

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Monday 22 November 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons in the Chair

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, B Bainbridge, C Bell, B Coult, S Deinali, J Griffiths, O Gunn, T Henderson, C Hunt, J Miller, J Nicholson, I Roberts, K Robson, K Rooney, S Townsend, M Walton and C Varty

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, A Ferguson, C Gray and W Taylor

Also Present:

Kelsey Clayton – Legal Services Manager
Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care
Jodie Henderson – Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence
Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor C Hood, C Baines, M Green and officer C Morris.

2. Substitute Members

No substitute members were present.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5. Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Children's Social Care reported the number of children looked after remained stable at 906.

6. Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that Ofsted inspections had taken place at High Etherley and Framwellgate Moor Children's Homes and there had been a mid-year review of Aycliffe Young People's Centre. Initial feedback is positive and further details will be shared with the Panel in due course. Councillor Gunn requested that letters of thanks be sent to the respective homes to acknowledge the good outcomes and thank all those involved for their hard work.

7. Proud Moments

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence congratulated Health Commissioning colleagues who were awarded the Fostering Network Fostering Excellence Award for Fostering Friendly Employer of the Year.

Commenting on how all the young people looked after are inspiring, the Strategic Manager shared two examples of proud moments this month. The first was a young person living in shared care arrangements who had experienced difficulties and disruption in his life, however he is now making remarkable progress, attending school regularly and achieving new goals both at school and in his personal life. Staff and his family have commented on how proud they are to see his progress and the kindness he is showing when caring for his younger sibling who has additional needs.

Another proud moment came when a young person with disabilities completed a sponsored walk for the Dogs Trust, raising over £100.

The Panel commended the achievements of the young people and wished them well going forward.

8. Update on Language

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence informed the Panel that staff are continuing to work with young people on the use of language to ensure that it is considerate, relevant and reflective of how young people communicate.

When preparing Care Plans, staff are using language that young people understand and events are being described in ways which are familiar to the individual young person. For example, if a young person refers to their grandmother as 'nanny' then that term is used their Care Plan. The feedback from young people is that these small changes mean a great deal to them.

The Strategic Manager highlighted that this is an ongoing exercise and the young people continue to challenge and encourage the service to use 'young-person friendly' language, where it is appropriate, as an alternative to professional terms.

As a result the term 'family time' is used as an alternative to 'contact' and the word 'home' is used instead of 'placement'. The Strategic Manager asked the Panel to consider the term 'Corporate Parent', and how the young people looked after feel about being corporately parented. She asked the Panel to bear in mind that young people mirror language and how sensitive they are to non-verbal cues, such as eye-contact, facial expressions and body-language. The Panel also noted the impact of trauma on young people may impair their attention and focus, making effective communication even more important in these circumstances.

Councillor Gunn thanked the Strategic Manager for highlighting the importance of this work and she asked whether consideration is being given to the language used by young people through social media. Referring to the good efforts by the young people to make these changes, she asked if Members could do more to improve how they communicate with young people. Caitlyn Gray of the Children n Care Council referred the Panel to the language guide produced by Durham County Council in conjunction with the Children in Care Council which details the terms young people prefer and would like to be used.

Councillor Hunt asked if work is done in schools to encourage education staff to adopt these terms. The Virtual School Head confirmed that the young people of the Children in Care Council attend regular meetings with Designated Teachers and policy changes have been made as a result of their discussions.

The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of how the service is committed to improving the use of language in liaison with young people and this is subject to continuous review.

Councillor Deinali informed the Panel that during the recent joint meeting with the Children in Care Council, the young people shared their concerns that complex language can create barriers and negatively impact how they perceive themselves and may exacerbate stigma and discrimination.

As a result, as a member of the National Education Union, she has put forward a motion to campaign for schools to address stigma and discrimination.

Recognising the importance of this matter, the Panel agreed that an update on language should become a regular agenda item.

9. Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update

Robert Johnson, Project Manager of Investing in Children and Caitlyn Gray of the Children in Care Council presented an update on recent activities (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Caitlyn explained that a joint meeting of members of the Children in Care Council and the Corporate Parenting Panel was held on 19 October. Topics discussed included the importance of family time, support for care leavers and ways to challenge stigma and discrimination.

Referring to family time, the young people highlighted that some of the venues used for this purpose are in need of updating and some of the rooms are suitable for younger children but not older children and teenagers. Caitlyn explained that in 2017 funds were raised through donations from Members to refurbish some family time rooms, with young people being actively involved in helping to design the rooms. The young people of the Children in Care Council would like the Panel to consider donating funds for the refurbishment of more family time venues.

Another issue discussed at the joint meeting was support for care leavers and what more could be done to assist care leavers and how this is a corporate responsibility and, as such, all services across the Council should be encouraged to look at ways in which they can support young people on leaving care.

The Project Manager explained how the young people are continuing to highlight the issues of stigma and discrimination and two young people gave a presentation to social work students at Sunderland University. The presentation was thought provoking and challenged the students' thinking and it was so well received, the young people will be following this up with a presentation to master's degree students in the near future.

Other developments during the month include the production of the next CiCC newsletter and the launch of the Education Fun Fund project, which utilises pupil premium money for fun education activities.

Peer mentors hosted a Halloween session for 6 to 10 year olds which gave the mentors the opportunity to talk to the younger children about the roles of the people who care for them, including the roles of Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers.

The young people are also discussing ideas for the production of a film and encouraged thoughts from Members as to a theme for the film.

Caitlyn concluded the presentation by sharing the details of a fundraising project by a young person who is raising money for Pancreatic Cancer UK, in memory of a foster carer.

The Chair congratulated the young people of the Children in Care Council on their work during a busy month.

Councillor Miller spoke of how much he enjoyed the event and he thanked all those that took part, adding that he would like to see the meetings taking place more often. He agreed with the young people that location and venues are a key part of the family time experience and therefore it is important that the venues are fit for purpose. He asked if it would be possible for Members to visit some of the family time locations. The Head of Children's Social Care confirmed that a visit will be arranged for Members to view family time venues.

Councillor Bainbridge echoed Councillor Miller's positive feedback saying how much she had enjoyed the evening and thanked the young people for organising the event. She spoke of how keen the young people are to increase opportunities and challenging stigma.

She commented on how she had been disappointed to see the press releases circulated by the young people which painted a negative picture of young people looked after. Referring to the refurbishment of the family time rooms and speaking as a long-standing member of the Panel, she spoke in support of raising funds to extend this project.

Councillor Townsend thanked the young people for the joint meeting, saying how refreshing and rewarding the experience was for her. She congratulated the young people on being such good advocates for themselves, inspiring others by driving their messages forward and using their voices and leadership skills to achieve their goals. She agreed that language must be relevant and consistent, especially for young people who are new to being in care so that they are not confused by many different ways of saying the same thing. She added that the work the young people are doing will be of benefit, not only now but also to young people looked after in the future.

Councillor Hunt thanked the young people for the fantastic event, saying one issue in particular had resonated with her which was the discussion regarding discrimination and she recognised the Panel's duty to challenge that perception. She spoke of her support for the young people's plans for their artwork to be displayed in bus stops to showcase how talented they are and she encouraged the young people to continue to 'think big'.

Councillor Deinali referred to the proposal to display the artwork in bus stops at Chester le Street and Framwellgate Moor and requested that this be rolled-out to all areas of the county. Councillor Gunn requested that the smaller villages and rural areas of the county are also included. Councillor Miller agreed and suggested that, with some major regeneration projects in the pipeline, there should be consideration given to incorporating projects like this into the plans for the future.

Alison Ferguson, Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and Looked After Children asked for permission to share the artwork with paediatric services and GP surgeries as they would also like to celebrate the talents of the young people.

The Project Manager thanked the Panel for their comments adding that the young people have produced fantastic artwork and he is looking forward to informing the Panel of the launch of the project.

Councillor Varty thanked all the young people who worked to organise the joint event, saying they all made a lasting impression. She commented that she learnt a great deal and she encouraged the young people to keep up the good joint working through sharing their thoughts and views with Members.

9a Feedback from joint CiCC / CPP

The Head of Children's Social Care delivered a presentation summarising the key themes discussed at the joint Children in Care / Corporate Parenting Panel meeting (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

As a result of the young people's comments regarding the family time venues, a review of the facilities will be carried out and more venues will be investigated such as community venues to provide local and convenient venues. An update on this work will be provided to the Panel in due course.

With regard to support for care leavers, the young people are keen to increase apprenticeships, employment opportunities and access to interviews within the Council. They also discussed the financial challenges faced on leaving care, the emotional aspects of the transition and the barriers that lack of access to transport can create. Members noted that the scheme to assist young people with the cost of driving lessons had been suspended during the pandemic and whilst this has resumed, there is now a long waiting list of young people waiting to access the scheme.

The young people also discussed how they can work with the Panel to continue to raise the profile of young people looked after, improve their experiences at school and provide them with support in their communities.

The Head of Children's Social Care explained that work will be done with the Children in Care Council to develop an action plan and bi-monthly meetings will be held to discuss progress on these themes. An update will be provided at the next joint meeting in March and a full update will be provided to Panel in April 2022.

In response to Councillor Miller's earlier comment regarding having more joint meetings, the Head of Children's Social Care explained that the joint meetings are currently scheduled to take place twice per year and the meetings are administered by the young people who also decide on the topics for discussion.

Councillor Miller commented that the issue of stigma was a focal point for discussion at the joint meeting and he had highlighted the good work of the Children in Care Council at the full Council meeting which was held on the day after the joint meeting. He suggested that the Council should give consideration to issuing a press release to show their commitment and pride in the county's young people. The Chair agreed this suggestion should be discussed with officers.

Caitlyn reiterated the importance of the use of language and how professional terms, which are often used subconsciously, may have negative connotations, such as the word 'vulnerable'. Caitlyn explained that the term is often used, however, young people looked after do not feel this term is relevant to them as they have a circle of support around them and feel safe, not vulnerable.

Councillor Hunt spoke of a young person she had spoken to at the event who had expressed a wish to have more family time.

The Head of Children's Social Care explained that decisions in respect of each young person are made at multiagency meetings and if the young person is of an appropriate age, they are involved in the decision making process. The service endeavours to ensure the voice of the child is heard and investigates specific issues.

10. Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Update

The Chair reported that this item was to be deferred to the next meeting.

11. Progress Report on the Care Leavers' Strategy and Action Plan

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence presented a report and presentation on the Care Leavers' Strategy and Action Plan which included progress against key areas of focus (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager explained that Pathway Plans have been improved to ensure young people are fully involved in them which helps to make these plans functioning documents. She spoke of how Durham is proud of the work ethos shown by young people and colleagues in DurhamWorks and the Corporate Management Team recognise this and are working to explore more opportunities for care leavers.

The Panel noted that one of the main challenges for care leavers is accommodation. Durham offers a wide range of accommodation including Staying Put, Staying Close, Supported Lodgings and semi-independent living, however, rates of pay can make it difficult for care leavers to access benefits therefore further work is being done to ensure that care leavers are not disadvantaged.

Colleagues in health are mindful that young people are developing their skills, as young adults, to recognise when they need to see a doctor and it is important that they are supported to reach out and access that help. Therefore they continue to ensure health services are open and accessible for young people.

The Strategic Manager stressed that young people are not being prepared for 'independence', instead, they are being prepared for adult-life and being supported to establish successful relationships with others.

The Panel noted that a group of young people has been established to review the action plan and rate the offer against the national offer. An update on the matter will be brought to the Panel in the new year.

Councillor Gunn thanked the Strategic Manager for the presentation and referred to hearing a national radio programme on the subject in which a care leaver commented that leaving care had been a 'frightening' experience. She commented that a successful and supportive transition can pave the way for the quality of a care leaver's life which highlights the importance of a successful strategy. Councillor Gunn expressed concern that actions require funding which is becoming more and more difficult whilst budgets are squeezed, not only locally but nationally.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12. Any other business

Councillor Gunn requested that consideration be given to starting the Panel meetings slightly later, at 9.45 am, to avoid traffic congestion.

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 Head of Children's Social Care presented the monthly Regulation 44 Visits and regulatory body ratings report (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.