

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on Friday 20 May 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, T Henderson, C Hood, C Hunt, B Kellett (for Councillor C Fletcher), K Rooney, S Townsend, C Varty and M Walton

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, L Joseph, W Taylor and R Upton

Also Present:

Laura Armstrong – Professional Practice Manager

Laura Caunce - Strategic Manager for Children Looked After Resources

Paula Gibbons – Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast

Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children

Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children

Melanie Stubbs - Virtual School Head

Jayne Watson - Senior Partnerships Officer

Julian Wilson – Senior Lawyer, Children and Adult Services

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fletcher, Miller and Robson, from co-opted member Caitlyn Gray and from officers Helen Fergusson and Jodie Henderson.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Kellett was in attendance for Councillor Fletcher.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The following matters arising were reported.

Item 7 – A poster relating to unaccompanied asylum seeking children had been circulated to the Panel, by email.

Item 8 – In response to the request from Councillor Miller, it was reported that the Art Stops project is being progressed at Wheatley Hill.

Item 9 – The young person, whose poem was read out by Caitlyn, intends to do some further work on the piece and the updated version will be shared with the Panel.

Item 11 – The issue of transport will be explored further and it will be included in the Annual Report 2022-23.

Item 12 – The Panel will be advised of the arrangements for the MASH visit which will take place during the summer.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Adopt Coast to Coast

The Panel received a report and presentation delivered by Paula Gibbons, Head of Adopt Coast to Coast which provided an update on activity of the Durham spoke of the Regional Adoption Agency, during the first year of operation from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Head of Service was pleased to report positive performance during the year, with Durham having a 19% conversion rate, from enquiry to approval and a total of 36 applications were in progress at 1 April 2022. The Panel noted that marketing activity had focused on embedding the brand and the Head of Service informed the Panel as to how they could provide support by following the service on Facebook and by bringing Adopt Coast to Coast into the conversation. Concluding the presentation, the Head of Service explained the priorities for 2022-23, including specific marketing campaigns for sibling groups and young people with additional health and / or developmental needs. The Head of Adopt Coast to Coast responded to questions and comments as follows.

- In response to an observation from the Panel that the percentage figure for the number of same-sex couples appeared low, the Head of Service pointed out that whilst the percentage figure appeared to be low, the number of same-sex couple adopters was increasing, which reflects the national trend.

The Head of Service referred to recent social media activity which aims to dispel the misconception that same-sex couples cannot adopt.

- In terms of developing the market activity, the Panel referred to the importance of reaching out to communities through partnership working such as police and community partnerships, Area Action Partnerships and town and parish councils. The Head of Service responded that community engagement will be increasingly important in the future as the opportunities for engagement return to normal, following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Head of Service clarified there were approximately 30 children with placement orders currently awaiting adoption and, as all adoption agencies use different methods of conversion, no accurate data was available as to how the region's conversion rate compares nationally. The Head of Service spoke of her intention to raise the issue of benchmarking at the next leader's group meeting.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

6 Number of Children Looked After

Martyn Stenton, Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children reported the number of looked after children stood at 986, representing a slight decrease on the figure of 989 reported in April. The figure included 30 young people for whom the court process had been delayed due to changes in case law.

7 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children reported that an Ofsted inspection of Children's Services took place between 9-20 May. A report is expected at the beginning of July and feedback will be shared with the Panel in due course.

8 Number of Foster Care Households in 2022/23

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children provided an update on the number of foster care households, informing the Panel that 29 new foster care households had been recruited and 22 foster care households had left the service which provided a net increase of 7 households.

The Panel received information on recruitment activity taking place which aims to reach the target of 35 new households, with specific marketing campaigns in respect of disabled young people, sibling groups and unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The Panel will be provided with an update on the impact of the campaigns in the autumn.

Members discussed ways in which they could assist with recruitment, including leafleting households within Members' respective electoral divisions, local shops, businesses and community buildings. Members commented that it would be useful to have information as to how many new foster carers were being recruited and from which areas, which could help to gauge whether leafleting was having an effect. Members were asked to inform the service when they are leafleting in order that data can be gathered. Members wishing to obtain marketing leaflets were asked to inform the Senior Partnerships Officer.

In response to a question from the Panel as to the amount of pop-ups on social media by private adoption agencies, the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children clarified that private agencies pay to advertise and he added that the service is exploring IT solutions in order to maximise the reach.

The Panel asked whether marketing information could be disseminated to families through school bag-drops and the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children responded that whilst this method would not be considered appropriate, the service was ensuring that positive messages are provided through schools.

9 Proud Moments

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children paid tribute to a young person who gone to great lengths to ensure the facilities at the Care Leaver's Hub were at their best for the visit by the Ofsted inspectors. The Service Manager spoke of how proud he was that the young person had acted of their own volition to ensure the inspectors received a warm welcome.

Laura Caunce, Service Manager for Children and Young People's Services, spoke of her pride at a young person who had made a concerted effort to engage in employment after initially showing some reluctance. The young person had secured voluntary work in retail which led to the opportunity to study for level 2 in retail and the young person is now looking forward to a positive future.

The Panel thanked the Chair for her gift of hand-knitted baby clothes for children looked after.

10 Children in Care Council Update

Robert Johnson and Luke Joseph provided an update on the work of the Children in Care Council during April (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

It was reported that the Art Stops project is continuing, through the Art and Wellbeing Café. Luke brought along a banner which the young people had produced and he explained the young people are taking it to events and asking participants to contribute to it by adding inspirational comments, quotes and sketches. Panel Members added their contributions.

The young people are continuing to be involved in the refurbishment of family time rooms and they are also becoming involved in interviews for Family Time Workers.

During the month, Durham's Children in Care Council hosted the North East Regional Care Council and one of the young people had met with the judges of Durham 2025 City of Culture bid, to share ideas. Representatives met with the Chief Executive and discussed issues including support for young people impacted by domestic abuse and foster care training.

Younger group members shared ideas for the development of a strategy by County Durham Partnership regarding growing up in County Durham. They are also continuing their work on the 'All About Me' project to develop profiles to help to familiarise themselves with the adults in their circle of care.

The older group reviewed the Corporate Parenting Panel annual report and provided feedback on updates set against the priorities for 2021-22 and both the younger and older groups were involved in setting priority areas for the future. The Senior Partnerships Officer updated the Panel that, at the joint meeting held on 12 May, the young people said they would like the issue of family time to be carried forward for additional work and they suggested personalised care and staff in children's homes and foster care should be topics for the future. The suggestions will be discussed to identify three key priority areas for focus in the annual report.

Robert Johnson, Project Manager, Investing in Children complimented the young people who had facilitated the meeting with Ofsted inspectors and he spoke of one young person with learning difficulties who had shown great courage and with peer support had been able to participate in the meeting.

The Members commented on how much they gain from the joint events and highlighted how moved they are by the stories the young people share. In particular, Members commented that the young people made it clear how much they value honesty from the adults around them.

Members also discussed how they can be of benefit to the young people and commented that they may have skills that they could help the young people to develop for example arts, craft and writing skills. The Chair spoke of how she was heartened that the young people had been fascinated to know what teenage life was like for her and Members suggested that this theme could be developed further, by the Members, who could bring photographs and items from their childhood along to events to share with the young people.

Members also noted the young people's views regarding the use of language. Laura Armstrong, Professional Practice Manager, explained the writing procedure 'Language That Cares' pledged the Council's commitment to using clear language to enable children, young people and families to understand what is being said and written. Panel Members commented that it would be useful to be provided with a refresh on the preferred terminology.

The Panel spoke of their concern when hearing of one young person who had been subject to a large number of changes of social worker within a relatively short period of time and that this was of particular concern as the matter had the subject of a scrutiny review. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children responded that the service is in a better position in terms of staffing and stability and the quarterly performance update would provide further information.

11 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.

12 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).

Resolved:

That the report be received.