



# County Durham Corporate Parenting Panel

**Annual Report**  
April 2020 - March 2021



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**“Every child  
is a different kind of  
flower and together  
make this world a  
beautiful garden.”**

**Shannon**

## What is a corporate parent

Local Authorities must provide the care, support, and security that young people need if they can't stay at home safely and become the young people's 'corporate parent'.

Being a corporate parent isn't just up to the Corporate Parenting Panel, everyone should be looking out for our children and young people, and every councillor and council employee has a role to play as the eyes and ears of the community.

Being a corporate parent means doing whatever we can to support young people in our care and our care leavers, to help them achieve their full potential and have the best possible outcomes.

## Why are children in care?

Young people are looked after for a variety of reasons including neglect and abuse. They could also be in care if their parents are unable to look after them because of their own complex health needs or behaviours. Some young people have no parents to care for them, or they could be unaccompanied asylum seekers.

# Message from the Chair!



Cllr Ivan Jewell  
Chair of the CPP

I would like to take this opportunity, as chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP), to thank everyone for their continued hard work and commitment over what has been a very challenging year. We could not have imagined the impact the global Covid-19 pandemic would have on delivery of services across England. In Durham our staff, partners, volunteers and the young people themselves played a key role in helping us to respond to the outbreak to ensure that all children, young people and their carers received the best possible help, advice and support during this difficult time.

During the pandemic, we have tried new ways of communicating with our children and young people using apps, Microsoft Teams and Zoom as well as socially distanced walks and picnics when the restrictions allowed. We have also sent interpreted coronavirus fact sheets to unattended asylum-seeking children who needed them.

Amongst the challenges, there have also been successes with some of our young people having had the poems they published about life in lockdown re-tweeted by the Children's Commissioner for England.

I will not be standing for re-election as a Councillor in the May 2021 elections, so will be stepping down as Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

I have enjoyed my time in this role and really appreciated being able to work with children and young people to understand how we can support them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

I wish everyone all the best for the future and take great pleasure in introducing the Corporate Parenting Panel's fourth annual report. **April 2021**

Councillor Mamie Simmons will become Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel from May 2021, with Councillor Michelle Walton as Vice Chair.



Cllr Mamie Simmons  
Chair of the CPP



Cllr Michelle Walton  
Vice Chair of the CPP

## Where are children in care?

Children and young people can be in care in a range of settings, including foster care, children's homes, supported lodgings, and secure accommodation – the council is corporate parent to all of them.



## Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Awards

In November 2019, the Corporate Parenting Panel was shortlisted for the LGC Awards 2020 in the Children's Services category. The awards ceremony was due to take place in March 2020, however this was postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic with a virtual event taking place in October 2020. It was a huge achievement for the Panel to be shortlisted as a record number of entries were submitted.

## Message from Children in Care Council (CICC) co-opted members

"I attend Corporate Parenting Panel to represent young people from the CICC. We have been giving feedback on all the wonderful things us young people have been able to achieve within the CICC.

"Due to the circumstances of Covid-19 we have been able to still achieve changes, one being the children's homes that have had improvements to their Wi-Fi which was very important because of online learning. Another is adding a positive story so, at every meeting, we hear about something that has been positive which is now many of the members favourite part of the meeting.

"I've had a very positive experience when working with the Panel and I'm looking forward to seeing all the changes that we are able to make together."

**Lesley Caulkin**

"I have been a representative at Corporate Parenting Panel meetings on behalf of CICC for a long time now. At these meetings, we get to feedback what we have discussed in our meetings, any training sessions we have taken part in, and the amazing stories about what children and young people have achieved or created through great art work.

"Due to Covid-19 we have been unable to attend our meetings face to face at County Hall and some decisions and improvements have taken longer to process. For example, faster Wi-Fi for children in our children's homes around the county which was to help with their education, social needs, and family time. However, at the end of our meetings we always have a positive story about what a child or young person has been up to during the pandemic such as arts and crafts and podcasts, which has always been members of the council's favourite part of the meetings.

"In my time so far, I have enjoyed being on the Panel and it has grown my confidence.

**Mitchell Green**

**“I am so proud of all the changes we have made to improve services for children and young people who are cared for in Durham, and I want to see more positive changes and new ideas going forward.”**

# Role of the Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP)

The CPP is a group that is part of the council, which is called a committee. It has 21 councillors as well as council officers. There are also 10 other members, including school representatives and young people's representatives to make sure there's a broad range of experience and knowledge and that children and young people are heard, and actively responded to.

Corporate parents have responsibility to act for the children and young people in our care as a parent would for their own child, and should ask three key questions:






## CPP responsibilities

There are a number of things which the CPP must do:


- ✓ Make sure the Council acts as a good corporate parent to children and young people in care and care leavers, including:
  - Young people in residential care, foster care and supported lodgings
  - Young people placed for adoption or placed at home under care planning, placement, and case review regulations
  - Young people in secure homes or in custody
- ✓ Engage and listen to the views of children, young people and their carers.
- ✓ Work in partnership with other agencies to make improvements for our children and young people in care.
- ✓ Oversee the virtual school for looked after children and young people. For more information visit [www.durham.gov.uk/durhamvirtualschool](http://www.durham.gov.uk/durhamvirtualschool). A sub-group has been established to lead on this work.
- ✓ Oversee Aycliffe Secure Services. A sub group has been established to lead on this work.

More information on the Corporate Parenting Panel can be found in Durham County Council's constitution at: [www.durham.gov.uk/constitution](http://www.durham.gov.uk/constitution)

# Updates against 2020/21 priorities

What we said we would focus on	Where we are now	What young people think
Subsidised transport	<p>We have had lots of meetings with the providers, but due to the number of different providers and services across County Durham we are unable to offer subsidised transport for all care leavers.</p> <p>We took steps to liaise with higher education colleges to discuss their approach to supporting students with paying bus passes whilst colleges were closed or delivering lessons virtually.</p> <p>We continue to look at transport support on an individual basis for our young people, and John Hewitt, the Council's Interim Chief Executive will discuss further with senior managers to re-visit this.</p>	
Extension of Freedom Card for care leavers	<p>Exploration into the expansion of Freedom Cards to establish a discount scheme for care leavers.</p> <p>Some discounts have already been offered, and young people have access to Durham County Council discounts and free access to council leisure centres.</p> <p>Unfortunately, this work was postponed due to the pandemic as many shops and services were forced to close as part of lockdown restrictions.</p>	
Teacher training	<p>Two young people from the Children in Care Council (CICC) attended the designated teacher network meeting on 24 November 2020. They presented a workshop "We are no different" to more than 80 designated teachers from schools both in Durham and across the country. This was well received, and discussions took place afterwards about the child/young persons' voice and how their thoughts and requests could be shared in schools. As a follow on from this we have decided to produce a Children Looked After Policy for schools. The CICC have worked with Melanie Stubbs, the Virtual Head to ensure the Child/Young Person's Promise is reflected in the policy.</p> <p>We are also producing a series of podcasts to support training with teachers in the future.</p>	



What we said we would focus on	Where we are now	What young people think
Care Experienced Young Inspectors	<p>It was agreed that Care Experienced Young Inspectors would help us to shape the services we provide in Durham County Council children’s residential homes.</p> <p>The inspectors will be developing a framework and toolkit, accessing training and support to allow them to carry out the role of a young inspector. The role will involve them visiting residential homes and sharing their views and observations on the services provided to the young people and their home.</p> <p>This work has been postponed due to Covid-19 but will be picked up again soon.</p> <p>In the meantime, we have been supporting our care experienced young people with opportunities to take part in interviews. This approach has seen a number of our care experienced young people lead in part of the interview process across a range of jobs by asking questions, leading discussions, rating presentations and making comments as part of the interview process. The skills built up through the interviewing process will be transferable as well as all the valued added to the interview process.</p>	

## Care Leavers Challenge

In February 2020, two councillors and two Durham County Council officers took part in the Care Leavers Challenge, living on £57.90 per week, which is what care leavers not in employment received.

Everyone found the challenge hard and it was agreed that we would use the learning from this to improve how we can support young people.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 response took priority over this work in 2020 so we have not been able to make any progress, and the Care Leavers Challenge didn't happen in 2021 either. We hope to pick this up again in 2022.

Moving forward we will look at the key issues that came from the 2020 challenge:

- Direct debit payments for electricity and gas
- Transport





# Children in Care Council (CICC)

The CICC is a group for children and young people who are looked after in County Durham and is supported by Investing in Children. The CICC members meet monthly to talk about issues which are important to them, highlight what works and share stories of the support they have received. This forum is well established, with senior managers from within Children and Young People's Services and elected members who are on the Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) regularly attending CICC meetings.

More information on the CICC can be found at [www.durhamcicc.co.uk](http://www.durhamcicc.co.uk)

## Co-opted positions for CICC members

Two young people from the CICC have co-opted positions on the CPP providing panel representation from the CICC. They attend each meeting (supported by Investing in Children) to share feedback from the CICC. In addition, the CICC have a standing item on each CPP agenda, where they provide feedback from CICC meetings, ensuring members of the CPP hear real unfiltered feedback directly from the young people. The young people are involved in decision making within the CPP, which is fed back to leads to influence service decisions and developments as necessary.

## Joint CICC/CPP meetings

In addition to the formal CPP meetings, children and young people from the CICC (supported by Investing in Children) host a joint meeting with the CPP every six months.

The young people set the agenda for the meeting and invite members and officers of the CPP to attend to meet with the CICC. During 2020 these meetings were postponed but will be re-started from July 2021 using Zoom instead of having a meeting. We also hope this will encourage more councillors to take part as they won't need to travel to attend the meetings.

These meetings are less formal than the CPP meeting and provide an opportunity for all of the young people who are part of the CICC to raise issues which are important to them and have discussions directly with members and officers of the CPP and have their ideas, suggestions and comments heard.

Feedback from the discussions is collated by Investing in Children and key issues are presented by the young people from the CICC at a formal CPP meeting, for further discussion. Work takes place to address these issues within the service, and feedback is provided to the CICC at the next joint meeting.

## CICC catch ups

During 2020 CPP meetings were cancelled so virtual monthly meetings were set up with the CICC, the Chair and Vice Chair of the CPP, the Head of Children's Social Care and some of the senior managers from the service so that young people were still able to have contact with the Panel on a regular basis.

When the CPP meetings were re-started they were virtual and every two months instead of monthly, so that regular contact with the CPP could be maintained.

Some of the things we discussed at these meetings were:

- Activities young people had been getting involved with during lockdown e.g. cooking, exercise, DIY and water fights
- The importance of seeing friends, which is now included in young people's plans
- Paying for bus passes while colleges were closed/ deductions from bursaries
- Pets in residential homes, and also about pets being included in safety plans (more info on page 22)



- Use of language including the term 'vulnerable' (more info on page 23)
- Pocket money/varying amounts (more info on page 22)
- Intergenerational work
- Podcast (more info on page 11)

## CICC newsletters

Young people from the CICC produced newsletters during lockdown. These were shared across the service, with children and young people and with the CPP. They were also shared with the Children's Commissioner for England.



We continue to support CICC with the newsletter on a monthly basis and have provided a link with Durham County Council's marketing team to support young people to understand the editorial role and become a 'young editor' for the newsletter.

More information on the CICC can be found at: [www.durhamcicc.co.uk/cicc-newsletters](http://www.durhamcicc.co.uk/cicc-newsletters)

## Monthly Corporate Parenting Panel briefings

To ensure members of the CPP remained sighted on the work taking place across the service to support children and young people in response to the pandemic, monthly newsletters were produced and circulated.

These included updates from all partners of the CPP including Aycliffe Secure Centre, the Virtual School and health colleagues. Updates also included key performance data.

# What happened in lockdown

- A virtual Children in Care Council (CICC) quiz night took place.
- Some of the children in foster care had fun online with their social workers during their one to one's including playing virtual hide and seek, reading stories together, finding shapes in the clouds, discussing blogs and talking about TikTok.
- Investing in Children hosted an easter egg competition and young people sent in photos of their entries. Here are the top three:



- CICC members supported Investing in Children with a successful funding bid, securing £2,500 to fund summer packs at £50 per pack, which went to children, young people or families who needed additional resources during the summer holidays while we were in lockdown. The packs were personalised based on the young people's interests e.g. paint brushes, outdoor games, sketch books, notebooks etc.



CICC members really wanted to impact on the Covid-19 crisis and worked on the project to do something nice for others and were nominated for a High Sheriff Award because of this work.

More information about the summer packs can be found in this short film on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)



- Young people from one of our children's homes raised money for Stray Aid, a local dog shelter. They set up a Just Giving page and raised over £600 to help support the dogs by doing a sponsored bike ride, which was over 30 miles!
- CICC members met with workers from the Children's Commissioner for England's Office and the National Police Chief Council to discuss their experience of coming into care and their experience of the police, which will feed into the review of the National Police Chief Council strategy.
- Young people in residential care receive Christmas gifts from a Durham company, and they were particularly generous this year. The young people were so pleased with the gifts they received that they used their 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 was moved when she viewed the montage and impressed 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 to the company.

- Young people have developed podcasts:
  - One young person from the CICC launched his podcast 'We are No Different Episode 1' on [Spotify.com](https://www.spotify.com) good news will be shared in the podcast and members of the CPP and staff within the service are invited to take part in future to share interesting stories.

- Two CICC members have done a podcast called 'Experiencing the care system' where they talk openly about their experiences of care and everyday life. They discuss the benefits that foster carers bring to the lives of young people in County Durham, along with valuing the contribution carers and staff have made during Covid-19. Listen to Episode 1 on [Spotify.com](https://www.spotify.com)

If you have any ideas for future podcasts, please get in touch.



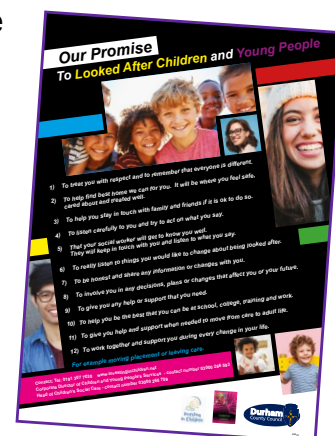
- Mini-Corporate Parenting Panel meetings have been introduced to enable young people to comment on events over the last twelve months. This initiative has been very well received.



- Young people's experiences of the pandemic were captured through creative activities, such as the production of videos, poetry and photographs. An e-book called Lockdown Diaries was produced to capture this work, which you can view at [www.issuu.com](https://www.issuu.com)

# Local Offer for care leavers

- Young People from the CICC are involved in supporting us with Durham County Council's promise. The promise launched officially on Friday 26 October 2018 and is regularly reviewed to make sure it is fit for purpose, and that we are doing what we have said we will do. If we are not, the young people can raise this at a CICC meeting so that action is taken.
- In response to the pandemic and lockdown restrictions, when care leavers were approaching 18 years of age and their current placement was due to end, we extended this where possible in line with their wishes.
- In Christmas 2019, members donated money from their budgets to pay for our care leavers to go for a Christmas meal. This was due to be repeated in 2020, however due to lockdown restrictions it was not possible – so instead the money was put towards hampers for the young people.
- We continue to pay young people who are on income maintenance allowance an additional £20 a week to match the government's additional £20 Universal Credit payment. This is in place until September.
- Work is ongoing to develop the Staying Close project where young people leaving care can continue to live close to, and access support from, their former children's home.
- A drop-in centre for care leavers is being developed.
- The care leavers hub at Sherburn Hill has been refurbished to offer cooking, shower and laundry facilities. We continue to work with care leavers and staff to develop the hub to meet the support needs of our young people.



## Drive project

The project supports young people by providing driving

lessons, up to the value of £500. The project pays for one lesson, the young person pays for the next lesson, and so on then the project pays for the first theory test and one practical test. This is available for looked after young people

aged 17+ and care leavers up to the age of 21 (25 if in full time education).

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic restrictions the project was on hold last year but Investing in Children are working through their database to see which young people are in a position to start their lessons when restrictions are eased.

# Regulation 44 inspections



The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 requires that an independent person should undertake an unannounced visit to all children's homes at least once a month (Regulation 44). The independent person must produce a report about the visit which sets out whether:

- Children are effectively safeguarded, and
- The conduct of the home promotes children's wellbeing.

Regulation 44 reports come to each Corporate Parenting Panel meeting highlighting any issues or concerns.

In March 2020, we moved from onsite Regulation 44 visits to virtual visits using Microsoft Teams enabling all of our children's homes to continue to benefit from a monthly visit.

During the virtual visit there is an opportunity for the visitor to interview the registered manager, in the same way as they would when on site, ensuring oversight and evidence for the monthly report. The visitor can also see the home by a virtual tour and through photographic evidence which is sent by the registered manager.

During the virtual visit there is also an opportunity for the visitor to speak with the young people to gather their views as well as being able to speak with members of the care team, parents and social workers etc, in much the same way as they did before using emails, phone calls and Microsoft Teams when needed.

Elected members who are aligned to each home receive copies of the monthly reports to ensure they receive regular updates and retain oversight.

**New inspectors will be identified after the local elections in May 2021.**

# Councillors responsible for Regulation 44 inspections April 2020 – March 2021

## Home/Councillor

### Tow Law

Cllr Anne Reed



### Park House

Cllr Ivan Jewell



### High Etherley

Cllr Christine Wilson



### West Rainton

Cllr Jude Considine



### 9 Cedar Drive

Cllr Pauline Crathorne



### Coxhoe

Cllr Liz Maddison



### Moorside

Cllr Beaty Bainbridge



### New Lea House

Cllr Jude Considine



### Framwellgate Moor

Cllr Mamie Simmons



### (Auckland - secure)

Cllr George Richardson



### (Barnard - secure)

Cllr Ivan Jewell



### (Lumley - secure)

Cllr Eunice Huntington



### (Walworth - secure)

Cllr Joe Makepeace



### (Durham House - secure)

Cllr Elizabeth Scott



# Key performance data 2020/21

- There were 950 children in care at the end of March 2021, with the long-term increasing trend continuing. The rate of children looked after per 10,000 children remains lower than the North East average.
- **Although the overall number of children looked after has increased, fewer children entered care in 2020/21 but Covid-19 impacted on the number of children leaving care during most of the year.**
- 55 children were adopted in 2020/21. This equates to 18% of all children leaving care which is higher than in England and the North East in 2019/20.
- **Around eight in ten of our children in care are placed in foster care or with friends and family. We have seen a reduction in children placed with in-house foster carers during the year, as Covid-19 had a direct impact on foster carers, for example choosing not to take on new placements or to deregister for their own health reasons.**
- 86% of children looked after who had been in care for at least 12 months had an up-to-date health assessment, but there was a significant reduction in dental checks as a direct impact of Covid-19. It has slowly began to increase as dental surgeries reopen.
- **92 children looked after were recorded as missing, accounting for 483 missing episodes. A return to home interview was completed for over 80% of missing episodes, an increase from last year. A child/ young person can refuse this.**
- 66% of our care leavers aged 17-18 were in education, employment and training, above the 2019/20 national rate of 64%.
- **63% of our care leavers aged 19-21 were in education, employment and training, above the 2019/20 national rate of 53%.**
- 94% of our care leavers aged 17-18 were in suitable accommodation, above the 2019/20 national rate of 90%.
- **96% of our care leavers aged 19-21 were in suitable accommodation, above the 2019/20 national rate of 85%.**
- Due to Covid-19, KS2 SATS's were cancelled, therefore there is no KS2 data to report this year.
- **There were 35 young people in the KS4 reporting cohort. 11 of them attended specialist provision, 5 attended alternative provision or independent school, 18 attended mainstream secondary and 1 was in a young offenders institute. Our cohort has continued to perform well at GCSE (grades 9-4) and significant improvements have been made in Maths.**
- We are delighted to report further improvement from 2019, with a positive 3-year trend in pupils achieving Maths at Grade 4+. English grades 9-4 results showed a slight dip, but this follows significant improvements made over the last two years. There was a very positive 3% increase in pupils achieving the higher grades in Maths, with young people achieving grades 9-5 basics rising.
- **43% of Durham looked after children had an identified special educational need (SEN) in 2019-20 with 19% of them supported by an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This has remained static over the last two years.**



# Education, employment and training

## Work with further education providers

DurhamWorks and the Young People's Service have strong links with local colleges and meetings take place throughout the year to support transition events. Activities take place to share information and ensure early identification of young people with care experience to prevent disengagement of vulnerable students. Employment, education and training meetings are held monthly and have representation from the further education and regional higher education sector.

## Transition support

Looked after young people are supported to make an effective sustained transition into post-16 education, employment and training through our new DurhamWorks Programme for Schools. They are offered one-to-one mentoring support, as well as the opportunity to participate in group activities in identified schools, which focus on transition support, improving motivation, as well as work related learning and enterprise.



## Post-16 support

Looked after young people and care leavers receive wrap-a-round support from their named specialist progression adviser in order to sustain their progression into education, employment or training or to re-engage them in learning if they are NEET.

## Apprenticeships

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Durham County Council was forced to reduce its apprenticeship recruitment programme during 2020-2021, which also impacted on the number of care leavers who were recruited. However, plans are currently being developed for 2021-2022 recruitment, which will again include ring-fenced positions specifically for care leavers.



As part of the Government's Covid-19 recovery plan, Durham County Council is offering a number of positions to unemployed young people through the Kickstart Scheme. Up to nine positions have been ring-fenced for care leavers, covering a broad range of occupational areas.

Supporting more young people in care and care leavers into sustained post-16 education, employment and training is a key priority for Durham County Council and is a recognition of its importance in improving the life chances of young people in our care and care leavers in terms of their future income, health, sense of wellbeing and purpose.

## DurhamWorks

Additional support is provided to our young people in care and care leavers aged 16-24 through the DurhamWorks Programme. This is a European funded, Durham County Council led partnership project that supports young people aged 16-24 who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment and Training) and resident in County Durham to progress into education, employment or training. The funding which will provide additional support to our young people in care and care leavers through DurhamWorks is available until December 2023.

Further details of DurhamWorks can be found at [www.durhamworks.info](http://www.durhamworks.info)

# Celebrations

Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, we were unable to host any awards or celebration events in 2020/21.

For the future, young people have asked us to consider hosting virtual 'Celebration events' now that people are getting better at using IT. They also suggested that people they know should present their awards, not important people who they don't know.



## Mind of My Own app



We started using Mind of My Own which is a unique digital communication tool for children and young people that supports Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Mind of My Own has been co-produced with children and young people to give a platform for them to easily share their lived experiences at a time that is convenient for them and to have their voices heard.

There are two apps which allow children and young people to communicate with their workers:

- The 'One App' is aimed at children and young people aged 8 years+ who can use the app more independently to prepare for and reflect upon meetings, visits, life events, achievements and problems.

- The 'Express App', for children aged 7 and under and for children and young people with additional needs, can be accessed through the support of a worker to create a one-page profile which shares their views, wishes and feelings.

Some of our young people are ambassadors for Mind of My Own and designed a leaflet for the children and young people's launch event on 9 April.

More information can be found at [www.mindofmyown.org.uk](http://www.mindofmyown.org.uk)







Melanie Stubbs' first year in post as virtual head has been an eventful one. Despite the constraints of Covid-19 and the impact it has had on education, there have been many opportunities to support our children in care to achieve the best possible outcomes for their future. Communication with carers and social workers has been an important part of the process to support children back into education following two lockdowns.

In Durham, school attendance is good for our children in care, and there have been no permanent exclusions since 2014.

The Personal Education Plan (PEP) process has been met favourably by all who use it and has enabled the virtual school caseworkers to monitor the progress of children and young people and champion for the best outcomes. This process allows the PEP's to move with the child electronically as they move through each Key Stage.

Training has been offered to designated teachers and governors to support the implementation of the new PEP system. Early years and post 16 are now part of this system, which has supported smooth transitions to the next phase for children.

Caseworkers work with schools to identify what is best for the child and can advise them about the range of interventions we can put in place to best meet the needs of the child. The Virtual School recognises the effects of attachment and trauma and has worked with the different therapeutic services within the County to ensure we offer schools the best advice at the right time. We have developed our links with Full Circle to provide a helpline to schools for advice and training. With the support of Durham Counselling

services and Education Psychology, children who are looked after should receive support in a timely manner. In addition to this we offer occupational therapy support through Future Steps, giving schools access to assessments when a need is identified.

The Virtual School Head has attended meetings with the young people from the Children in Care Council (CICC) and is forging close links to help them get their voice heard in education. CICC have led a training session for designated teachers and have contributed to a Children Looked After Policy to be shared with schools in May 2021. Further work is planned with CICC as we move into the future.

During lockdown the Virtual School worked with schools and gave an additional £50 for each child to purchase a licence for home learning, or other materials to support carers with home schooling.

A transition workbook was also prepared and posted to all Year 6 children who were moving to secondary school in September 2020.

A yellow circular callout with a dotted green border containing the text: "In Durham, school attendance is good for our children in care, and there have been no permanent exclusions since 2014."/>

**In Durham,  
school attendance  
is good for our  
children in care, and  
there have been no  
permanent  
exclusions since  
2014.**

# Aycliffe Secure Centre



Aycliffe Secure Centre was judged “outstanding” in all areas at its full inspection in September 2019, and an assurance visit by Ofsted in November 2020 found high standards had been maintained despite the difficulties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aycliffe Secure Centre provides secure accommodation for up to 38 young people, 8 of whom are sentenced or remanded by the Youth Custody Service. In addition to this there is occupancy for 30 young people accommodated for their own or others safety, under Section 25 of the Children’s Act 1989, commissioned by Local Authorities.

The background experiences and needs of all our young people are usually very similar irrespective of their legal order therefore, the

living accommodation and socialisation for all young people is determined by the risk assessment of the individual and the current group. Young people are not placed in a specific house, solely on whether they are here on welfare or a custodial sentence/status. The centre operates a single sex house for girls, one for boys and one home for young people with particularly complex needs. Gender on the other two houses is decided by the market demand of referrals. Over this period, the centre has only had four houses in operation due to Covid-19 restrictions and the impact on staffing.

The philosophy of the centre is one of ‘Exceptional Parenting’. We aim to ensure that all our young people have opportunities to enrich their lives. The centre also follows the SECURE STAIRS

framework and is now in the early stages of working towards Enabling Environments.

As a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, there has been considerable change in managing referrals, admissions and discharges and the direct care and education of young people. The centre has also started to look at its recovery and an Aycliffe specific roadmap is in place, aligned to national milestones.

The centre has faced many challenges throughout this period of uncertainty and no practice has remained unaffected in some way. Key highlights and achievements include:

- The Covid-19 recovery plan is fully implemented, and a roadmap has been developed to continue to aid this positive direction of travel.

- Nationally recognised Butler Award commendation awarded to the lead nurse for her excellence in maintaining a Covid-19 safe environment.
- No positive Covid-19 cases within the population of young people.
- Despite restrictions, all families were offered a face to face visit at Christmas.
- Implementation of lateral flow testing facilities.
- A significant and maintained reduction in incidents.
- The school has remained open throughout this entire period.
- Contribution to the final Anna Freud evaluation.
- Significant improvements in the physical environment of the centre.
- Continued utilisation of digital solutions to facilitate young person contact with parents and professionals and to ensure Mental Health (Kolvin) and Substance Misuse (Humankind) services.
- The local SECURE STAIRS implementation plan is now fully implemented.
- 108 multi-agency staff have attended 5-day Trauma-Informed Practice for Children and Young People training.
- 64 psychological formulation meetings and 598 attendances.

- Positive feedback from young people, parents and professionals.
- Recognition for achieving the Investor in Children award for 10 consecutive years.

Aycliffe Secure Centre has continued upgrading facilities during the pandemic as well as working on plans for the transition home, which will be a registered children's home, accommodating young people from the centre who are no longer on secure orders as it can be difficult to find places for children once they have been in secure accommodation.

Marking celebrations and occasions has almost become more important during this period, there have been individual celebrations of significant milestones as well as special dates in the calendar. This has included:

- Birthday parties, including an 18th birthday celebration
- Winter wonderland ball
- Centre-wide Christmas buffet
- Pets and animals being brought into the centre
- Christmas house decoration competition
- Special end of term assembly
- Visit from DJ



We also work with our catering company to ensure that food is both nutritious and meets the tastes and needs of all our young people, and one of the suggestions they made was to have a themed night where food from different countries and cultures is tried. This has been established on Wednesday nights - so far, the Indian curry night has been the favourite! These activities have been embraced and enjoyed.

**“To all staff, I just want to say a big thank you. Thank you for always being there to listen to my problems. Also, I just want to say thanks for trying to make Christmas as good as possible. Many Thanks, love [young person].”**

## Children's homes

We offer residential services for children and young people, providing support and care for young people who cannot live at home or who require a short break away from their family or carer.

- The children's home in Sacriston was registered with Ofsted in early January 2021 and the young people who now live in their new home love their new posh pad, especially the bedrooms which they designed as part of the moving in plans.
- The move from Cedar Drive has happened and the young people are settling into their new home in Aycliffe enjoying their swanky rooms and all their new space and lovely garden.
- Park House, our short break home was closed temporarily from March 2020 due to Covid-19, but it reopened in June 2020 when the guidance and restrictions allowed and welcomed back their children and young people along with some new children and young people who have settled right in.
- After much searching, a property for the edge of care provision has been identified and we are hoping that all goes well with the purchase and plans to ensure we are supporting our children, young people, families and carers.
- The children's home at Coxhoe is currently going through the planning process.

## Fostering and adoption

- During the pandemic, foster carers received additional telephone supervision from their fostering social worker to explore any issues or concerns for the families and the children/young people in their care. For example, if someone got Covid-19, or if people had to self-isolate, a Covid-19 plan was developed with each foster carer.
- Newsletters and links to resources and activities were regularly shared with foster carers and their foster children.
- Many examples of positive feedback from foster carers and the other professionals were received.

**“ We really do feel privileged to be prioritised so early in having the covid injection/protection by the Fostering Service. We think it does show how much the service does value us as Foster Carers. ”**

- As part of Foster Care Fortnight (11-24 May 2020), the National Association of Virtual School Heads Board asked Virtual School Head Teachers to share what foster carers were doing during the lockdown to help children in care with their learning.

- Young people's guides which help children and young people to understand what foster care is and what they can expect to happen when they first come to live in their new foster family have continued to be sent to carers of children in care.



- The Adoption Team responded to increased enquiries over the last year and the preparation groups for prospective adopters were delivered virtually. One prospective adopter said:

**“ I feel I now know more about the correct way to help the child (whilst keeping in mind that every child and situation is different). The training was creative, with a mix of slides and personal experiences, which stuck in my head.... very informative and enjoyable, it was clear the amount of effort that has been put into the new format of this training and I'm grateful to be involved.”**

**adopt**  
Coast to Coast

launched virtually on 1 April 2021. The three spokes, Cumbria, Durham and Together for Children will continue to provide their current adoption services from first contact. The key priority areas for 2021/22 are:

- ✓ To establish Adopt Coast to Coast as the 'go to' agency for those interested in adopting,
  - ✓ To develop branding so it is recognisable alongside and separately to the Local Authority partners,
  - ✓ To continually review the outcome of marketing activity to ensure best value and best return on investment,
  - ✓ To ensure the prospective adopter's journey is reviewed and streamlined through review and sharing of best practice,
  - ✓ To establish early linking and matching,
  - ✓ To embed models of early permanence for example Fostering for Adoption in Durham,
  - ✓ To work across the partnership to develop the post adoption support offer.
- Full Circle staff adapted the training packages so that they could be delivered virtually, and the helpline funded by the Adoption Support Fund provided immediate support to adoptive parents and Special Guardianship Order carers struggling with the experience of lockdown while caring for children who have experienced trauma. This service was positively received by those who accessed it.



# Achievements

- Young people highlighted the importance of pets and animals in their lives, and how this helps with relationship building and their mental wellbeing.



On the back of this, discussions took place within the service and staff were asked to be less risk adverse and try to accommodate animals or consider what changes could be made to support this.

Young people had been asked to be mindful to ensure that all those in the home were receptive to having pets and as a result, a number of children's homes have introduced pet hamsters.

Some of the children's homes have also implemented 'dog-fostering' when staff members bring their dogs into the home for a few days, enabling the young people to care for the dog and participate in walking, feeding and grooming.

One home has an allotment with chickens, one young person is helping a horse owner to care for their horse and another is volunteering at a local animal shelter.

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.

The importance of animals is being discussed with foster carers, to try and accommodate young people's wishes around having pets or being with animals.

- Young people shared details of the Coram Voice 'Positive Matters' campaign at a Corporate Parenting Panel, to challenge stigma and share positive stories about children in care. As a result, we have added 'Proud Moments' to each meeting agenda

where we share positive stories about our young people.

We are very proud that a young person from the Children in Care Council was 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.

- Young people highlighted that there were disparities in pocket money and other entitlements in residential homes across the County.

A working group was formed to look at all money and incentives including pocket money, birthday money, Christmas presents, college attendance, good behaviour rewards, presents for families etc.

As a result of their work, a decision was made to keep the current system of pocket money and incentives to encourage young people to pull their weight in the home.

Pocket money will be increased, and an annual review will take place for pocket money and incentives, which will be led by the young people, supported by staff within the service. It is anticipated that the review will take place in September / October each year to coincide with the budget cycle.

A similar activity will be undertaken within foster care groups, with benchmark guidance produced for pocket money and incentives, then the information will be included in the updated Young People's guides.

- Young people raised concerns about the Wi-Fi in our children's homes.

Work took place with young people to establish what the problem was, and to discuss the solution and as a result it was felt that a full Wi-Fi upgrade was needed for all the homes.



This work was undertaken around the Covid-19 restrictions and, moving forward, any new homes will have the new Wi-Fi requirements built into the specifications from the outset.

- Laptops were delivered to children and young people who were identified as requiring one under the national government scheme. This includes children in care including those out of county in foster care and residential children's homes. Where children did not have internet access, they were also provided with a 4G router.

This helped young people to stay in touch with friends, family and workers during lockdown, and to help with schoolwork during virtual lessons.



- Looked After Reviews were facilitated on Microsoft Teams, and the Independent Reviewing Officer service devised five questions to be sent to the children, young people and their carers/family after every meeting to capture their views and feed into any improvement work for the service.
- The number of children and young people attending meetings increased by a third in April 2020 in comparison to March 2020, which was really good to see.

- Digital family time sessions were supported and were able to continue in line with Covid regulations. The following feedback was received:

**“We are so grateful we are getting to see him like this and see how he’s changing. We know every day when we’re getting up that we’re getting something from him. It’s getting us through the week, we don’t know what we would do without this.”**

**“Thank you so much for the regular updates about my children, I miss them and love them more than anything in this world! I’m so very grateful for all communication the Local Authority allow me to have with them.”**

**“It has been brilliant just to see their faces during this awful time, I am so pleased your service offered this to us so I could still get to see them.”**

- Although lots of work has been done around language, young people felt that the word ‘vulnerable’ was being overly used during the pandemic. The young people don’t like to be referred to as being vulnerable, because many of them do not feel as if they are actually vulnerable.

Work will take place to look at the use of the word across the service, and it is hoped that this will improve as we move on from the pandemic.

- Young people have continued to deliver training sessions.
  - Children in Care Council (CICC) members delivered development sessions to 48 Durham and Sunderland University social work students about the importance of language and gave an overview of what Durham County Council have done to develop relationships with the young people.
  - Between October 2020 and March 2021, training has been delivered virtually by the CICC to 32 future foster carers over three sessions. Younger CICC members shadowed this training so that they will be able to get involved in the delivery in the future.
  - Over 50 designated teacher leads participated in virtual development sessions, led by CICC members, amplifying key messages about how education and support should work best for the young people. The future aim for CICC is to support the development of a school-based education policy for care experienced young people in line with Durham Virtual School Team.
- Investing in Children are working with 45 Durham County Council teams, who have achieved the Investing in Children's membership award or are working towards this, including Children Looked After Teams, Families First Teams and One Point Centres. 18 of these teams have the Investing in Children Gold Award, for being awarded membership over a 10-year period.



- In terms of the health and mental health of our children in care, the County Durham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) increased its workforce by appointing a dedicated Designated Nurse for looked after children adding to those already in designated safeguarding and looked after children roles.

The CCG has continued to work with health and council colleagues to improve the timeliness of initial health assessments and the availability of health plans at the first looked after review.

The CCG has also been working with the Fostering Network towards achieving a Fostering Friendly Employer Award.

- County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust (CDDFT) has continued to deliver initial health assessments during the pandemic, initially these were virtual assessments, but each child has also had a follow up face to face appointment to ensure a thorough health assessment was undertaken. An audit was also undertaken to compare what was discussed in the virtual and the face to face appointments and learning will be shared.
- Harrogate and District Foundation Trust appointed two specialist nurses for children in care, which has enabled us to:
  - engage with a young person in a residential care home who had previously refused to participate in their last two review health assessments,
  - support a young person with a complex hospital appointment to ensure all health needs are being met,
  - support all children in residential care homes and children at home placed with parents on a care order on a regular basis.
- Young people suggested that 'social worker profiles' are created for young people so that they have their work contact details but also get to know a little bit about their social workers e.g. if they have children, if they have any pets, any likes or dislikes, what their favourite food is, what movies they like etc. It was felt that this would help give young



people something to talk to them about in the early days.

The young people said that they would like the cards to have a picture of their social worker on so that this can form part of their care experience journey.

- We received a request from the Children's Commissioner for England's Office to gather the views of our children in care and care leavers to inform an update of the National Police Chiefs' Council's strategy on policing children and young people. The aim was to ensure the strategy is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and has children's rights front and centre.

The Children's Commissioner's office hosted focus groups with the CICC to get young people's views. From these, a number of recommendations were pulled together by the Children's Commissioner's Office and handed over to the National Police Chiefs' Council to use to inform their strategy. Feedback from this work will be used to inform service decisions moving forward.

Young people said that in some cases the police had said to them that they were going 'on holiday' when in fact they were being placed in care.



- Five CICC members were involved in a collaborative project with South Tyneside Council, Blue Cabin and Liverpool Hope University (funded by the Department for Education) to work with Children in Care Councils to understand what has happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim is to establish what worked well/not so well and share this learning.
- The young people shared how the Durham CICC and Durham County Council's Corporate Parenting Panel connected virtually and maintained good communication channels during this difficult period.



# Priorities for 2021/22

- Transport – again following the Care Leavers Challenge, how we can support young people with their transport issues and costs which eat up a large proportion of budget and are a significant barrier to travel for education, work and social activities.
- Ensure that we consistently use child friendly language across our services based on the feedback from children and young people.
- Care Experienced Young Inspectors – roll out the programme which has been on hold due to the pandemic – as outlined on page 8.
- Sessional employment – paid opportunities to be involved with County Council activities such as events to gain skills and experience.



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