

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL
CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 15 October 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons in the Chair

Members of the Panel:

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

Co-opted Members:

C Baines, J Bell, A Ferguson and M Green and C Putt of the Children in Care Council (CiCC)

Also Present:

Barbara Arbon – Adoption Team Manager accompanied by adoptive parents Robbie and Steven
Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care
Paula Gibbons – Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast
Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children
Claire Morris – Strategic Manager, Looked After Resources
Michelle Summerbell – Team Manager, Full Circle Service
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Stephen Tracey – Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager
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 J Charlton, O Gunn, A Surtees and from co-opted members Caitlyn Gray, Louise Burns and Wendy Taylor. Officers Jodie Henderson and Martyn Stenton also submitted apologies.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor I Roberts was in attendance for Councillor A Surtees.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. The officer was thanked for the comprehensive minutes.

In relation to item 14 of the minutes it was reported that representation is being sought for three additional Regulation 44 representatives for Aycliffe Secure Centre. The matter would be discussed later in the meeting, during item 14.

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 and young people looked after continues to reduce, standing at 905 as at Friday 15 October 2021.

6 Proud Moments

The Strategic Manager for Looked After Resources spoke to the Panel about a young person resident in a children's home whose past experiences have led to that person finding it difficult to form relationships and to share thoughts, feelings and fears with others. The young person is a talented baker and enjoys making and decorating cupcakes. Of their own volition, the young person made a special cupcake as a 'thank you' for a teacher who had provided support throughout particularly difficult times. The Panel recognised that this gesture was a very brave step for the young person who was acknowledging the trust and attachment that had been formed in the relationship. The Panel sent their encouragement and best wishes to the young person for their future progress.

7 Actions in response to Ofsted's focused visit to Children's Services

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the meeting held on 24 September at which the findings from Ofsted's focused visit to Children's Services in July were discussed. The Panel noted an action plan in response to the findings was required to be submitted to Ofsted within 70 working days of receipt of the letter.

The Head of Children's Social Care delivered a presentation which outlined the response to areas identified for improvement (for copy of presentation see file).

Confirmation is awaited from Ofsted that it is satisfied with the action plan and a progress update will be provided to the Panel in due course. The Head of Children's Social Care responded to questions and comments from the Panel.

Councillor Bainbridge referred to the planned improvements in relation to ensuring good quality assessments for young people living in supported accommodation aged 16 to 17 and asked whether these improvements will apply to young people above the age of 17, up to 25 years of age. The Head of Children's Social Care clarified that the Ofsted letter referred to a specific cohort of young people aged 16 to 17, who are able to live independently, with a measure of support. The area for improvement identified seeks to ensure that the assessments for those young people are fit for purpose. The Council continues to care for young people and care leavers up to the age of 25.

Councillor Hunt referred to the strengths identified and asked what opportunities exist for staff who are not qualified social workers but have the skills required to work alongside social workers. The Head of Children's Social Care responded that these staff include family workers and staff in teams such as Supporting Solutions and Child Exploitation and they perform key roles within the service. To assist staff who have the skills to become qualified social workers, the service has partnered with the university to offer a social work apprenticeship scheme.

With reference to the sufficiency of placements, the Chair asked the Panel to be aware of an increase in fostering and adoption marketing in order to boost recruitment. The Vice-Chair commented that she would like to see more promotion on the Council's website including better signposting to the appropriate contacts. Councillor Coult drew the Panel's attention to the fostering page, adding that sharing the page through social media is a useful method of increasing the reach. Councillor Deinali added her support for the use of social media saying she had shared facebook posts which had led to enquiries.

Alison Ferguson, Designated Nurse for Looked After Children informed the Panel that her employer had recently received an award for being a fostering-friendly employer and they have worked with the local authority and health colleagues to encourage others to adopt this approach.

In response to a query from Councillor Hunt, the Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that the fostering service regularly holds 'Meet the Team' events where prospective foster carers are invited to meet informally to gain more information. These sessions are held throughout the county and at various times of the day, to ensure they are accessible to all.

8 Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update

The Panel welcomed Robert Johnson, Project Manager from Investing in Children and Chloe and Mitchell from the Children in Care Council who provided the following update on their work during the month (for copy of presentation see file).

Chloe informed the Panel that she successfully completed the peer mentor training and she is now the first Children in Care Council peer mentor. She spoke of how she had met the young person she is mentoring whilst they were taking part in an activity day and she said how pleased she is that they are gradually getting to know each other and how she is enjoying helping her peer through being there for support, whenever she is needed.

Mitchell provided details of the art café which helps young people to develop their creative talents, with a focus on wellbeing. The young people are also continuing their work to challenge stigma, break barriers and increase opportunities for looked after young people and care leavers. Initiatives such as the 'Proud Moments' Corporate Parenting Panel agenda item and the 'Celebrate Me' awards contribute towards raising the profile. In addition elected members will be asked at each meeting how they are contributing to this.

The Panel heard that funding was secured which enabled the young people of the Children in Care Council to work with partners including Durham County Council to deliver fifty boxes of summer packs to families throughout the county over the summer. This work has resulted in a nomination for a national award.

The Investing in Children Project Manager praised Chloe on becoming the first peer mentor adding that the feedback has been very positive and he hopes there will be many more peer mentors like Chloe in the future. He also highlighted how keen the young people are to give back to the community following the COVID-19, which led to their successful joint work carried out on the summer pack project.

The Panel commended Chloe for her selflessness with her peer-mentor work and the Vice-Chair asked Chloe if she had felt any anxiety at the prospect of taking on the role.

Chloe responded that she had felt nervous about the training day, however, although it was a long day, she felt the training had prepared her well and taught her how to provide friendly support to her peers.

In answer to a question from the Panel about the work to challenge stigma, Mitchell explained the work that had been done to improve the use of language to ensure it is children and young people friendly. He added that group discussions take place regularly to develop ideas to challenge stigma. The Vice-Chair encouraged the Children in Care Council representatives to continue their good engagement with the Panel and pledged to provide assistance and support to the young people with their suggestions for improvements.

In thanking Chloe for her peer mentor work, Councillor Coult commented that it was heartening to observe from her presentation that she is not only a peer mentor but she has also formed a bond and become a friend to the young person she is mentoring. Adding her support for the peer mentoring scheme, Councillor Coult expressed how important the simple act of talking and sharing experiences is for young people. The Project Manager confirmed there are plans to progress the peer mentoring scheme next year.

The Chair thanked the Project Manager for all the work he carried out to support the young people, to which he replied that it is very much a team effort.

Concluding the item, the Senior Partnerships Officer reminded the Panel that the joint meeting with the Children in Care Council will be held at 5.30 pm on Tuesday 19 October at the Sjovell Centre. Those intending to attend were asked to let the Senior Partnerships Officer know in advance in order for the appropriate COVID-19 risk assessment to be undertaken.

9 Performance Update

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager presented an update on the quarter one performance which included a comparison with statistical neighbours (for copy of report see file).

The Vice-Chair, acknowledging the importance of monitoring the number of young people going missing / absent from care, requested that the information omitted from the report be provided to the Panel, for information. The Equality and Strategy Manager informed the Panel that in quarter one, 51 young people went missing from home with 206 missing episodes which was higher than the figure for the same period last year, however, due to the unique time period during COVID-19, a like for like comparison was not possible. All return to home interviews, where they were accepted, were completed.

The Vice-Chair referred to the lag in education data and expressed concern that data from 2018 was unavailable. The Virtual School Head explained that the Virtual School Annual Report for 2019 includes three-year trends and, under normal circumstances, KS1, KS2 and KS4 examination results would be reported, however, there were no KS1 and KS2 results to report due to the pandemic. Some KS4 assessment results are available and they will be included in the Virtual School Annual Report which is due to be presented to the Panel in January. KS4 assessment results and a commentary on A level results will also be included in the Annual Report. Members of the Virtual School Sub-Group are provided with academic achievement reports three times per year.

Responding to a query from the Vice-Chair, the Equality and Strategy Manager clarified that in the chart illustrating the length of time looked after by age, each child appears only once in the chart.

The Vice-Chair referred to the breakdown of social work caseload by team and thanked the officer for the useful information. She requested that future reports include the number of social workers alongside the percentage figures.

Referring to social work caseloads, Councillor Miller asked if there was a recommended maximum amount of cases a social worker should have at any one time, and, if not, had this been considered. The Head of Children's Social Care replied that the nature of the service leads to peaks in demand from time to time and there are clear policy guidelines as to what is acceptable in terms of social worker caseloads. Strategies are in place to address pressure points and the service is in the process of implementing a new team to manage demand in the area of adolescent safeguarding and exploitation, implementing a new adolescent safeguarding team to increase capacity in this area.

Councillor Coult referred to the dip in performance with regard to initial health assessments and dental checks and, referring to the number of initial health assessments which are not performed within the recommended 20 days, she asked if there is a timescale in which health assessments must be completed. The Equality and Strategy Manager responded that the pandemic had inevitably impacted on health and dental checks and this is being addressed through strategic partnership groups. Dental Practices are requested to offer priority appointments to children looked after. The Designated Nurse for Looked After Children commented that completing health checks within 20 working days is a very tight timeframe and in some cases this is not met as delays are caused when parents are unwilling to grant consent for the checks to be carried out. Delays had also been caused by self-isolation rules during the pandemic.

Councillor Hunt asked whether data was available on the number of young people who were missing from education or excluded from school. The Virtual School Head highlighted that there have been no permanent exclusions since 2014 and full information will be included in the Virtual School Annual Report. All children looked after are either on a school roll or in specialist or alternative provision. She explained that elective home education is not recommended for children looked after and it is used only when a child is considered to be too unwell to attend school. In these cases the Education Health Needs team will provide education at home for the child who will remain on the school roll, with a view to returning to school in the future.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Annual Report on the Adoption Service: April 2020 - March 2021

The Panel welcomed Paula Gibbons, Head of Adopt Coast to Coast, Barbara Arbon, Adoption Team Manager and Robbie and Steven, adoptive parents. The Panel considered the Annual Report on the Adoption Service for April 2020 to March 2021 (for copy see file).

Robbie and Steven introduced themselves to the Panel, having been invited to speak to the Panel about their fostering to adoption journey which began in December 2019. The parents informed the Panel that their journey began when they attended an informal information event which led to an initial assessment in January 2020. The onset of the pandemic did not hamper their plans and they attended a virtual training session just before the first national lockdown. Following the completion of the application they were introduced to their allocated social worker who provided support throughout the process. To their delight, they successfully gained approval and they were placed with a baby boy the following day. The formal adoption process was completed in July 2021 and the parents expressed their thanks to the team for enabling their family.

The Vice-Chair thanked the parents for their comments and asked them what attracted them to Durham's service. The parents replied that they were keen to adopt outside of their local area and they chose to approach Durham based upon recommendations from friends who had been through the process. In response to a question about the support they had received, the parents said the support had been excellent and they could not find fault.

They gave thanks to their allocated social worker, Clare Bewley, for all her support. They commented that the application process had been lengthy, however, they acknowledged that the process is robust for good reason.

Suggesting improvements, the parents said they would have found an online process for tracking their journey helpful, in order to check what stage their application had reached and what the next steps were. The parents confirmed that they attended the training provided by the young people of the Children in Care Council as part of their fostering/adoption journey.

Councillor Miller asked the parents if they could identify any part of the process which should be changed or improved. The parents responded that the most difficult part of the process was having the courage to make the first contact to register their interest. They added that as much as they were keen to convince Durham that they were good prospective adopters, they also needed the adoption service to sell itself to them, to provide them with assurance that they had chosen the right adoption service. They also highlighted that it is daunting to invite professionals into your home to scrutinise your lifestyle, however, it is an essential part of the process and whereas it is often the only time that prospective adopters will go through the process, social workers may forget from time to time how overwhelming the process can be. The parents commented that when the home visit took place, they were provided with peace of mind and were assured that they had made the right decision in choosing Durham.

The Head of Adopt Coast to Coast thanked the parents for their positive comments adding that the parents are a great asset to the Adopt Coast to Coast marketing campaign. She commended Durham's Adoption team who had worked hard throughout their busy year, approving 41 adopters. Whilst staff quickly adapted to virtual working, the increased workload brought the new challenge to maintain that high level of service. She concluded by thanking the Team Manager, Barbara Arbon and the marketing team who had played a huge part in the success over the past year.

The Panel noted that representatives are being sought for the Adoption Panel. The Adoption Team Manager explained that Adoption Panels comprise of independent members, social work professionals, medical representatives and elected members. Their role is to consider adoption assessments for approval, and, to match children and young people who are planned for adoption with approved adopters. Panel meetings are held fortnightly, on Wednesday mornings. Members interested in joining the Panel were invited to contact Barbara Arbon for further information.

The Head of Adopt Coast to Coast then answered questions from the Panel as follows.

The Vice-Chair referred to the Annual Report on recruitment and queried the percentage figure which stated the last two years had remained at 41%. The Head of Service clarified that the percentages were incorrect however the figures were correct, with the number of enquiries decreasing and the number of approvals increasing in 2021. The Head of Service confirmed that all three spokes of the Regional Adoption Agency had observed an increase in enquiries during the period.

In response to a question from Councillor Miller, the Head of Service confirmed that the process for selection for the adoption panel and the fostering panel is that there is an application form and an interview.

Councillor Deinali asked whether there are any age ranges that parents prefer to adopt and any ages that are more difficult to place. The Head of Service replied that the majority of adopters have not had birth children and therefore seek to adopt a younger child. A great deal of support is provided to encourage adoption across all age ranges and many adopters across the three spokes of the Regional Adoption Agency who have adopted older children, large sibling groups and young people with health or development needs are encouraged to share their experiences through marketing campaigns. This issue is a national challenge and the national leaders group is striving to maximise the achievement of adoption plans for all, in a timely manner. The Head of Children's Social Care added that the Regional Adoption Agency aims to address this issue by pooling resources into one organisation which is capable of operating on a larger scale to enable children and young people to be matched with the most suitable adopter as quickly as possible.

The Chair concluded by thanking the parents for attending the meeting and providing such a valuable insight into their adoption experience. On behalf of the Panel, she wished the family well for the future.

11 Full Circle Service Update

The Team Manager of the Full Circle Service provided an update on the service (for copy of presentation see file).

The Panel heard that the therapeutic service which consists of a team of therapeutically trained social workers was formed in 1995, to support the mental health needs of children and young people, particularly those who have experienced trauma through neglect and abuse. The Team Manager explained how trauma in early years may have a significant impact on brain development which can last well into adulthood. The team works closely with social work teams and multi-agency work is also carried out. Over the years, the service has developed a respected reputation, providing consultation to families, foster carers and a wide range of professionals.

Direct therapeutic support is undertaken where appropriate and a large amount of training is carried out including the delivery of workshops on attachment and trauma and related care planning issues. The service also offers support and training to education staff including designated teachers to help them gain a better understand of the impact of trauma. The offer has recently been extended to children and young people who are in the care of neighbouring authorities but who are placed within County Durham.

The Team Manager said it was pleasing to see that the recent inspection carried out by Ofsted in July recognised the support provided by the service and the role it plays in supporting social workers with their plans for children and young people.

The Strategic Manager for the First Contact and Specialist Countywide Service commented on how proud she is of the team and added that the Team Manager who had begun her career as a support worker was an exemplar of how the service values and encourages its staff to maximise their opportunities. She drew parallels with the comments made earlier in the meeting with regard to the importance of peer mentoring.

The Vice-Chair asked whether the staff work exclusively for the Full Circle Service and the Team Manager informed the Panel that there are 6 full time, 1 part time and 1 temporary therapeutic social workers and all staff work exclusively for the therapeutic service.

Councillor Bainbridge referred to the 593 referrals in 2020-21 and asked how the figure compares with previous years. The Team Manager explained that the number of referrals had increased since 2018 and additional investment at that time led to the recruitment of an additional three therapeutic social workers. Referrals have remained steady over recent years with a number of enquiries being one-off consultations and requests for initial advice and guidance which may lead to accessing training. The service has recently increased their offer and a fuller range of interventions is available.

The Virtual School Head commented on the close partnership with the Full Circle, with all designated teachers including those who are outside of the area and who care for Durham children looked after, having access to the training provided by the Full Circle. This is useful to inform behaviour policies which may need to be adapted in light of trauma experienced. The feedback from schools confirms that the advice line provided by the Full Circle which is available until 1.00 pm per day is a very valuable resource.

Cllr Henderson, Portfolio Holder for the Children and Young People's Service thanked all the officers for their attendance at the meeting, acknowledging the time it takes for the preparation of reports and presentations.

He also expressed appreciation to all the officers working hard behind the scenes to bring these reports before the Panel.

12 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.

13 Regulation 44 Visits and Regulatory Body ratings of Children's Residential Homes

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

The Strategic Manager for Looked After Resources said she would action queries from members who had not been receiving detailed monthly Regulation 44 reports and monthly reports for the home to which they are assigned.

The Senior Partnerships Officer sought three representatives for Aycliffe Secure Centre and several members indicated their interest in gaining further information on the Adoption and Fostering Panels.