

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 2 July 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, B Bainbridge, C Bell, J Charlton, S Deinali, J Griffiths, T Henderson, C Hood, C Hunt, J Miller, K Robson, K Rooney, A Surtees, S Townsend, C Varty and M Walton (Vice-Chair)

Also Present:

Julie Bradbrook – Partnerships Team Manager
Kelsey Clayton – Legal Services Manager
Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care
Jodie Henderson – Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence
Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Stephanie Pym - Participation and Engagement Officer, Children's Social Care
Young Persons representative of the Children in Care Council - Lesley Caulkin
Caitlyn Gray and Mitchell Green

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor B Coult, Councillor O Gunn and co-opted members Alison Ferguson and Wendy Taylor.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor M Stead was in attendance for Councillor B Coult.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Introduction to the Corporate Parenting Panel

The Head of Children's Social Care delivered a presentation which introduced the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Members received information on the governance arrangements, terms of reference and functions of the Panel, including the work with statutory agencies and the Panel's oversight of the Virtual School and Aycliffe Secure Centre. The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted the Local Government Association's key lines of enquiry for corporate parents, which inform the Panel's programme of work.

The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of various key roles for members, with representation on panels and sub-groups including the Fostering Panel, Aycliffe Secure Centre, Aycliffe School, the Virtual School and the Regulation 44 sub-group. Members wishing to volunteer to fill positions were asked to register their interest through Julie Bradbrook, Partnerships Team Manager.

5a Induction for Councillors: Being a Corporate Parent

The Panel noted presentation slides which provided information for Councillors on being a corporate parent, illustrating the County's profile of children in care, the qualities of a good corporate parent and details of how the Panel has responded to the views of children looked after and young people (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

6 Introduction to the Children in Care Council

The Chair welcomed Robert Johnson, Project Manager from Investing in Children and Caitlyn, Lesley and Mitchell, representatives of the Children in Care Council. The Project Manager explained the Children in Care Council (CiCC), supported by Investing in Children, enables children and young people in care, including care leavers, to have their say in the way the care service is delivered. The young people then presented an introduction to the Children in Care Council (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel heard that all children and young people who are looked after in County Durham automatically become members of the CiCC. There are two separate groups, one for those under 14 years of age and a group for those aged 14 years and over. Recent activity by the under 14s group includes work with the Virtual Head to produce a guide to Personal Education Plans which will assist the young people to gain a better understanding of the plans.

The young people are also involved in the development of a project using Pupil Premium funds, to allow young people to apply for funding for educational projects. Work has also taken place with the Full Circle Therapeutic Service to co-design new therapy rooms. In addition, the young people are also busy producing the next edition of the Children in Care Council newsletter.

Members of the over 14s group have been involved in foster care training and participated in interviews for social workers and senior staff.

They have also worked on a pilot training session with the police and some of the young people have undertaken peer mentoring training, to help to develop the younger CiCC members. Meetings have taken place with Independent Reviewing Officers and meetings with members of the Corporate Parenting Panel have continued throughout COVID-19. The young people spoke of how they are keen to positively promote care and they have applied for funding for a care community celebration event to take place when the COVID-19 restrictions are fully lifted.

The young people explained how the CiCC has developed its relationship with the Corporate Parenting Panel over the years through joint meetings which are held twice a year at the CiCC office. These meetings are less formal than the Corporate Parenting Panel meetings and provide an opportunity for all of the young people who are part of the CiCC to discuss matters directly with Panel members.

Representatives of the Children in Care Council also meet regularly with Durham County Council's Chief Executive, John Hewitt, to discuss corporate parenting responsibilities and how the Council may increase opportunities for children and young people looked after and care leavers.

Panel members were encouraged to consider participating in the Care Leavers' Challenge which is held annually with participants 'living life in the footsteps of a care leaver' for a week, by managing on a budget of £57.90 ie the amount that care leavers not in employment receive. This aims to raise awareness of the daily challenges faced by care leavers. Councillor Bainbridge commented that she had participated in the Care Leavers' Challenge and she could attest to how challenging it had been, highlighting that it required skills that some young people may not have, such as the ability to cook healthy meals on a small budget.

Lesley and Mitchell then outlined the qualities the young people of the CiCC consider important for good corporate parents, including the following:

- ambition (the young people feel that corporate parents should strive for the very best for children and young people looked after and care leavers, just as all parents should do for their children);

- learning (about the full range of the service including the fostering service and the many support services provided);
- listening (through engaging, asking questions and hearing the voice of the child, through sharing their experiences, ideas and concerns and by taking action);
- be bold (the young people feel the Panel should be a 'force to reckon with');
- to advocate and uphold corporate responsibilities across the Council's services;
- to connect with the care community, challenge discrimination and promote opportunities locally for children and young people;
- to celebrate the care community through supporting events.

In concluding their presentation, Lesley and Mitchell asked the Panel members how they intend to be good Corporate Parenting Panel members.

The Vice-Chair congratulated the young people on their excellently delivered and well-informed presentation. Members of the Panel echoed the sentiments, saying that the young people's attendance at Panel meetings is very much appreciated and that by presenting their views in person, it sends a very powerful message to the Panel. Members commented on how impressed they were at the way the young people presented themselves in what can be a daunting situation, even for experienced public speakers.

In response to the question from the young people as to how members intend to become good corporate parents, members' responses included the following:

- to listen to the children and young people, to be led by their views and to work for them;
- to ensure the young people are the driving force behind the work of the Panel;
- to positively promote children and young people looked after within their wards and the wider community;
- to do their best as corporate parents and to expect the children and young people to hold the Panel to account.

In response to a question from Councillor Surtees on how to contact the young people, the Project Manager explained that contact can be made through Investing in Children and through the Head of Children's Social Care. The Head of Children's Social Care informed members that they will have the opportunity to meet and interact with the young people more fully at the joint meetings which are hosted by the Children in Care Council.

In response to a question from the Panel as to what the young people find of most value from attending the Corporate Parenting Panel meetings, Mitchell responded that he has a particular interest in local politics, having stood as a candidate at the recent local elections and he added that scrutiny is an important aspect to ensure the best outcomes are achieved for looked after children and young people.

Councillor Miller reiterated the comments on the importance of listening to the young people and he agreed with the young people's comments that a community celebration would be a welcome event for all, to lift spirits, following the restrictions of COVID-19.

The Chair thanked Rob, Lesley and Mitchell for their presentation and encouraged Panel Members not to miss the fantastic experience of the joint meetings with the young people of the Children in Care Council. Details of the meetings will be advised in due course.

7 Mind of My Own

The Panel received a presentation from the Participation and Engagement Officer for Children's Social Care, Stephanie Pym, together with young people Caitlyn and Lesley from the Children in Care Council on the Mind of My Own app (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Members were informed that the Mind of My Own app is a digital communication tool for children and young people to share experiences and have their voices heard. The app has been developed with young people and it recognises that all young people communicate their feelings in different ways.

The young people demonstrated the two apps available, the 'One App' which is aimed at children and young people aged 8 years and over and can be used independently. This app includes scenarios such as preparing for a child protection conference or a foster care review and it encourages the young person to consider issues they would like to discuss and to think about feelings and concerns that they may wish to share. The app also allows the young person to reflect upon meetings that have taken place, to consider how to solve problems, plan ahead for the future and to think about their general wellbeing.

The 'Express App' is for younger children and those young people with additional needs. This app can be accessed with the support of a worker and uses images, sounds and emojis in order to help to communicate emotions.

The scenarios in this app encourage the young people to think about and share their feelings on their everyday lives and their education. The app also includes a one-page profile which may be useful for those young people who are becoming acquainted with a new social worker.

Designated workers are able to view the information that the young people provide.

The young people commented on the advantages of the app saying it is fun, flexible and easy to access at any time, with the scenario on preparing for independent living being particularly useful.

Some of the young people are ambassadors for Mind of My Own and they have designed a leaflet to provide information on the app and how social workers can help the young people to sign up for and get started with the app. The presentation included information from one of the young ambassadors, William, who said the app helps him to talk about his feelings and emotions, for example, when he is feeling sad or nervous, he can share his feelings at that time, through the app.

The Participation and Engagement Officer concluded the presentation by saying that Mind of My Own is designed to be an additional tool to capture the voice of the child and explained that information is gathered from the various engagements and statements, such as how the young people are feeling about their wellbeing and what aspects of their lives they feel positive about.

The Chair thanked the Participation and Engagement Officer, Caitlyn and Lesley for their presentation.

Highlighting the importance of young people's mental health, Councillor Miller commented on the benefits of the app as an easily accessible way for young people to express their feelings confidentially and enquired whether young people without access to email could access the app. The Participation and Engagement Officer explained that those without access to email can access the app via their worker's account and new features are being developed to increase accessibility.

In response to a question from Councillor Deinali, the Participation and Engagement Officer explained the One App is available not only to those who are currently in care but all those who access the Children's Social Care service.

Councillor Charlton praised the young people who participated in the development of the app.

8 Overview of Children and Young People's Services

The Head of Children's Social Care delivered a presentation on the structure of the Children and Young People's service including an overview of the support available to children and young people (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The presentation included information on Aycliffe Secure Centre which caters for young people for whom a court has determined are required to be placed in secure accommodation. The Centre has highly skilled staff and offers a range of specialist services including health services, therapeutic services and emotional and behavioural development.

In response to a question from Councillor Surtees as to how the service provides for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, the Head of Children's Social Care clarified that children seeking asylum who have no responsible adult to care for them are considered to be children 'in need' and are provided for by the Children Looked After and Permanence Team.

The Head of Children's Social Care demonstrated the 'Circle of Support' highlighting the many individuals and services which children and young people looked after will have contact with throughout their time in care, which emphasises the importance of developing strong relationships within the circle of support.

9 Useful Resources

The Panel received a report, for information, which outlined useful resources for corporate parents (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2020-21

The Head of Children's Social Care presented the Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2020 – March 2021, for agreement (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted that in November 2019, the Corporate Parenting Panel was shortlisted for the Local Government Chronicle Awards in the Children's Services category which was a great achievement with a large number of entries being submitted.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic had brought many new challenges, however, monthly virtual meetings took place between members of the Children and Care Council, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Panel and senior managers within Children's Services to ensure regular contact was maintained.

With the increased reliance on 'virtual' methods of contact, young people raised some concerns regarding the slow internet connections in some children's residential homes. The service responded quickly to ensure the internet connection in all homes is fit for purpose.

Work has continued on the use of language in order to promote the use of child friendly language across the service, an initiative which was based on feedback from children and young people.

The Panel noted work for the future includes the roll out of the care experienced Young Inspectors programme, for young people to be involved in the inspection of children's residential care homes. The service will also continue work to support young people to access training and work opportunities.

Councillor Miller stressed the importance of increasing opportunities and apprenticeships for children looked after and suggested that all Committees should consider ways in which they could help to increase the local offer.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2020 – March 2021 be approved.

11 Number of Children Looked After

The Panel noted the number of looked after children within the County was 939, a figure which has remained stable since the previous meeting in April.

12 Ofsted Inspection: Aycliffe Secure Centre full inspection results

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children reported that at an Ofsted inspection in 2019, Aycliffe Secure Centre was judged outstanding. An assurance visit took place in November 2020 and a full inspection, under the new framework, took place in spring 2021. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children was pleased to report the Centre had retained its outstanding status, with only a small number of recommendations to take forward.

The Panel heard how the Centre staff had worked hard to respond to the pandemic and with COVID-19 secure working methods in place, the school had remained open throughout, to ensure the education of the young people was uninterrupted. The inspection found that not only had business as usual been maintained but significant improvements had been made during the pandemic with staff 'going the extra mile' to improve aspects such as the young people's sleep patterns.

A new 'transition home' is planned to open in the summer to help young people who have resided at the Centre to integrate back into the community and a bid for DfE funding has been made to further support this project.

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children acknowledged that the retention of the outstanding status was testament to the huge efforts of the Centre's team.

Councillor Surtees placed on record her thanks to managers and staff and congratulated the Centre on this success, during such challenging times.

The Chair echoed the comments and expressed how much she enjoys visiting the Centre and meeting the staff and young people, who make the most of the impressive facilities at the Centre.

The Chair welcomed involvement from the new Panel members and encouraged new members to take the opportunity to visit the Centre in due course and to consider volunteering to represent the Panel on Aycliffe Centre's sub-groups.

13 Proud Moments

Jodie Henderson, Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence introduced the 'proud moments' item which promotes positive news about children looked after. The Strategic Manager informed the Panel that feedback from young people suggested there was more work to be done to challenge stigma around being in care, therefore, the 'proud moments' item had become a standard item on the agenda for the Panel to share the best moments of the young people who are looked after. The Strategic Manager highlighted that colleagues have a difficult task in selecting which proud moments to share, as there are often too many to choose from.

This month's item reported on a young person from one of the residential children's homes who is a volunteer with a community allotment project and has worked hard to support the project's activities and raise awareness of environmental issues. This has led to a commendation from the volunteer lead and the project is now supporting the young person to achieve the John Muir award for raising awareness of the natural environment.

Another proud moment came when a young person who had been finding life particularly difficult, with help and support from specialist services, overcame their difficulties and developed such empathy for other young people in a similar position, that they are now providing help and support to others through leading activities. The Strategic Manager paid tribute to this young person's fortitude, saying that it is experiences such as these that challenge and encourage the service to support young people to live their lives to the full and realise that they are valued and can make a contribution.

14 Any other business

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that Ofsted inspectors will carry out a two-day focused visit on 13 and 14 July, looking at children in care who are vulnerable to exploitation. The inspectors have specifically asked to meet with the Children in Care Council, during their visit. Feedback will be provided, with a letter identifying strengths and weaknesses expected to be published at the end of August.

15 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.

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

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

In response to observations from the Panel that a number of homes were shown in the report as 'requiring improvement', the Head of Children's Social Care explained that when Ofsted recommend improvements, a monitoring visit takes place, after which a graded visit is carried out, with Ofsted providing a timescale for the required improvements to be completed.

Resolved:

That the recommendation contained in the report be approved.

17 Any other business

Councillor Henderson, newly appointed Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People introduced himself to the Panel and thanked the Head of Children's Social Care and Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children for their valuable assistance during his induction.

Members were reminded that those wishing to volunteer for positions on the various sub-groups were asked to contact Julie Bradbrook, Partnerships Team Manager.