

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 24 September 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors Adcock-Foster, Bainbridge, Bell, Coult, Deinali, Griffiths, Gunn, Henderson, Hood, Hunt, Miller, Roberts (substituting for Councillor Townsend) Robson, Rooney, Surtees, Varty and Walton

Co-opted Members:

C Gray, H McFarlane (substituting for A Ferguson) and W Taylor

Also Present:

Kelsey Clayton – Legal Services Manager

Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care

Lindsey Herring – Project Manager, Children and Young People's Accommodation Sufficiency

Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children (with Caitlyn Gray – representing the Children in Care Council)

Claire Morris – Strategic Manager, 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

Lisa Wood – Strategic Manager, First Contact and Specialist Countywide Service

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Charlton and Townsend and from Co-opted Members C Baines, A Ferguson and M Green.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Roberts was in attendance for Councillor Townsend and Heather McFarlane, Designated Nurse, Safeguarding and Children Looked After attended for Co-opted Member, Alison Ferguson.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 July 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The following matters arising were reported.

Referring to agenda item 5 of the minutes, the Senior Partnerships Officer provided details of appointments to sub-groups as follows:

- Fostering Panel - Councillors Simmons, Hunt, Varty and Miller
- Aycliffe Secure Centre - Councillors Walton, Hunt, Deinali, Coult and Varty
- Aycliffe Secure Centre Schools Group – Councillors Deinali and Varty

The Panel noted that Regulation 44 representatives will be aligned to residential homes in due course.

Members were asked to consider vacancies on the Virtual School sub-group and the Head of the Virtual School, Melanie Stubbs, offered to provide further details on the role to those interested in obtaining further information.

The Senior Partnerships Officer reminded the Panel that the joint meeting of the Children in Care Council and Corporate Parenting Panel will be held on Tuesday 19 October at 5.30 pm at the Sjovell Centre. Members were encouraged to attend the event.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that the number of children looked after stood at 912, which was a significant reduction on the figure reported in July. With proceedings gradually returning to normal following the pandemic, an increasing number of children and young people are moving into their more permanent arrangements.

6 Ofsted focused visit to Children's Services

The Head of Children's Social Care updated the Panel on Ofsted's two-day focused visit to Children's Services which took place remotely on 13 and 14 July and looked at Durham County Council's arrangements for children in care.

The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted the key findings set out in the Ofsted letter which was published on 23 August 2021 (for copy of letter see file of minutes).

The inspection identified a range of strengths and recognised that the service knows its children well, with Ofsted commenting that the self-assessment provided an accurate picture of children in care. The letter identified areas of strong performance including that social workers were very positive about working for Durham and receive good support and supervision. Positive feedback was received on the quality of social workers, with Ofsted finding that most children in care are making good progress; that their needs are understood and high-quality care plans are in place. The wide range of specialist support available, including the Full Circle and Supporting Solutions was highlighted. The letter also commented that children and young people at risk of exploitation and missing from care are provided with a prompt response. Ofsted acknowledged the processes in place to listen to the views of children and young people and to ensure their views positively impact service delivery. Inspectors were extremely complimentary about the Children in Care Council, having had the opportunity to meet representatives, to hear about their experiences and achievements.

The Head of Children's Social Care explained that in the service's submission to Ofsted, challenges were recognised, particularly in the area of placement sufficiency, which is a national issue. Ofsted found there were no risks to children, however, some process issues were identified which included two areas for priority action and one area for improvement. The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that an action plan is being developed to address these issues and an update on the service's response will be provided at the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting in October.

Councillor Gunn praised the Head of Children's Social Care and her team for the good outcome and observed that regulations may cause difficulties for local authorities when placing challenging young people, which can hamper improvements in this area. Adding her thanks to the Head of Children's Social Care and the team, Councillor Walton, Vice-Chair, commented on the excellent strengths, adding that the feedback with regard to how the service strives to ensure the young people's views are taken into account is particularly pleasing. The Vice-Chair assured the Head of Children's Social Care that the Panel will support the service with regard to the areas for action and improvement.

7 ADCS North East Submission to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the independent review of Children's Social Care which was commissioned by the Department for Education in March 2021. This is a national piece of work into the delivery of Children's Social Care Services. The Panel heard that the work includes extensive consultation with stakeholders and young people, with representatives of the Children in Care Council, including Mitchell Green, submitting their views.

The ADCS North East Submission to the Independent review (for copy see file) was commissioned by the 12 directors of Children's Services to reflect their views as statutory leaders, and has been submitted as part of the independent review. The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the issues raised by Councillor Gunn in the previous item and informed the Panel that the review aims to address these issues, with the challenge in respect of sufficiency being a central part of the review. Councillor Gunn responded that she would be grateful for further information in due course. The Head of Children's Social Care agreed to circulate the 'case for change' document and update the Panel on learning from the review, as work progresses.

8 Investing in Children / Children in Care Council (CiCC) Update

The Panel welcomed Robert Johnson from Investing in Children and Caitlyn Gray, representing the young people of the Children in Care Council who were in attendance to provide an update on the CiCC's recent activities, including the following (for copy of presentation see file):

- Caitlyn explained that she was one of the young people who had met with the Ofsted inspectors during their focused visit in July and she spoke of how much she had enjoyed talking to the inspectors and how she was pleased to see their excellent feedback.
- The recent CiCC training session with the police had resulted in very positive feedback and follow-up work will take place.
- A research project is being undertaken into the experiences of the young people of the CiCC during lockdown in order to identify the young people's views and to look at how the findings can be shared.
- Virtual foster care training had taken place and meetings are returning 'in person' as COVID-19 restrictions are eased. CiCC members led the training with input from new members and the feedback from foster carers was excellent.

- Peer mentor training took place over the summer for CiCC members and a meeting will be held in October, with 5-10 year olds, at which older members will be leading the session and answering questions from the younger members, about the Children in Care Council.
- CiCC members are contributing to the development of 'young people friendly' care and health plans.
- Caitlyn informed the Panel that whilst Mitchell and Lesley are now studying at university they are continuing to support members of the CiCC to attend future Corporate Parenting Panel meetings from January 2022.

The Panel congratulated all the young people who had studied for exams over the summer and thanked Caitlyn for her comprehensive presentation adding that she is an excellent mentor for the new representatives who will be coming along to future meetings. The Panel placed on record their thanks to the young people of the Children in Care Council for their input which is valued by the Corporate Parenting Panel to inform the programme of work. The Panel also recognised that the CiCC has a wide reach and their views are reflected in work across the Council's services, as well as being considered by key partner organisations. Members commented on the commitment shown by the young people, observing it is clear that officers and members are very proud of the young people.

Robert Johnson, Project Officer, encouraged members to attend the joint meeting on 19 October, as the young people are working on creative plans for the event. The Chair commented on how much she looks forward to these joint meetings and encouraged Panel members to attend.

9 Annual Performance Report – Supporting Solutions

The Panel received a report on the activity and development of the Supporting Solutions Service from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 presented by Lisa Wood, Strategic Manager, First Contact and Specialist Countywide Service (for copy see file).

The Strategic Manager informed the Panel that the Supporting Solutions Service is continuing to develop the service to meet the needs of young people, parents, and carers. The offer of support includes Edge of Care support, Family Group Conferences, a Missing from Home Co-ordinator, Child Exploitation Workers and access to crisis beds. The Panel heard how the service had maintained its offer throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure families continue to have access to support, with all young people on the edge of care having access to the same level of support as had been available to them, prior to the pandemic.

The service has recognised that there is an increasing number of children of a younger age presenting on the edge of care and a pilot project 'Edge of Care Minis' has been established to support 7-11 year olds.

The service has also responded to the need for extra support from families experiencing domestic abuse, with a full time worker from the Domestic Abuse Team being seconded to the service. In addition, a dedicated Child Exploitation worker is available to work with those at risk of exploitation and an additional Missing from Home Coordinator has been appointed to ensure return to home interviews are offered in a timely manner.

The Strategic Manager for First Contact and Specialist Countywide Service then responded to questions and comments as follows.

The Vice-Chair asked how the service has expanded to provide support to young people under the age of 11. The Strategic Manager explained that the service was developed in 2018 and the young people presenting on the edge of care at that time were predominantly aged 14-18 years. However during the first year, a demand from those aged 11-14 was observed and new members of staff were employed as a response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been an increase in those aged under-11 requiring the service and the 'Edge of Care Minis' pilot was established to address the demand.

Councillor Surtees welcomed the work with regard to domestic abuse, with the appointment of a dedicated Domestic Abuse worker, and stressed the importance of the focus on the child in families where domestic abuse is a factor.

Councillor Varty spoke anecdotally about the Edge of Care staff showing great enthusiasm in their work and how she has confidence that family group conferencing is successful. She encouraged staff to keep up the good work.

Councillor Coult enquired about the number of young people who repeatedly go missing from home. The Strategic Manager responded that the majority of young people who go missing from home go missing on only one occasion. However, each time a child goes missing from home, a return to home session is held. When a child goes missing from home three times in one month, a multi-agency meeting is held, and, if required, a formal strategy is put in place to ensure the child is safe. The Strategic Manager also noted that during lockdown a lot of activities, such as meeting friends were prohibited, so if young people did this they could be classed as missing from home.

Councillor Miller commented on the pleasing progress with regard to the reduction in risk for young people at risk of exploitation. The Head of Children's Social Care echoed Councillor Miller's comments, saying she was proud of the developments in the service and she congratulated the team on being shortlisted for a Local Government Chronicle national award, which is testament to their hard work.

Heather McFarlane, Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and Children Looked After asked the Strategic Manager whether the service feels it receives the necessary support when children who require health interventions go missing from home. The Strategic Manager replied that health colleagues are very much a core and part of the team, however, there is always more to do in terms of joint awareness and training on early warning signs and sexual health and it was agreed that Heather would discuss link-working with the Strategic Manager.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Fostering Service Annual Report 2020-21

The Panel received the Fostering Service Annual Report for 2020-21 presented by Claire Morris, Strategic Manager for Resources (for copy of report and presentation see file).

The Strategic Manger spoke of the competitive nature of foster care recruitment and informed the Panel of improvements made to the marketing campaign which is taking a more targeted and personalised approach. In addition, the service has embraced virtual ways of working and is using social media in order to reach a wider audience and increase accessibility. The campaign is also seeking to dispel myths around foster caring and to promote open dialogue around aspects which are often difficult to discuss, such as finance. The campaign seeks to highlight the unique selling points that Durham has to offer, such as the wide support offer available. The service has recognised that some of the processes involved in becoming a foster carer can be onerous and steps have been taken to streamline these processes and increase the support available. The Strategic Manager referred the Panel to links included in the presentation to local radio campaigns which were aired during fostering fortnight and she thanked all those involved in their production, including Caitlyn and the young people of the CiCC. The Strategic Manager then explained the Family Finding activity which supports foster families to promote stability and prevent unplanned moves. Through this, families are supported and encouraged to consider the challenges ahead.

In addition, the training offer has been updated with increased investment and a tailor-made programme for foster carers, with the programme being designed in consultation with foster carers and children and young people. Alongside this, is an improved data recording system to inform service plans for the future.

The Strategic Manager concluded by outlining the priorities for the future including the continuation of recruitment of, and support for, foster carers, preventing unplanned moves, improving management oversight and promoting the voice of the child.

The Strategic Manager responded to questions and comments as follows.

The Vice-Chair asked if there was information available as to why some people enquire about fostering but decide not to take the enquiry further. The Strategic Manager pointed out that a number of enquiries are made by competitors who are merely gathering information about Durham's offer. Others approach the service for information with a view to becoming a foster carer at some point in the future. Some are not able to make lifestyle changes required, such as giving up smoking. The Strategic Manager stressed the importance of monitoring the data in relation to the drop-off rate, which is not a cause for concern at present and it is hoped that the improved marketing strategy will provide better information and answer some questions so that prospective foster carers can make an informed choice, prior to the initial point of enquiry.

Heather McFarlane spoke from experience when supporting foster carers and commented that some health aspects, such as sexual health were areas of concern on a frequent basis. Referring to foster carer training, she asked whether the training involves local / national health providers and experts. The Strategic Manager explained that training includes input from experts and links with health colleagues with regard to training and marketing, however this is under constant review to ensure needs are met.

Councillor Miller observed that the drop-off rate in 2020-21 is worse than in the previous year and asked how many foster carers the service would like to recruit. The Strategic Manager pointed out that the pandemic had been a uniquely challenging time and many people had been re-evaluating their lives and looking at different avenues, including fostering, without following through at the present time. However, the analysis of data indicates there is no suggestion that the marketing message is lacking. With regard to the number of foster carers, this is managed through analysing the number of foster carers leaving the service and the number of children and young people entering the care system and this informs the number of foster carers that are required to be recruited.

There is, however, no upper limit to the amount of foster carers recruited, therefore applications for new foster carers will always be accepted.

With regard to training, Councillor Hunt emphasised the power of hearing the experiences of young people who have lived happily with foster families and how they have gone on to achieve great success as adults.

Councillor Gunn thanked the Strategic Manager for the comprehensive report and said that one of the most compelling marketing campaigns she recalls is one in which an officer, whose family included foster children, spoke of the positive experience. Councillor Gunn also highlighted the importance of learning from, and mentoring by, experienced foster carers.

The Strategic Manager agreed that success stories and personal experiences send a very powerful message, therefore they are being used in the marketing campaigns. She added that a number of support sessions and groups are held with experienced foster carers and whilst virtual meetings are very useful, the value of learning from each other, in person, cannot be under estimated.

Resolved:

That the report be received.

11 Proud Moments

The Strategic Manager spoke of how the service endeavours to raise the profile of the young people looked after, however, as Panel members have observed in the meetings, Caitlyn and the representatives of the CiCC are making this task very easy for officers, as they are doing such a great job.

The Panel heard about a young person in care who had suffered a number of traumas which had a long-lasting impact on this young person who had, as a result, missed much of their education. With support from their family, the Virtual School and other professionals, the young person had grown stronger and on their trial day at work, they were offered the position. The Strategic Manager acknowledged this well-deserved achievement for the young person, who had shown great strength in the face of adversity, adding that it is hoped this is just the beginning of a very bright future. Members echoed these comments and wished the young person continued success.

12 Regulation 44 Visits Update

The Project Manager for Children and Young People's Accommodation Sufficiency presented the Regulation 44 Visits Update which provided an update on the plans in place to deliver Regulation 44 visits across all Children's Homes operated by Durham County Council (for copy of report see file).

The Panel heard how the Corporate Parenting Panel agreed with plans to outsource the Regulation 44 function at a meeting held in February 2021. An open procurement process was carried out over the summer and NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) was awarded the contract, which commenced on 1 September 2021.

Meetings will be held with NYAS to review the findings and recommendations identified in Regulation 44 visits. This information will be used to continually review and improve residential care provision.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

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 conflicts of interest with sub-group representation, will be addressed when aligning Regulation 44 representatives to Aycliffe Secure Centre residential homes.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

15 Any other business

The Head of the Virtual School spoke to the Panel about the work of the Virtual School Sub-Group and several members volunteered to be appointed.