

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Friday 30 April 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor I Jewell in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors B Bainbridge, P Crathorne, S Quinn, A Reed and M Simmons

Co-opted Members:

A Ferguson

Also in attendance:

Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care

Paula Gibbons – Head of Regional Adoption Agency

Anita Harvey – Solicitor, Children, Adults and Health

Jodie Henderson – Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence

Mark den Hollander – Independent Visitor Co-Ordinator

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

Lesley Caulkin of the Children in Care Council

Selwyn Morgans – Centre Manager, Aycliffe Secure Centre

Claire Morris - Strategic Manager, Children Looked After Resources

Melanie Stubbs - Virtual School Head

Jayne Watson - Senior Partnerships Officer

Lisa Wood - Strategic Manager, First Contact & County Wide Specialist Services

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Charlton, Councillor J Considine, Councillor E Scott, Councillor H Smith and co-opted members C Baines and W Taylor.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2021 were confirmed 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

The Panel noted the decrease in the number of children looked after which had reduced from 959 in January to the current figure of 937. This reduction reflected that systems and processes were gradually returning to normal following the pandemic.

6 Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update

Lesley and Mitchell from the Children in Care Council updated the Panel on the following recent activity at the Children in Care Council:

- Funding had been secured for older care leavers to be involved in a 'Positive Relationships' project to raise awareness of the many different forms of abuse through peer-led workshops in schools.
- Work is taking place with the Virtual Head's team to increase the participation of young people in how pupil premium is spent.
- Younger members of the CiCC held their first 'face to face' meeting at which they developed artwork for the Full Circle service. Further meetings are being planned.
- The young people have supported the launch of the 'Mind of my own' app and launched the first in a series of podcasts called 'We are no different', focusing on young people's experiences of the care system.
- The first police training session is being developed, facilitated by the young people.
- Peer mentoring training is being offered to young people in children's homes, with several young people expressing an interest in becoming mentors to the younger children. One young person from Coxhoe Children's Home has been making a very positive contribution to the CiCC meetings and has been particularly proactive in the peer mentoring programme.

The Chair thanked Robert, Lesley and Mitchell for their presentation and perspective which is always very much appreciated by the Panel.

7 Adopt Coast to Coast Update

The Panel received a presentation from Paula Gibbons, Head of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) who provided an update on Adopt Coast to Coast which was launched virtually on 1 April 2021. The Head of Service extended her thanks to the staff within the three spokes of Cumbria, Durham and Together for Children for the hard work that had gone into making the launch a success.

Members were informed that the partnership builds upon the strengths across the three services and that performance in 2020-21 included 77 adopters approved and 130 children matched. The Head of the RAA described the key priority areas for the future including the development of the branding, streamlining processes to reflect best practice, the promotion of early matching and the further development of the post adoption support offer.

Members praised the positive progress and in response to a question from Councillor Reed regarding the assessment of prospective adopters, the Head of the RAA clarified that the service investigates all options which are in the best interests of the child, including assessing foster carers and extended family members as adopters.

Councillor B Bainbridge acknowledged the foster to adopt approach which is a really positive initiative.

The Chair congratulated the Head of the RAA on the launch, adding that he is looking forward to seeing the service develop, through maximising efficiency and improving outcomes for children and young people.

8 Children who go Missing from Home and Care - ERASE

The Panel received a report and presentation from Lisa Wood, Strategic Manager, First Contact and Countywide Specialist Services outlining the recent activity and development of the ERASE Team since the service was reviewed in 2019 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager highlighted service improvements which had taken place including working with police colleagues to ensure the recording criteria for reporting children missing is aligned with the police definition. In addition, a data analyst had been seconded from Durham Constabulary to obtain a clear picture of the position to ensure an appropriate response is provided.

The Strategic Manager explained that, on recognising that a number of professionals were undertaking return to home interviews, a dedicated Missing Coordinator was appointed in April 2020, to provide independent return to home interviews for all children going missing from care. Close work is undertaken with the police co-ordinators which enables the sharing of intelligence and promotes a better understanding of any emerging trends.

The Panel noted that the Strategic Child Exploitation Group had increased its membership to include the voluntary sector and representatives of the LGBTQ community and young people with offending behaviour.

In terms of performance, the Panel noted that the number of young people missing from home and care had increased during the year, however, members were asked to bear in mind the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic and the new definition developed in line with police colleagues which may account for the increase in the number of reported incidents. Nationally there had been an increase in the reporting of children going missing as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Strategic Manager highlighted the improved performance with regard to the number of return to home interviews completed as a result of the dedicated officer in post and that the service had created COVID-safe ways of working to ensure the service continued throughout the pandemic, including 'talk and walk' sessions.

Learning from audits and inspections had led to improvements such as the development of a language document which had been designed in conjunction with young people, which aims to promote consistent use of language when describing children and young people missing from home or care and those vulnerable to exploitation.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

9 Independent Visitor Service Update

The Panel received a report and presentation from Mark den Hollander, Independent Visitor Service Coordinator which updated on Durham County Council's Independent Visitor service for children and young people looked after (for copy see file of minutes).

The report also provided assurance in response to the open letter from the National Independent Visitor Network, that we are meeting our statutory duty to make Independent Visitors accessible to the children and young people in our care.

The Service Coordinator began by describing the challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and he outlined the steps taken to manage risk during the period, whilst ensuring the service was maintained.

The Service Coordinator explained that the Children Act 1989 placed a duty on local authorities to appoint an independent visitor for children looked after. The role of an Independent Visitor is to promote the child's developmental, social and emotional needs and encourage participation in positive activities. Volunteers are trained and matched with a young person, in a professional befriending role.

The service currently has 42 volunteers and 22 matches have been completed. An important aspect of the service is to offer young people opportunities to have fun whilst complementing the work of the young person's wider care team.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Proud Moments

Claire Morris, Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources, spoke to the Panel about one young person who had informed her that she had created some posters and leaflets which had won a competition. The young person had been grateful for the opportunity to identify her talent and she shared her thoughts about the praise she had received and how much this had increased her confidence, improved her schooling and relationships and had also led her to decide to pursue art as a future career. Members commended the young person on her achievement, acknowledging her effort and they paid tribute to the service for their support.

On behalf of the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children, the Senior Partnerships Officer stated that she would circulate a very positive article published in Children and Young People Now, about Aycliffe Young People's Centre to the Panel. The Panel noted the last full Ofsted Inspection of the Centre in 2019 resulted in the achievement of outstanding in all areas and an assurance visit which took place in November 2020, found high standards had been maintained. The Head of Children's Social Care updated members that Ofsted had paid a further visit to Aycliffe Centre within recent weeks and whilst the published report is awaited, the initial feedback is very positive. The Chair praised the continued excellent work at the Centre.

11 Regulation 44 Commissioning Arrangements Update

The Head of Children's Social Care provided an update on Regulation 44 Commissioning Arrangements, informing the Panel that the current arrangements for Aycliffe Centre will remain, however, the arrangements for community Children's Homes will change. Organisations have been invited to tender for delivery of the service on behalf of Durham County Council and the new arrangements are expected to be in place by June. The new provider will be invited to a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel in due course.

12 Any other business

The Chair took the opportunity to thank all officers and members involved in the Corporate Parenting Panel as he was to stand-down at the forthcoming election. Having been a member of the Panel for 8 years, he commented that he had found it a very enjoyable experience and he had been pleased to be a part of the progress made, with all those involved sharing the common goal of having children's best interests at heart. He added that he was particularly heartened to see the increasing participation of the children and young people, as their views are essential to inform the work of the Panel.

The Chair also conveyed thanks to all members who would be stepping down at the election including Vice-Chair, Councillor Heather Smith who had asked him to pass on her good wishes. He also thanked Councillor Jude Considine who had been a very active member of the Panel.

The Head of Children's Social Care thanked the Chair and Vice-Chair for all their support to officers and more importantly for their support to the children and young people. She added their commitment had been very much appreciated, particularly during the pandemic, with regular meetings being held throughout, which had resulted in significant progress being made.

The Senior Partnerships Officer read out a message from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Councillor Gunn, thanking all members for their commitment, particularly the Chair and Vice-Chair for their strong leadership, especially during the restrictions of the pandemic. Councillor Gunn expressed gratitude to all the officers involved and concluded by thanking the young people of the Children in Care Council for their strength and creativity.

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 a report presented by 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).

The Panel noted the continuing progress, demonstrating good quality care and support being provided to young people.

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that registration process for the new homes at Aycliffe and Sacriston had now been completed. During the registration process the Ofsted Manager had been very complimentary about the quality of the homes, the managers and teams and the views expressed by the young people who were moving into the homes. Work continues to identify further new properties and the Head of Children's Social Care stated that this quality and rigour will continue in respect of future homes.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

15 Any other business

The Chair placed on record his sincere thanks to all those involved in the work of the Panel and extended his best wishes for the future.