

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a remote meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held on **Friday 18 December 2020 at 9.30 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor I Jewell in the Chair**

**Panel Members:**

Councillors B Bainbridge, J Considine, P Crathorne, M McKeon, J Makepeace, O Milburn, C Potts, S Quinn, G Richardson, E Scott, M Simmons, H Smith, T Tucker, C Wilson

**Co-opted Members:**

A Ferguson

**Also in attendance:**

Kelsey Clayton - Legal Services Manager  
Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care  
Paula Gibbons – Head of Service, Regional Adoption Agency  
Lindsey Herring – Commissioning Officer  
Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children, and, Amber and Mitchell from the Children in Care Council  
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  
Jayne Watson - Senior Partnerships Officer

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from C Baines, Councillor J Charlton, Councillor P Jopling, Councillor A Reed and W Taylor.

### **2. Substitute Members**

No substitute members were in attendance.

### **3. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 24 October 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

### **4. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **5. Number of Looked After Children**

The Head of Children's Social Care, Helen Fergusson, informed the Panel that as at 18 December 2020 there were 960 children looked after, representing a slight increase on the number reported at the last Panel meeting held in October. Plans for children and young people which had been delayed due to COVID-19 were progressing well, however, the impact of the pandemic was likely to continue to be reflected in the figures over the coming months.

## **6. Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update**

Robert Johnson, Project Manager, and Amber and Mitchell delivered a presentation which updated on recent activity by the Children in Care Council (CiCC) (for copy of presentation see file of minutes). The information provided included the following matters.

Young people from the Children in Care Council delivered training to over fifty designated teachers, at which the young people provided their views on key messages and school policies. The young people suggested they would like to have some of their review time held in private, as some young people may feel more comfortable discussing private matters without their designated teacher present. The young people also discussed the importance of the continuity of their designated teacher, which promotes trust and stability, and, allows the relationship to develop.

The young people engaged with social work students from Durham and Sunderland Universities to discuss issues raised by the Children in Care Council, including the use of language and the importance of the voice of the child. The young people are keen to see what the students learnt from their visit and follow-up work is planned for the new year.

The Children in Care Council delivered virtual training to future foster carers which was very well received, and, following requests from the foster carers, the young people are exploring further opportunities to work with them.

A piece of work is being done, with the Children's Commissioner for England, on a national policy which is being developed in Sussex which aims to improve policies between the police and care experienced young people. A number of the young people would like to progress this work further by becoming ambassadors for the purposes of future development and training. It is hoped that and this learning will be incorporated into training for foster carers.

At a recent Children in Care Council meeting, the young people discussed working with the Corporate Parenting Panel in order to develop an annual fundraising event to raise money for young people including care experienced young people.

Discussions had taken place on the benefits for children and young people of spending time with, and, caring for, animals, and, the young people talked about ways in which Durham County Council could support this initiative. They suggested that Durham County Council could investigate the possibility of adopting an animal, possibly through a partnership arrangement with a local farm, which could be linked to the 'freedom card' incentive scheme.

Councillor Scott asked what action could be taken to progress this matter. The Head of Children's Social Care confirmed that the suggestion from the young people is being considered, and the Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources is taking the matter forward, with a view to providing an update to the Panel in the spring. In addition, the Head of Children's Social Care explained that the comments from the young people had been raised with Social Workers and Independent Review Officers, to highlight the importance of young people's relationships with pets, and, how this can have a significant impact, particularly when placement moves are necessary.

Following on from the discussion at the last Corporate Parenting Panel meeting on promoting the positives of care experienced young people, the Project Manager was pleased to report that Ian from the Children in Care Council had been selected as one of only 25 young people nationally to become a National Voice Ambassador for Coram Voice. Coram Voice is a national charity for the rights of children who are either in, or, leaving care, which aims to ensure children's rights are upheld, and, that their voices and experiences inform and improve the systems that care for them. The Project Manager commented on how proud he is of Ian's achievement and he added that he is looking forward to supporting Ian in this work which will link with the Children in Care Council, Durham County Council and the Corporate Parenting Panel.

The Corporate Parenting Panel placed on record their congratulations to Ian on his success and wished him well in his new role. The Chair thanked Rob, Amber and Mitchell for attending the meeting, for providing the informative presentation and for sharing their views.

## **7. Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children Looked After and Care Leavers**

The Panel considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services and the Joint Head of Integrated Strategic Commissioning for County Durham CCG and Durham County Council which set out Durham's strategic approach to securing sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of children looked after, and, presented the Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers for the period 2020-2023 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Lindsey Herring, Commissioning Manager, delivered a presentation and outlined the key strategic priorities as follows:

- Grow the number of in-house foster carers and reduce reliance on independent foster care provision
- Increase the number of adopters
- Continue to develop and broaden the residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers
- Develop access to a diverse range of appropriate accommodation for Care Leavers

Claire Morris, Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources, thanked Commissioning colleagues for their work in producing such a detailed strategy. By way of a brief update, she explained that, in respect of the plan to expand the smaller homes offer, a 3-bedded home had recently been purchased and recruitment for the manager of the home is underway.

Panel members asked questions and commented as follows:

- Councillor Smith referred to the recent Overview and Scrutiny Review into Children's Residential Care Homes and commented that she was pleased to see the increased liaison with private providers which she hoped will lead to more children and young people being placed closer to familiar surroundings and locations.
- Councillor McKeon acknowledged the work of the Commissioning team to create a flexible offer and to endeavour to meet the individual needs of the unique group of young people within the county and she thanked officers for the hard work. Speaking from experience within her ward, she reported that local members, the parish council, and, the community had been very well briefed and consulted on proposals for the location of a children's home within the ward. The Commissioning Manager highlighted that joint working is undertaken with the police, providers, and, young people, to carry out comprehensive assessments of the potential impact on communities.

- Councillor Considine thanked officers for their hard work and added her support for the plan to increase the offer for smaller homes.
- Councillor Crathorne spoke of the importance of providing support to young people on leaving care, and the development of the Staying Close pilot scheme, to offer young people leaving care the opportunity to continue to access support from their previous children's home.
- Councillor Tucker referred to page 9 of the strategy and noted the net current forecast overspend of approximately £5 million and she asked how this is likely to impact spending throughout the next financial year. The Commissioning Manager informed the Panel that financial profiling is underway and the Head of Children's Social Care added that careful consideration will be given as to how projects will be prioritised, both in terms of finance, and, the needs of children and young people.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

**8. Aycliffe Secure Centre Update**

The Panel received an update on Aycliffe Secure Centre from Selwyn Morgans, Aycliffe Secure Centre Manger which included presentations on how the Centre had continued to operate effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic and the plans for a Transition Home, to prepare young people for integration into the community (for copy of presentations see file of minutes).

The Centre Manager provided details of the numerous changes implemented since March 2020 to ensure the Centre continued to care for young people whilst maintaining a safe environment for all. He paid tribute to staff for rising to this unprecedented challenge and he also thanked the young people for playing their part to minimise the impact, with incidents of restraint and self-harm reducing during the pandemic.

The Centre Manager was pleased to report that, at a recent assurance visit by Ofsted, the Centre maintained its outstanding rating and received very positive feedback.

Referring to the success of virtual visits which were implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chair asked if these would continue to be offered when normal service is resumed. The Centre Manager confirmed that that this initiative will continue as it had worked very well and enabled the young people to stay in contact with their families, safely, throughout the pandemic.

Councillor Quinn asked if there were any plans to vaccinate staff. The Centre Manager responded that there were no immediate plans, however, the situation was being monitored, with regular meetings being held with colleagues from NHS England, Public Health and the Department for Education.

Councillor Bainbridge expressed her support for the plan for the Transitions Home.

Councillor Richardson asked for further information on how the young people based in the Transitions Home would access education. The Centre Manager clarified that the young people would attend education establishments within the community and the education team based within the Centre would work with those establishments. In addition, facilities for education would be available within the Transition Home.

The Chair thanked the Centre Manager for the informative update.

## **9. Update on Regional Adoption Agency – Adopt Coast to Coast**

The Panel received an update report of the Head of Children’s Social Care on the Regional Adoption Agency, presented by Paula Gibbons, Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Head of Service provided details of the significant amount of work which had taken place since the Cabinet approved the development of the hosted model in December 2018. The Panel noted that the partnership model will be delivered through a hub and spoke structure and that workstreams are meeting regularly in preparation to go live in early spring 2021.

### **Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

## **10. Adoption Report: April 2020-September 2020**

The Head of Service Adopt Coast to Coast presented the 6 monthly Adoption Service report and delivered a presentation on activity from April to September and key priority areas for 2020-21 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Head of Service highlighted the good performance during the challenging period and praised staff for their actions to develop new ways of working, in light of the pandemic.

The Chair thanked the Head of Service for the comprehensive report and he placed on record the Panel's thanks to staff for implementing the changes which had enabled the Adoption Panels to continue, by being held virtually.

Councillor Richardson asked how the offer in County Durham differs from that of neighbouring authorities. The Head of Service explained that all local authority adoption services work within the same set of regulations and carry out considered and thorough adoption assessments. Durham had the opportunity to investigate processes which enable a timelier journey for adopters, and, Adopt Coast to Coast had benefited from learning from the experiences of other regional adoption agencies.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

## **11. Any other business**

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel of an initiative that was introduced during the pandemic which aimed to capture the experiences of the pandemic, of children and young people looked after, through creative activities, such as the production of videos, poetry and photographs. As a result, an e-book had been produced which would be circulated to the Panel with the minutes: [CYPS Lockdown Diaries](#)

The Panel viewed an audio clip of one of the poems written during lockdown, which was narrated by the author of the poem, a child looked after.

The Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources shared a positive story about two young people residing at one of the county's children's homes. The young people had noticed that, during the pandemic, people had more time to enjoy nature, which provided them with an enterprising idea. They spent recent weeks clearing the shed in the garden in order to create a wood shed in which they intend to use their design skills to make bird-tables in time for the spring. The young people have impressed staff by fully engaging and showing a real commitment to this project.

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

### **13. Regulation 44 visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Children's Residential Homes**

The Panel considered a joint report of the Head of Children's Social Care and Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children which provided an update on Regulation 44 visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Children's Residential Homes (for copy of report see file of minutes).

#### **Resolved:**

That the report be noted.