

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Parenting Panel** held on **Friday 26 February 2021** at **9.30 am** via Microsoft Teams

Present:

Councillor I Jewell (Chair)

Panel Members:

Councillors B Bainbridge, J Charlton, J Considine, P Crathorne, M McKeon, J Makepeace, C Potts, S Quinn, A Reed, G Richardson, E Scott, M Simmons, H Smith and C Wilson

Co-opted Members:

C Baines, A Ferguson

Other Members:

Councillor O Gunn, Chair of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Also in attendance:

Kelsey Clayton - Legal Services Manager

Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care

Carole Gill – Operations Manager for Children Looked After and Care Leavers

Robert Johnson - Project Manager (Investing in Children) and Mitchell Green (Children in Care Council)

Laura Malone – Strategy Team Leader

Selwyn Morgans – Centre Manager, Aycliffe Secure Centre

Claire Morris - Strategic Manager, Children Looked After Resources

Mark Smith – Strategic Commissioning Manager

Melanie Stubbs - Virtual School Head

Jayne Watson - Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Wendy Taylor.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were present.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 18 December 2020 were agreed as a correct record to be signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Number of Looked After Children

Helen Fergusson, Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that the number of children looked after remained stable at 959, however the impact of delays caused by COVID-19 are likely to be reflected in the figures over the forthcoming months.

6 Update on Residential Children's Homes

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that work is ongoing to identify a new property to replace the provision at Tow Law with a fit-for-purpose, smaller property. A progress update will be provided in due course.

Following on from the discussion at the previous meeting on plans to increase the number of specialist provisions for those young people with complex needs, the Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that a two-year lease had been agreed on a property at Coxhoe, with a view to purchasing a property within that timeframe, for continuing care. The leased property will care for a specific young person and the care will be provided through the Council direct. A recruitment process for the home manager and staff is underway.

The Panel noted the new provision at Sacriston provides for two young people and formal registration with Ofsted is well underway. The work on the re-provision of the home on the Aycliffe site is progressing well, with young people expected to move in soon, following the Ofsted registration process.

7 Regulation 44 Visits - Commissioning Arrangements

The Panel considered a report presented by the Strategic Commissioning Manager, Mark Smith, which outlined the plans to carry out a commissioning exercise to outsource Regulation 44 visits for Durham County Council maintained Children's Homes and the rationale for arriving at this decision (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted

8 Investing in Children / Children in Care Council update

Robert Johnson, Project Manager, Investing in Children (IIC), and, Mitchell Green of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) delivered a presentation which focused on activities by the Children in Care Council from March 2020 until February 2021 (for copy see file of minutes).

Taking the Panel through the presentation, Mitchell and Robert highlighted areas of activity including the following:

- The production of four Children in Care Council newsletters which include articles and stories written by the young people.
- A number of Children in Care Council members had been involved in a feel-good project, the 2020 Summer Pack project, during the pandemic.
- Funding has been secured to work with the Full Circle Team to enhance therapy support centres, which will be carried out with input from the young people.
- The young people are continuing their work with the Social Work Academy, with the Children in Care Council taking care messages to trainee social workers.
- Training with foster carers is going well, with further opportunities to introduce younger members of the Council to this training.
- Young People are attending and presenting at Independent Review Officer team meetings and a sub-group of younger members, new to Investing in Children, has been formed to meet with IROs, to share ideas and reflect on experiences.
- The young people of the CiCC continue to raise its profile with the website being launched on Care Day, Friday 19 February. The young people have also been developing a podcast.
- Work to develop poetry skills is ongoing and a poem written by one of the young people had been re-tweeted by the Children's Commissioner for England.

- 'Mini-CPP' meetings have been introduced to enable young people to comment on events over the last twelve months. This initiative has been very well received.
- Links with the Virtual School and designated teachers has played a vital role during the period and will continue to do so as young people return to education establishments following the pandemic. Young people had attended a session with designated leads, to deliver key messages.
- As a result of discussions at CiCC meetings regarding the importance of seeing friends, this is now included in Care Reviews. The young people have also continued their discussions on the importance of pets and animals and how this aligns with relationship building.
- Awareness has increased in relation to travel bursaries and the Council has taken steps to liaise with higher education colleges to discuss their approach to supporting students.
- Child-friendly policing work is being done to develop training with the police in County Durham.
- A 'Positive Matters' campaign was launched at a meeting with the Corporate Parenting Panel, to challenge stigma.
- Engagement with the Regional Care Council is ongoing.
- Members were encouraged to read to an impressive article written by a young person published in the latest Children in Care Council newsletter, entitled 'Video Games, Good or Bad?'

The Chair thanked Robert and Mitchell for all the good work being carried out.

Picking up on the work with pets, Councillor Charlton commented how she had observed the positive impact a dog had on pupils at a local school, particularly those experiencing emotional issues. The Chair responded that an update on pets was to be provided later in the meeting.

9 Corporate Parenting Strategy for Children and Young People 2020-2022

The Head of Children's Social Care presented the Corporate Parenting Strategy for Children and Young People 2020-2022 for information, noting that the draft Corporate Parenting Strategy was considered in detail at the Panel meeting held in October 2020 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Care Leavers' Strategy - Annual report

Carole Gill, Operations Manager for Children Looked After and Care Leavers presented the Care Leavers' Strategy Annual Report which provided an update on progress against the objectives set out in the Care Leavers' Strategy 2019 to 2023 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Panel noted performance against strategic priorities remains strong, despite the impact of the pandemic.

Outlining areas of performance against the strategic priorities, the Operations Manager reported on the appointment of a dedicated Accommodations and Support Officer, and, an increase in the number of 'Staying Put' arrangements in place. The Panel noted the good progress with respect to the number of young people in suitable accommodation and the Operations Manager paid tribute to the excellent partnership working taking place. Performance in relation to participation of care leavers is in line with, or, above that of comparators, with 30 care leavers at University or other higher education establishments and 7 care leavers in apprenticeships with the Council, one of whom hopes to secure a full time post as a Young Person's Adviser in the future. The Council continues to work with DurhamWorks and colleagues in Human Resources, to increase opportunities for care leavers.

To continue the good work of the former Chief Executive, a meeting is to be held with the Interim Chief Executive to discuss future plans to support children looked after and care leavers. The Panel noted areas for future development include the roll-out of the ClearCut communications tool, the establishment of the Care Leavers' Hub and the development of a 'Staying Close' pilot.

Councillor Reed thanked the Operations Manager for the good work which is clearly benefiting the young people and asked what support is available for young people who choose to move from foster care to independent living. The Operations Manager explained that work begins early to ensure that the individual needs of the young person are matched to pathway plans, with the aim being for a clear pathway plan to be identified well before the young person reaches the age of 18. Support is ongoing up to the age of 25 and each young person has access to a Young Person's Adviser until they reach the age of 25, should they wish to do so. 'Staying Put' arrangements are available for those young people who wish to remain with their foster carers. For young people with highly complex needs, whose plan is to move into the care of Adult Services, work is carried out with the Transitions Team.

The Operations Manager spoke of the increasing range of accommodation options and the support provided by the Edge of Care Service and Supporting Solutions, for young people who require additional support.

Councillor Richardson congratulated the achievements of the young people, particularly those studying at University and higher education establishments.

Resolved:

That the report be received.

11 Performance update

The Panel considered the Performance Update report presented by Laura Malone, Strategy Team Leader for Children and Young People's Services, which provided an overview of performance in relation to looked after children and care leavers during quarter three of 2020-21 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategy Team Leader highlighted the relatively stable number of children looked after, with the number of children leaving care reducing, due to delays caused by the pandemic. The figure for initial health assessments had reduced slightly during the quarter and work is being done with NHS colleagues to identify the cause for this issue. Noting that the number of health assessments and dental checks had reduced during the period, the Strategy Team Leader pointed out that the pandemic had led to reduced access to these services.

The slightly lower number of young people in in-house foster care may also be a result of the pandemic, with foster carers exercising caution with regard to increasing their households during the lockdown periods. The Strategy Team Leader commented that the number of children looked after reported missing represents a small proportion of the looked after population.

In response to a question from the Chair as to whether the number of missing incidents was a cause for concern, the Strategy Team Leader reassured the Panel that the number of missing incidents had remained relatively low during 2020-21, and, clarified that within the 45 missing incidents, some young people had gone missing on more than one occasion. The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that a dedicated member of staff is now in post to provide a single point of contact to coordinate all the work on missing children and to provide young people with the opportunity to discuss their issues in respect of their return home, with an independent person. This also assists the service to examine any emerging patterns and share intelligence with police colleagues, if necessary.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 Any other business

The Strategic Manager for Children Looked After and Resources, Claire Morris, gave an example of how the young people looked after had made her proud over the Christmas period. The young people regularly receive Christmas gifts donated by a Durham company and the company had been particularly generous this year. The young people were so pleased with the gifts they received that they used excellent IT and creative skills to produce a montage of images of themselves enjoying their presents over Christmas, which they sent to the company as a gesture of thanks. The Strategic Manager expressed how moved she was when she viewed the montage and how impressed she had been at the amount of effort the young people had put in to such a professional piece of work, which they had taken upon themselves to produce, to show their appreciation.

Following the discussions with the Children in Care Council regarding the importance of pets, the Strategic Manager was pleased to report that a number of children's homes had introduced pet hamsters. She spoke of how the young people had been mindful to ensure that all those in the home were receptive to having pets. Other pet activities include children's homes holding 'dog-fostering days' which enables the young people to participate in dog-walking and dog-grooming, one home has an allotment with chickens and one young person is helping a horse owner to care for a horse. Young people's Safety Plans now include a section on pets which details the pets young people would like to keep in contact with, in the event of moving on, and relationships with pets is now a part of social work training, with the work being replicated in the fostering service.

Carole Gill, Operations Manager, thanked the members of the Corporate Parenting Panel, and all those who had provided support throughout the year. She remarked on how generous people had been this Christmas, which had been greatly appreciated. She thanked Judge Scully of Newcastle Combined Court and her colleagues, who carried out fundraising for care leavers over Christmas which resulted in such a large amount of gifts that the service had been overwhelmed by the kindness.

Councillor Scott spoke of how heart-warming these good news stories are, particularly at this time, and she paid tribute to the staff for all their efforts.

Councillor Gunn, Chair of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee echoed the sentiments, adding that staff and young people had clearly made an extraordinary effort during this difficult year.

Councillor Gunn thanked the Corporate Parenting Panel for their work and reported that in her role as Chair of North East Regional Children and Young People's Service Lead Members Network, she and Councillor McKeon had delivered a presentation to one of the meetings, on Durham's Corporate Parenting Panel model. The feedback from that has led to aspects of Durham's model being adopted by other authorities, which is testament to the excellent work of the Panel.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked all officers, not only for the reports presented to the formal meetings but also for the regular briefings and updates from the service provided between meetings. The Head of Children's Social Care emphasised how important the support of the Corporate Parenting Panel is to the service.

The Chair noted Councillor Tucker's resignation from the Corporate Parenting Panel and placed on record the Panel's thanks to Councillor Tucker for her valuable contribution.

13 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.

14 Regulation 44 visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Children's Residential Homes

The Panel considered the report of the Head of Children's Social Care which provided a monthly update on Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings (for copy see file of minutes).

In response to a question from the Panel regarding the capacity of the external provider market, the Strategic Commissioning Manager commented that a significant rise in the number of children's homes across the country has led to a rise in the number of organisations delivering independent Regulation 44 visits, with the provider market being in a healthy position.

The Chair assured the Panel that the situation is kept under constant review.

In response to a question from the Panel referring to the options for the future delivery of Regulation 44 visits, the Head of Children's Services clarified that reciprocal arrangements with another local authority had been rejected. The preferred option is a private provider, with the necessary expertise to ensure that the regulatory requirements required by Ofsted are maintained.

Resolved:

That the report be received.

15 Any other business

The Head of Children's Social Care asked members to consider if they would like to represent the Corporate Parenting Panel on the Care Leaver's Steering Group which meets quarterly. Any member wishing to be part of that work was asked to contact the Senior Partnerships Officer.