

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 24 June 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, J Charlton, B Coult, S Deinali, C Fletcher, J Griffiths, C Hood, C Hunt, B Kellett (substitute for Cllr C Varty), L Mavin (substitute for Councillor Simmons), I Roberts, K Robson and S Townsend

Co-opted Members:

Caitlyn Gray, Sarah Neale, Wendy Taylor and Karen Watson

Also Present:

Laura Counce – Service Manager for Children and Young People
Helen Fergusson – Head of Children’s Social Care
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Robert Johnson - Project Manager, Investing in Children
Jamie Paddock – Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Stephen Tracey – Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager
Jac Tyler – Strategic Manager, Children and Families
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Bell, I Cochrane, O Gunn, T Henderson, C Rooney, M Simmons, A Sterling and C Varty.

Apologies were also noted from co-opted member Luke Joseph and officers Laura Armstrong and Jodie Henderson.

2 Substitute Members

Councillors B Kellett and L Mavin were in attendance for Councillors C Varty and M Simmons respectively.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Chair reported the following matters arising.

- Calendar invites had been sent to Members for the visit to MASH in July.
- Further marketing materials had been supplied to Members and the impact of fostering campaigns and the suggestions for fostering promotion through parish / town councils and AAPs will be addressed at the September Panel meeting.
- The current Children in Care Council newsletter had been circulated and an update on the use of language was to be provided later in the meeting.
- It was noted that data relating to social worker stability is not collated as part of the key performance indicators, however, this would be addressed within the performance update.
- Consideration is being given to arranging further joint events with the Children in Care Council and Members were asked to give thought to forthcoming events in their own division that would be suitable for the young people to be invited to.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Number of Children Looked After

The Head of Children's Social Care reported the number of children looked after was 988 which included 25 young people whose plans for adoption had been affected by court delays as a result of the Somerset ruling and those plans were progressing.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care updated the Panel that the outcomes of the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services and the inspection of Framwellgate Moor Children's Home will be shared upon publication of the reports in July.

7 Proud Moments

The Head of Children's Social Care was pleased to inform the Panel of a ringing endorsement of the quality of care provided by a new foster care couple, which had been received from a Children's Guardian. The Guardian praised the new foster carers saying they had the competence of foster carers with years of experience, adding that their warmth, attention and child-centred home environment had led to a significant positive change for the children in their care.

The Panel agreed to consider agenda item 9 as the next item of business.

8 Language that Cares

The Panel received an update on the work done throughout the service to ensure the language used in speech and writing can be understood by children and young people. The Panel noted the 'Language that Cares' document is undergoing a refresh with the help of young people and the revised document will be shared with the Panel in due course. The use of plain English is also encouraged through workforce development and ClearCut communication training.

The Service Improvement Manager spoke of how the messages from the young people are respected by partners and health colleagues and she spoke of a recent Children in Care Council meeting which was attended by two health professionals who were keen to gather the young people's views, to inform the language used in health reviews. The Service Improvement Manager highlighted the increase in requests from young people wishing to access their case files and spoke of the stark contrast in the language used in historical files, some of which would be regarded as inappropriate in contemporary times. Members heard that work had taken place with young people to improve their understanding of accessing their records and the matter had also been addressed in training for social workers, to encourage them to be mindful of language used and the impact this may have on those reading their case notes in years to come. The Service Improvement Manager commented on how she was pleased to see practitioners were writing with insight and compassion, for example, in the form of a letter to the young person.

The Service Manager for Children and Young People described the circumstances of a young person who was extremely apprehensive about moving from their children's home into adult provision. The young person had kept a daily diary which included details of a heart warming conversation between the young person and their key worker.

The diary entry spoke directly to the young person's level of understanding, using language which showed empathy to reassure the young person that they would be fully supported on their journey into adulthood.

The Head of the Virtual School explained that all Virtual School staff are required to use the ClearCut tool to assess each young person's level of understanding and establish whether a child requires specialist support from other agencies. Members heard that the Virtual School works closely with the Children in Care Council and representatives from the Children in Care Council attended a designated teacher network meeting and led a group entitled 'We are no different', with their views being fed back to all teaching staff. The young people had also been engaged to help to improve their understanding of personal education plans and had been involved in the production of the Children Looked After Policy.

The Panel formed groups and discussed the use of the words 'bossy', 'demanding', 'oppositional' and talkative and considered alternative words that could be used in order to take a more positive, supportive approach.

9 Children in Care Council

The Panel received a presentation from Caitlyn of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) on activity during May (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Within the presentation, Caitlyn highlighted that a member of the CiCC was shortlisted for the CORAM Voices Creative Writing Competition and a link was provided for Members to view further details. Also during May, the young people hosted their own Care Day which was a great success, promoting positivity and providing the opportunity for the young people to showcase their poems, art and photography.

Caitlyn reported that the Artstops project is continuing and an increasing number of young people are joining the project. Members praised the work of the young people and expressed interest in purchasing prints. The Project Manager for Investing in Children replied that consideration is being given to making digital prints available and to exhibiting the work in the future. Members expressed support for exhibiting the work and a suggestion was made that prints could be displayed in community health centres and rehabilitation centres, to inspire and encourage others. The Head of the Virtual School suggested the designs could be made into postcards, to be used by practitioners when sending 'thank you' or 'good luck' cards and it was suggested that the Project Manager for Investing in Children could look to progress this.

Another event that took place during May was a meeting with Ofsted inspectors facilitated by the young people, at which they shared details of the work they have undertaken with Durham County Council. Caitlyn spoke of how much the young people enjoyed the meeting and how they are looking forward to receiving feedback from Ofsted in July.

The young people also met with Corporate Parenting Panel representatives to discuss future actions and they discussed how important it is that they are familiar with the workers in their circle of care. The young people had developed aids such as 'One of Me' and 'Top Trumps', to share information about their likes and dislikes, hobbies etc with their carers, in order to get to know each other better. The Service Manager for Children and Young People commented on the consideration being given to the recruitment of children's home staff and how this could be more home-specific and how the young people resident in children's homes could become more involved in recruitment processes for the staff in their homes.

10 Performance Update

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager presented performance for the final quarter of 2021-22 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

It was reported that 982 young people were in care at the end of the quarter which represented an increase on the same period last year. Whilst the number of children becoming looked after had returned to pre-COVID levels, a reduction in the number of children leaving care was reported, with delays to adoption proceedings. Placement stability had been impacted by older children being more susceptible to placement breakdowns. Referring to the 35% increase in the number of 14-17 year olds, the Strategy Manager explained the figure reflected the number of young people staying in care for longer.

In response to an observation that only 60% of children in care were undergoing an Initial Health Assessment within the target of 20 working days of the young person becoming looked after, the Panel noted that the paediatric team had suffered particularly badly from Covid related sickness absence, which had been unexpected and led to clinic delays. It was clarified that a number of health assessments were falling short of the target by only one or two days and the Head of Children's Social Care explained the assessment process requires consent from the person/s with parental responsibility which may be a cause of delay. Karen Watson, Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children informed the Panel that staffing levels had returned to normal and catch-up clinics were being held.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

11 Pre-Birth Service Update

The Panel received a report and presentation from the Strategic Manager for Children and Families on the Pre-Birth Intervention Service (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Service Manager delivered the presentation and provided additional information, responding to questions and comments. The Panel noted that new criteria implemented in May 2021 aims to target intervention towards those parents who will benefit from intensive support and the criteria includes care leavers resident in County Durham up to the age of 25 and where the unborn baby meets the requirement for a statutory pre-birth assessment. The Strategic Manager explained that statutory pre-birth assessments are required where there are child in need or safeguarding concerns in respect of an unborn baby.

The Service Manager presented a breakdown of the current cohort, highlighting the early intervention, as referrals must be made prior to 21 weeks gestation. Members received information on the nature of the intensive intervention which includes emotional and practical support and specialist support through a network of multi-agency professionals. The officer explained practitioners visit expectant mothers two to three times per week and the programme works with both parents, with fathers-to-be included in the process.

The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted the positive progress made, as observed in the reduction in the percentage of under 1s looked after start rate, which reduced from 29% in 2020 to 24% in 2021.

The Strategic Manager also reported on the Pause service in Durham which has secured funding to in-source the service, with plans to integrate it with the pre-birth intervention service. The Strategic Manager explained the service offers women support to 'pause' in order to break the cycle of repeated pregnancies, in circumstances which have resulted in children being removed from their care.

Referring to the Pause programme, the Panel observed that a total of 83 children had been removed from the care of 21 women and asked how this figure compared nationally. The Strategic Manager responded that the figure was comparable to the national average, with each woman having approximately 3 or 4 children removed at the point of Pause intervention.

Highlighting the case studies, Members acknowledged the value of the work of the teams within the Families First Service to ensure the best outcomes and asked that their thanks be passed to staff.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

12 Any other business

The Chair asked members if they would benefit from a refresher session of the CPP training, now that they are settled into their roles. The Panel agreed that this would be beneficial and details of the training will be circulated in due course. The Chair asked members to let Jayne Watson know of any particular topics they would like to be focused on, in the session.

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 Panel considered the monthly report on Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings of children's residential homes (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be received.