanked officers for the regular updates which had been circulated to the Panel, during the suspension of meetings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5. Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Children's Social Care provided an update on the number of children looked after which stood at 955, an increase of approximately 50 on the figure reported in February. Members noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had delayed plans for some young people who were ready to leave the looked after system, the increase therefore did not represent 50 new cases. The increase mirrors the regional and national trend.

Councillor A Reed asked if the increase had impacted on foster care capacity. The Head of Children's Social Care responded that, over recent months, there had been an increase in the number of children living in kinship care arrangements, and in these circumstances, a family member or friend is approved as their foster carer. In addition to this, the foster carer recruitment campaign continues to ensure sufficiency.

6. Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update

Robert Johnson, Project Manager, delivered a presentation which updated the Panel on recent activities carried out by the Children in Care Council (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Project Manager explained the young people have continued to connect with the Corporate Parenting Panel, remotely, throughout the pandemic, and, during the summer the young people highlighted a national campaign which aims to challenge the stigma and negative stereotypes that some people associate with being in care. The young people considered this was so important that it should be brought to the attention of the Corporate Parenting Panel who could highlight this at a more local level. The young people suggested that the Corporate Parenting Panel could assist by reviewing positive news stories with the Children in Care Council on a regular basis, and they would also like to see more positive promotion of children looked after through platforms such as the foster carer recruitment campaign and the Children in Care Council newsletter.

Councillor Milburn asked the Programme Manager whether the Children in Care Council promote through Durham County Council's media and communications team.

The Programme Manager confirmed that the media team does promote the work of the Children in Care Council and they do gain recognition, for example, the Children's Commissioner for England had retweeted a poem written by one of the young people. However, in addition to media coverage, the young people would also like Corporate Parenting Panel members to continue to promote them within their wards.

Councillor Considine commented that she would be more than happy to share the Children in Care Council's magazine and she suggested that it may be beneficial if the magazine could be distributed with the County Durham News magazine which is circulated to every household in County Durham, thereby maximising its circulation.

Acknowledging how difficult the months during the pandemic have been for young people, Councillor Tucker asked if the young people had received additional mental health support. The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that the service has continued to provide mental health services, and, therapeutic support through the Full Circle, and, in addition there is work being done to develop peer support to encourage young people to support each other. The service has found the pandemic has been very much an individual experience with some young people embracing the use of online and digital platforms and some finding that remaining in foster care, or, in their children's homes for longer than anticipated, a very positive experience.

Councilor Tucker asked what support is available to help young people gain employment and whether vetting of prospective employers takes place. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that a dedicated team of officers prepare young people for the transition into further education or employment. She added there are approximately 30 older children looked after in higher education, and the service is aware of how challenging the COVID-19 pandemic is going to prove with regard to employment opportunities and this will continue to be a priority.

The Project Manager concluded his item by paying tribute to the Young People's Service including the Young People's Advisers, saying the support they had provided throughout the pandemic, had been invaluable.

7. Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report

Jayne Watson, Senior Partnerships Officer presented the Corporate Parenting Annual Report for 2019/20 and delivered a presentation (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Senior Partnerships Officer explained the report was produced in conjunction with the young people of the Children in Care Council, to ensure their voice was reflected in it, and she presented highlights of the achievements during the year and details of the priorities for the forthcoming year.

The Chair thanked all those involved in the production of the annual report.

Resolved:

That the recommendation in the report be approved.

8. Corporate Parenting Strategy

The Committee considered a report and presentation of Helen Fergusson, Head of Children's Social Care on the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted the strategy outlines the range of work taking place to continue to improve outcomes for children looked after and care leavers. The Head of Children's Social Care described eight priority areas and gave the following examples of planned work for the forthcoming year, aligned to the eight strategic priorities:

1. Work with health partners to increase support for young people with complex mental health needs, including work with Tees Esk and Wear Valley Mental Health Trust to support young people in crisis.
2. Expansion of the Edge of Care provision and a focus on delivering Family Group Conferences to reach extended family members to ensure that, wherever it is safe to do so, the possibility of children remaining with extended family members is explored. Work is also being undertaken to embed Signs of Safety to ensure all families who are experiencing difficulty are offered a family network meeting.
3. Work will continue to ensure placement sufficiency, through the recruitment of foster carers. The Panel noted a new Children's Home is due to open imminently, and it is hoped to further increase residential provision to offer more short breaks and respite. Work is also taking place with providers of smaller, more specialist provision.
4. There are plans to extend the pre-birth service to include care leavers who are becoming parents and a dedicated Pause project for County Durham is due to be launched for parents who have repeatedly had children removed from their care, in order to provide them with support to break the cycle.

5. Work will be done to improve the local offer through increasing employment opportunities and to further develop the Staying Close project where young people leaving care can continue to live close to, and access support from, their former children's home. In addition, a plan for a new drop-in centre for young people is being developed.
6. Clear Cut Communication will be implemented to identify, at an early stage, those children and young people who require additional help with speech and language.
7. The Virtual School now has increased capacity to include oversight of all children in early years settings as well as school settings, and, within the next year, it also plans to have oversight of post-16 provision.
8. The service will continue to listen and respond to the views of children looked after and young people. An issue had come to light during the pandemic with the increase in the use of technology where it became apparent that some of the children's homes had inadequate wi-fi facilities. As a result of this feedback from the young people, steps will be taken to improve the wi-fi speed in all Durham County Council's children's residential homes.

The Head of Children's Social Care responded to comments and questions as follows.

In response to a question from Councillor Charlton, the Head of Children's Social Care said further details would be provided to Councillor Charlton in due course, regarding the location of the drop-in centre.

Councillor Jopling asked what support is provided to those leaving care who find they cannot cope with independent living. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that every care leaver is assisted by a Young Person's Adviser and they have access to a wide range of support and accommodation. It is recognised that all young people are different and a plan is developed for each care leaver to identify exactly what support they need. The service keeps in touch with all care leavers and support continues up to the age of 25. Where a care leaver is not able to live on their own, alternative living arrangements are explored, including supported lodgings and group living arrangements.

Councillor Considine referred to the Fostering to Adopt placements and asked if these had increased and she added that she was pleased to see progress of the Pause and Staying Close projects. The Head of Children's Social Care said the service is working closely with colleagues in housing to identify suitable properties to extend the Staying Close project.

With regard to Fostering to Adopt placements, four arrangements are in place, and, the Regional Adoption Agency, which is due to launch next year, will offer additional opportunities.

Councillor Reed commented on the amount of work planned for the future and extended praise to the staff. She spoke of those young people who, on reaching secondary school find it difficult to cope, refuse to engage and may go missing from school and asked what provisions are in place to assist young people experiencing difficulty, and, to assist schools to manage these issues.

Melanie Stubbs, Virtual School Head Teacher informed the Panel that there are a variety of service level agreements in place with therapeutic and educational health service professionals and schools are requested to alert the Virtual School as soon as issues occur. On a positive note, there have been no permanent exclusions from the Virtual School since 2014 and only 2 children looked after had been discussed at Behaviour Panels throughout the county. Support from the Full Circle is available to schools through a telephone helpline. With regard to alternative provision, an inclusion base at Lanchester provides respite for young people experiencing difficulties. The Virtual School head commented that young people looked after require a sense of belonging and the focus is to ensure that stability is maintained as much as possible.

Councillor Tucker asked what steps are taken when a young person simply refuses to accept help offered. The Virtual School Head explained that, as a former designated teacher, she never gives up on a child. She emphasised that a young person must always have someone to turn to and that, in itself, sends a very important message. When a young person refuses to engage, they strive to find a method that will work. On occasions, it is necessary to engage experts from the health needs team to assist and alternative provision will be investigated if all other methods of intervention have failed. This year has seen the introduction of the Personal Education Plan caseworker remaining with the child throughout, in order to promote continuity.

Councillor Tucker asked for information on what is done to ensure that children's homes are located in suitable locations. Claire Morris, Strategic Manager responded that close work is carried out with police, housing and planning to ensure that a potential location is suitable in terms of schools, the community, safety, and, importantly, the views of young people are also taken into account.

Councillor Bainbridge asked whether additional funding had been accessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Head of Children's Social Care confirmed additional government funding had been obtained to provide support for adopters, kinship carers, special guardianship carers and for peer support opportunities, including a dedicated telephone helpline being set up. A number of the funding streams are currently under review.

Councillor Smith drew members' attention to the County Durham Plan, adopted at the Council meeting held on Wednesday 21 October, which includes clear guidance relating to planning decisions on appropriate sites for children's residential homes.

The Chair thanked members and officers for the useful discussion.

Resolved:

That the report be received.

9. Performance Update

The Panel considered a performance update and presentation from Stephen Tracey, Corporate Equalities and Strategy manager (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Equalities and Scrutiny Manager referred to the rise in the number of children and he pointed out that although the figure has increased by 50, there had been a 25 % reduction in the number of children becoming looked after and a 50% reduction in the number of children ending their time in care, therefore more children had remained in care for longer, during the pandemic. The pandemic had also had an impact with regard to fewer hospital and dental appointments and this had led to a slight dip in performance relating to the number of health and dental assessments being carried out. Outcomes for care leavers had improved during the period with two-thirds of care leavers being in education, employment or training and only a very small number of care leavers are not in suitable accommodation.

Councillor Jopling congratulated the service on their performance, in particular in relation to suitable accommodation and asked if any young people were known to be sleeping rough. The Head of Children's Social Care confirmed that no young people looked after were sleeping rough and bed and breakfast accommodation is used only in very exceptional circumstances. She pointed out that the data includes a small number of young people in custody.

Councillor C Wilson asked about unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and she asked how they are cared for. The Head of Children's Social Care replied that, as soon as the Council becomes the responsible authority for those young people, they are cared for in the same way as all other children looked after, with access to the same accommodation and support.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10. Any other business

Claire Morris, Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources shared a good news story resulting from the pandemic. One of the young people in care with an ambition to become a footballer used lockdown to his advantage to practise his footballing skills at every available opportunity. The residential home staff spent many hours, over the weeks, helping the young person to develop his skills. As a result of this, he successfully gained a place on a local football team and his team won their first match 7-0. To everyone's delight, the young person was selected as man of the match. The Strategic Manager added that seeing how proud this young person was of what he had achieved demonstrates how important and rewarding the work can be.

In response to a request from Councillor Considine, the Panel placed on record their thanks and well wishes to Florence Coulter, former Fostering and Adoption Team Leader, on her recent retirement and wished her well for the future.

11. 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.

12. Regulation 44 visits

Dawn Wilson, Senior Commissioning Officer reported that virtual visits had taken place since March and the statutory requirements had been met throughout the pandemic.

As a result of feedback from the Panel, future Regulation 44 visits reports will be in a new, summarised format.

The Chair praised the current model of quality assurance and thanked the Commissioning Officers for their professional approach.

The Chair asked members to consider the two vacancies and asked that they speak to him, or, the Senior Partnership Officer if they required further information. Councillor Tucker commented that she would be happy to fill one of the vacancies.

Councillor Tucker commented that the meeting had been very productive adding that she was pleased to see that children looked after and care leavers have been well supported and encouraged throughout the pandemic. She added that staff in Children's Services had clearly done a great deal of work over recent months and they should be commended. The Head of Children's Social Care thanked the Panel for the kind words, saying they were much appreciated and she assured the Panel that she would pass these comments to staff at the next staff briefing.