

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2** on **Friday 25 March 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, B Bainbridge, J Charlton, B Coult, S Deinali, J Griffiths, O Gunn, C Hood, L Hovvels (substituting for Councillor Miller), I Roberts, K Rooney, S Townsend, C Varty and M Walton

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, A Ferguson, C Gray, L Joseph and W Taylor

Also Present:

Laura Armstrong – Professional Practice Manager
Laura Counce - Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources
Robert Johnson - Project Manager (Investing in Children) and Caitlyn and Luke of the Children in Care Council
Melanie King - Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
Kate Lonsdale – Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
Melanie Stubbs - Virtual School Head
Stephen Tracey - Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager
Jayne Watson - Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bell, Henderson, Miller, Robson and from co-opted member, Chris Baines.

Apologies were also received from officers K Clayton, H Fergusson, J Henderson and M Stenton.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor L Hovvels was in attendance for Councillor J Miller.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 February 2022 were agreed 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 Senior Partnerships Officer reported that the number of children looked after stood at 983. As reported at the previous meeting, recent changes to caselaw had resulted in delays to adoption proceedings and included within the figure of 983 were 30 young people who had been placed for adoption and were in suitable accommodation, awaiting Adoption Orders.

6 Ofsted Updates

No Ofsted inspections had taken place within the period.

7 Proud Moments

The Head of the Virtual School presented this month's proud moments, commenting on a year 11 student with an Education Health and Care Plan who had moved to the south of the country to access specialist provision. The young person had produced an outstanding piece of descriptive writing, expressing their thoughts and feelings about their new surroundings which had provoked an emotional response from staff, who were so impressed that they sent a message to the young person to congratulate their good work.

Another proud moment reported by the Head of the Virtual School was the story of a young person that she had first supported during their transition into year 7. The two met again several years later when the Head went to her first meeting of the Children in Care Council. She was delighted to report how well this young person had developed and she was touched to hear the young person acknowledge how valuable the support from the Virtual School had been to them.

Members congratulated the young people and discussed how important it is to showcase pieces of work such as the one described and retain them for posterity. Suggestions included that, with the young people's consent, work could be sent to the Poet Laureate, displayed in the new History Centre and young people's hubs and published in books or digitally through platforms such as Amazon. It was also suggested that the Council could encourage writing and poetry through competitions. Councillor Hovvels highlighted the value of incorporating young people's work into Durham County Council's marketing campaigns.

Councillor Gunn referred to innovative ways that communities have found during the pandemic to share art and literature such as using disused bus shelters as libraries and she added that this may be another avenue to consider. She spoke of the importance of consulting the young people on how they would like their work to be shared. Robert Johnson, Project Manager from Investing in Children referred to the success of the Artstop initiative and he added the Children in Care Council would welcome opportunities to explore similar projects with the Council. Melanie Stubbs, Head of the Virtual School and Laura Armstrong, Professional Practice Manager agreed to consider these suggestions for a further discussion to be held at a future Panel meeting.

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

Robert Johnson, Project Manager for Investing in Children and Caitlyn and Luke of the Children in Care Council delivered a presentation which focused on recent activities by the Children in Care Council (for copy of presentation see file of minutes). The update included:

- a workshop was held during half term to create a mural for the Full Circle team's new meeting room which is planned to be opened in July;
- the young people are developing a brothers and sisters film to raise awareness of how being separated from siblings can have a long-term impact and how to increase opportunities for sibling groups that do not live together, to be together;
- ten Education Fun Fund applications were successful during the period;
- funding for an additional Artstop project has been secured;
- a CiCC member had been a keynote speaker at a police event;
- a foster care training review had taken place and it is hoped that Corporate Parenting Members will be invited to see how the young people deliver foster care training in the future;
- The CiCC encouraged Members to gain an insight into the challenges faced by young people when their placement breaks down;
- the young people shared a proud moment about a young person who had initially been reluctant to participate in meetings, however, they had grown in confidence and now take an active role in group sessions and they have met with law students from Newcastle University to discuss care proceedings.

The Panel congratulated the young people on their work and Councillor Gunn spoke of the value of the information that is provided by the young people from their direct, lived experiences of being cared for.

She referred to the young people's concerns regarding placement stability and the separation of siblings and how these issues become very real when they are raised by the young people themselves. Referring to the successful Education Fun Fund applications she commented it was pleasing to see the young people's input into how the funding is allocated.

Picking up on the challenges of placement stability, Laura Caunce, Strategic Manager for Looked After Children Resources informed Members that a deep-dive analysis is underway into the issue, which is due to complete in April.

Laura Armstrong, Professional Practice Manager, remarked that the young people were underestimating their achievements and she explained that in addition to all the work they had previously described, they had also assisted to organise five events for Care Day and spoken at the Foster Carer Awards ceremony. The Professional Practice Manager took the opportunity to thank Members for their support at these events.

The Project Manager for Investing in Children paid tribute to a young person who had experienced a turbulent time recently, however, despite this, the young person had found the strength to honour a commitment to speak at a conference and the Project Manager spoke of how proud he was of the way this young person had shown great empathy for others.

Councillor Walton referred to the foster carer training review and spoke highly of the training delivered by the young people of the Children in Care Council saying their training sends powerful messages and has an enormous impact.

Members commented that they would like to see the film the young people are developing to raise awareness of sibling groups, to learn more about how they can support the young people in these situations.

The Chair thanked Rob, Caitlyn and Luke for their valuable contribution to the meeting.

9 Performance Update Quarter 3

The Panel received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided an overview of performance in relation to children looked after and care leavers (for copy of report and presentation see file).

Stephen Tracey, Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager delivered the presentation highlighting key areas of performance.

He explained the trend prior to the pandemic was a steady increase in the total number of looked after children. Since then, numbers increased due to delays in legal proceedings which had led to more young people staying in care.

In terms of composition, the number of children coming into care under the age of 1 had decreased whilst there had been an increase in the number of young people entering care over the age of 16. The total number of children looked after is higher than the national average but remains below regional and statistical neighbours. In terms of placements, the number of young people placed in external residential care had increased. The number of children placed outside of the county had increased slightly, however, the figure was below the national average. With regard to placement stability, the number of young people subject to three or more placement moves during a year had increased.

In response to a question from Councillor Coult, the Equality and Strategy Manager explained the decrease in the number of under 1s entering care and the increase in the number of young people aged 16 entering care, brings additional placement pressures. The increase in the number of looked after children placed in Secure Accommodation had seen a slight increase which was being monitored.

Councillor Walton expressed concern at the number of young people experiencing placement breakdowns with older children more likely to experience placement breakdown. She asked if this was an indication that increased support is required for foster carers, to help them manage the challenges posed by teenagers. The Strategic Manager for Children Looked After and Resources acknowledged the need to target resources into the training of foster carers to ensure they have support at the earliest stages to prepare them for the challenges ahead.

Councillor Gunn highlighted that the increase in the number of children subject to three or more placement moves in one year had been raised as an issue by the young people themselves. The Professional Practice Manager informed the Panel that her role includes to undertake a monthly audit of children coming into care, to investigate their individual circumstances.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Fostering Update

Councillors Walton and Simmons spoke of the success of the Foster Carer Awards ceremony which took place on 9 March, with the evening being very emotional for all those concerned and she thanked all those involved in arranging and hosting the event.

The Senior Partnerships Officer referred to the Mockingbird project to increase and retain foster carers saying the plans are progressing well and it is hoped that the project will be in progress by summer.

The Panel viewed the fostering advert currently being aired on television and noted a further advert is due to be aired in May. Councillor Townsend requested a link to download the advert on Members' social media pages, in order to increase the reach.

11 Annual Health Report

Alison Ferguson, Designated Nurse for Children Looked After presented the Annual Health Report and delivered a presentation highlighting key points (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Designated Nurse explained the statutory requirements, commissioning arrangements and achievements over the year. The Panel noted the introduction of exception reports which are used to identify reasons and target improvements, when statutory timeframes are not achieved. Challenges for the forthcoming year include the ongoing impact of Covid-19 and the increasing number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

Councillor Charlton asked how children looked after were prioritised for the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). The Designated Nurse explained that the initial contact takes place as soon as possible and it is usually by phone, however this depends upon the age of child. The presented need is then assessed by a team of professionals. Durham has commissioned the Full Circle service which has a suite of support available and the CAMHS service is introduced if there is an increased need. The Council also commissions bespoke packages of care as and when required. The Head of the Virtual School spoke of the strong links with the Full Circle which had undertaken training for designated teachers and it also provides a helpline available to schools every day until 3pm.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 Care Leavers' Hub

The Senior Partnerships Officer delivered a short presentation on the opening of the Care Leavers' Hub which took place on 28 February, attended by Councillors Simmons, Walton and Henderson. The Hub, which is located in Sherburn, is a multi-agency project which provides a safe space for care leavers. The project offers care leavers the opportunity to participate in structured group work, with a schedule of activities including a Sunday Lunch Club. The young people can also use the laundry and access support with other practical skills and job applications, in addition to spending time with friends.

The Chair commented on the impressive facilities and the range of support available. When asked if there was any other support the young people would like to see, the young people mentioned that they would like more support with travel costs to attend interviews and medical appointments.

The Panel expressed concern that care leavers had raised transport costs as an issue on several previous occasions. Councillor Gunn said how pleased she was to see this project come to fruition and emphasised how important accessibility will be to the project's success. She expressed her concern that there was more work to be done with regard to providing assistance with travel costs and commented that a corporate parent's aspirations for children looked after should be exactly the same as all parent's aspirations for their own child, adding that they should be respected and their independence should be promoted.

Councillor Charlton asked whether there was scope to offer assistance through the Link2 bus service. Councillor Hovvells pointed out that priority is given to members of the public with health or mobility issues and she added her support for more assistance with travel costs and urged the Panel to make representations for policy change. Councillor Deinali referred to the Council's recent allocation of £2 million of savings for short term support to bus services in County Durham and questioned whether some of that money could have been allocated to provide concessionary travel for young people, in addition to supporting bus services.

13 Virtual School Sub-Group Proposals

Members discussed and agreed a proposal to allocate two of the four vacant co-opted member positions on the Corporate Parenting Panel to representatives from a maintained nursery provision and post-16 education and these representatives would also sit on the Virtual Sub-School Sub Group.

14 Any other business

The Senior Partnerships Officer reported the following items of other business.

Feedback from the joint Children in Care Council and Corporate Parenting Panel meeting which took place in October, at which the themes of family time, support for care leavers and prejudice and discrimination, will be presented at the next joint meeting. Priorities for 2022-23 will be set at the meeting with the Children in Care Council which will be held on 12 May.

15 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.

16 Regulation 44 visits and Regulatory Body ratings of Children's Residential Homes

The Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources presented the Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings report (for copy see file of minutes).

The Panel commended staff of the children's residential homes and Aycliffe Secure Centre on their good work to maintain business as usual in exceptional circumstances throughout the pandemic and during the recovery.

Resolved:

That the report be received.