

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 28 January 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons in the Chair

Members of the Panel:

Councillors Adcock-Foster, Bainbridge, Charlton, Coult, Deinali, Griffiths, Gunn, Henderson, Hunt, Roberts, Robson, Rooney, Townsend, Varty and Walton

Co-opted Members:

C Baines and J Bell

Also Present:

Stephen Crass – Progression Coordinator

Helen Fergusson - Head of Children's Social Care

Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children, and Caitlyn Gray from the Children in Care Council

Heather McFarlane - Designated Nurse, Safeguarding and Looked After Children

Alison Middleton – Solicitor, Childcare Team

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 Councillors Bell, Fletcher, Hood and Miller, Co-opted Members Alison Ferguson and Wendy Taylor and from officers Kelsey Clayton, Jodie Henderson and Claire Morris.

2. Substitute Members

No substitute Members were in attendance.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. The Senior Partnerships Officer reported the following matters arising:

- Item 6 - An email of thanks had been sent to Selwyn Morgans, Anne Haigh and Claire Morris in recognition of the good Ofsted inspection findings in respect of Aycliffe Centre and High Etherley and Framwellgate Moor Children's Homes.
- Item 8 - The language document had been circulated to the Panel for information and six-monthly updates on the use of language had been added to the future work programme.
- Item 9 - Family Time location pictures, before and after, had been shared with Councillor Miller. The Communications team had increased media coverage relating to positive news stories of the care experience and the promotion of fostering. The charity fundraising link which had been shared with the Panel had succeeded in reaching the target.
- Item 11 - The Care Leavers' Hub will be launched in February, to which the Chair, Vice-Chair and Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People had been invited.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5. Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Children's Social Care updated the Panel that the number of children looked after stood at 929 which was a slight increase on the previous figure, however, figures over recent months remained fairly stable.

6. Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children was pleased to report that Aycliffe Secure Centre had retained its outstanding rating at the Ofsted inspection in November, a rating held since 2019. The inspection found warm and supportive relationships exist between the young people and staff and extremely effective partnership working takes place within the Centre. The inspectors commented that managers dealt with the challenges of the pandemic diligently and effectively which ensured the care, wellbeing and safety of the young people had not been compromised. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children informed the Panel that a press release had been issued which also included information on the plans for the new transition unit at the Centre which had benefited from DfE funding.

The Head of Children's Social Care updated the Panel on the good Ofsted outcomes for Coxhoe, Framwellgate Moor and High Etherley children's homes. Feedback from inspectors acknowledged the high quality relationships between staff and young people and, in particular, the inspectors commented on the quality of the rooms which had been designed by the young people.

The Panel heard that following a recent recruitment drive, several new managers had been appointed and further developments in the pipeline include new deputy manager roles within each home. Further information on these developments will be presented to the Panel in the future.

The Chair congratulated all those involved.

Councillor Gunn remarked on the excellent work carried out at Aycliffe Centre in extremely challenging times. Referring to the transition unit, she commented that she was looking forward to seeing this project progress and she referred to the amount of work that had been carried out in order to secure DfE funding. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children acknowledged that this had been a complicated piece of work which began in 2019 and he agreed it was pleasing to see that a funding package is now in place. He thanked the previous and present Portfolio Holders for Children and Young People for their support.

Councillor Gunn commented that she was pleased that the recent staff recruitment drive had been successful and she asked if further information was available on the impact of the fostering recruitment campaign and whether the service had given consideration to a television marketing campaign. The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that a television advert for Durham's Fostering Service was being produced and it was expected to be aired for two weeks, one week in February and one week in May. In another new initiative, the display boards in the grounds of County Hall will be utilised to support the fostering campaign. Feedback on the impact of these initiatives will be shared with the Panel in due course.

The Head of Children's Social Care was pleased to report that this year will see the return of the annual Foster Carer Awards ceremony and the event, which Members will be invited to, is planned for early March.

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the increasing digital presence via social media platforms and Members were provided with marketing materials which support specific fostering campaigns including children with disabilities and special needs, teenagers, unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and larger sibling groups.

In response to a question from Councillor Hunt as to whether Aycliffe Centre had returned to pre-Covid levels, the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children explained that staffing issues were being carefully monitored in light of the new COVID-19 variant and plans were being developed to review the reopening of the fifth home in March.

Councillor Varty spoke of how she was pleased to be part of the Fostering Panel which had given her the opportunity to witness the fantastic work carried out by foster carers and officers. The Chair echoed Councillor Varty's comments on the valuable work and congratulated all those involved in the work.

7. Proud moments

The Head of Children's Social Care shared stories that had made the service proud in recent months. The first story related to a project by young people at New Lea Children's Home. The young people were aware of a 'toilet-twinning' project and they secured £100 of donations for a toilet for a family in Afghanistan. The Head of Children's Social Care thanked the young people for their proactive work to help children living in more difficult circumstances and also thanked those who kindly donated.

The Panel also heard of a young person who is preparing to move into supported living arrangements and how she had been reflecting on the past whilst preparing for the future. She had commented that she feels loved and prepared for the next phase of her life, knowing that her family will continue to support her, just as they had done throughout the years. Her carers spoke of how proud they are of her and how they are pleased to see such a positive outcome for this young person.

The Head of Children's Social Care concluded by thanking the Chair for donating a 'corporate grandparent' gift of hand-knitted baby clothes which would be donated to a Care Leaver who had recently become a mother. The Head of Children's Social Care thanked the Chair for the kind gesture.

8. Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update

Robert Johnson (IIC Project Manager) and Caitlyn Gray (CiCC representative) presented an update of the work of the CiCC since the previous meeting in November (for copy of presentation see file of minutes), including the following:

- Caitlyn reported that she had recently been appointed Head of the Children in Care Council.
- Referring to the Artstops project, twelve care experienced young people now have their art displayed in bus stops. Additional funding had enabled a wellbeing café to be held on Monday evenings at the Sjovell Centre and the young people are developing self-portraits. Durham County Council's Chief Executive is investigating further opportunities to develop the project as it has proved such a big success and Councillor Miller's request to extend the project into his electoral division is progressing.

- Two young people had been involved in delivering training to Sunderland University Social Work students, reflecting on their care experience, the support they had received and areas for improvement. The young people received excellent feedback and one of the young people is interested in undertaking similar work with the Fostering Panel.
- The young people are continuing their work on care plans and the use of language.
- The younger members of the CiCC are looking at identity and how they are viewed as individuals in a project called 'All About Me'. They hope to present this work to the Panel in the future.
- Caitlyn gave a big 'thank you' to Laura and Steph who are coordinating the celebration of Care Day this year and the young people are arranging a separate event to take place in April, to which the Panel Members will be invited.
- The CiCC is working with Newcastle University Street Law project, where 'Street Law Ambassadors' work with youth groups and schools to deliver sessions on legal policies and procedures which affect young people.
- One young person who had been particularly committed to working with the police and had participated in training sessions with the police had used the experience and positive feedback she gained from this work to help secure a full time job.
- A further peer mentoring session is being planned to be held during February half term and the CiCC would like Members to attend the session to offer their support, as the wider group members have expressed that they would like the opportunity to spend more time getting to know Panel Members.
- The sixth edition of the CiCC will be circulated to the Panel.

Councillor Hunt congratulated Caitlyn on her promotion and, referring to the artwork, asked how copies may be purchased. The Project Manager advised that Members wishing to purchase copies from the artist could do by contacting him.

Councillor Walton echoed Councillor Hunt's congratulations to Caitlyn and thanked her for informing the young people about the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel. She added that the Panel will welcome the opportunity to attend their events. Referring to the success of the Artstops project she asked how the young people involved in the project felt about having their artwork displayed. Caitlyn responded that they had been thrilled to see their art on display and for some it had provided a boost to their confidence.

Councillor Townsend commented on Caitlyn's commitment and leadership adding that she should be proud of the work she is doing to help and encourage others.

She spoke of how much she had enjoyed the recent event she had attended and reiterated Councillor Walton's comments that Members will be keen to attend future events.

Councillor Gunn added her thanks and congratulations to Caitlyn and spoke of how she is proud of all the work that Caitlyn and the young people are carrying out. She suggested that in the future, the young people may wish to consider linking up with Durham's Police and Crime Commissioner as there would be much to be gained from this partnership.

Referring to the fostering marketing campaign, Heather McFarlane, Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and Looked After Children suggested that the artwork could be featured in future television adverts. The Head of Children's Social Care responded that this suggestion would be considered in the future.

Councillor Coult asked whether digital copies of the artwork were available. The Head of Inclusion and Vulnerable Children responded that digital images were available and the details would be recirculated to the Panel.

The Senior Partnerships Officer informed the Panel that a full list of dates of future events would be compiled and circulated to Members, with the Artstops information and the CiCC newsletter.

9. Virtual School Annual Report Summary

The Head of the Virtual school presented the Virtual School Annual Report for 2020-21 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the report covered the Academic Year from September 2020 to July 2021. The Head of the Virtual School explained that as of July 2021 there were 573 Durham Looked After Children of statutory school age, up to the age of 16 and the work of the Virtual School extends post-16, to provide a smooth transition. Some young people attend schools outside of the County due to care arrangements or specific needs, however, this does not disadvantage them as they have access to the same support as those attending schools within the County.

The Head of the Virtual School highlighted that 61% of young people attended a school rated by Ofsted as good or better and explained that some schools had not been inspected since 2018 and that some had recently converted to an academy therefore their current Ofsted rating was unavailable. The Virtual School places extra scrutiny on schools which are rated as 'requires improvement' or below, to ensure that the young people within the school are well supported. The need for stability is a key consideration therefore a child who is settled and happy in a school would be moved only for safeguarding reasons.

The Virtual School Head referred to the 49% of Durham children looked after who had an identified special need and provided information on the strategies in place to support these children.

The Panel noted difficulties in reporting attendance over the last academic year, due to Covid measures and school closures, with overall attendance for children looked after being 89.3%. As the cohort fell into the group required to continue to attend school, if carers felt it necessary for their children to stay at home, this was classed as unauthorised absence. However, attendance for the autumn term for the current academic year was 93% which reflected that, under normal circumstances, children looked after have good school attendance. The Panel noted there had been no permanent exclusions since 2014.

The Panel heard that the COVID-19 pandemic had also impacted upon assessments and exams with no Key Stage 1 or 2 results available and outcomes for Year 11 students being based on teacher assessed grades. The Panel noted the 2020 -2021 cohort achieved well.

The Virtual School Head outlined areas for development which include to continue to raise awareness of early trauma on behaviours and learning and to work with the Children in Care Council, school governors and designated teachers to ensure a consistent approach. The Virtual School Head stressed the importance of stability within the school setting as, in cases where placements break down, school may be the only stability in a young person's life.

The Panel noted Durham had been selected as part of a pilot scheme to receive Pupil Premium Plus funding to support Care Leavers attending further education colleges.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10. Supporting Care Leavers into Education, Employment and Training

The Committee received a report on the support available to Care Leavers to enable them to progress into Education, Employment and Training presented by Stephen Crass, Progression Co-ordinator (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Progression Co-ordinator outlined the wide range of support available including:

- the DurhamWorks programme, which assists Care Leavers to progress into and remain in education, employment and training;

- the new DurhamWorks Programme for Schools and other transition support from year 11, to post 16 learning;
- the DurhamEnable supported employment scheme for Care Leavers aged over 18 with learning, physical or mental health barriers;
- support for Care Leavers through Durham County Council's Pathway for Young People, including a new sessional employment programme, opportunities to access paid work experience, ring fenced apprenticeships and guaranteed interviews for those who meet the essential criteria of advertised posts;
- the Government's Kickstart scheme which assists young people whose employment prospects have been negatively affected by Covid through providing employment for 6 months for those claiming Universal Credit;
- the establishment of youth hubs in Stanley and Peterlee and the plans to launch a hub in Bishop Auckland;
- Durham County Council's involvement in the six month Pupil Premium Plus scheme, and the 'Keep in College' £20 weekly incentive payment for Care Leavers who achieve over 80% authorised attendance.

The report also presented performance data and provided information on future priorities including maximising the new European Social Fund programmes being delivered through DurhamWorks to ensure Care Leavers continue to benefit from these opportunities.

The Progression Co-ordinator answered questions and comments as follows.

Councillor Walton observed that some of the programmes had been successfully adapted to continue throughout the pandemic and asked if there were plans to continue the new ways of working. The Progression Co-ordinator responded that the hybrid approach will continue as it had led to stronger links with the young people and their wider support group.

Councillor Walton commented that she was pleased to see increasing opportunities for Care Leavers within the Council and referring to the recent briefing sessions for tier 4/5 managers with regard to the role of the corporate parent, Councillor Walton asked why managers required additional training to feel more confident in this regard. The Progression Co-ordinator explained that some managers had requested additional support when dealing with complex issues and as a result, managers now have points of contact if they require assistance.

Councillor Deinali referred to those young people who are continuing in education after the age of 19 in order to achieve basic skills and asked what financial support in respect of living costs is available to these young people who may not be eligible to access the benefit system. The Progression Co-ordinator explained that funding is available through the Government's adult education funding stream and financial support is offered through DurhamWorks up to age of 25. Further information on support with living costs would be circulated to the Panel following the meeting.

Councillor Gunn thanked the officer for the comprehensive report and commented that DurhamWorks had been hugely successful adding that she was pleased to hear about the new DurhamWorks Programme for Schools. Noting that DurhamWorks is European Union funded, she asked how hopeful the service is for the future of these projects. The Progression Co-ordinator responded that the current programme is funded until the end of December 2023, however, the Youth Futures Fund is not European Union funded and DurhamWorks Futures may extend beyond December 2023. It is hoped that the positive impact of the current DurhamWorks programme will stand it in good stead in terms of future bids for the UK Prosperity Fund.

Councillor Coult referred to the lack of data in respect of those aged 19-21 who were classed as 'not known' and queried what more could be done to obtain this information. The Progression Co-ordinator replied that he would endeavour to obtain and circulate recent data published by the DfE. He pointed out that there are difficulties in gathering data on those within the 19-21 age group as they may be less inclined to inform on their whereabouts.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11. Performance Update

The Panel received an update on performance, for information, which included caseload breakdown as requested at the November meeting (for copy of report see file of minutes).

12. Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership Update

The Panel received the Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership (DSCP) Annual Report, for information (for copy of report see file of minutes).

13. Any other business

A selection of Fostering Service marketing materials were displayed, and Members were encouraged to take these and share them within their communities, to encourage people to enquire about fostering if this was something they were considering.

14. 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.

15. Regulation 44 Visits

The Panel considered a report of the Head of Children's Social Care and Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children which provided an update on Regulation 44 visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Children's Residential Homes (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.