

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 25 November 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-chair), R Adcock-Forster, B Coult, S Deinali, O Gunn, T Henderson, B Kellett, J Miller, K Robson, K Rooney and S Townsend

Co-opted Members:

Billie-Leigh, J Gamble, Luke and W Taylor

Also Present:

Laura Counce - Service Manager, Children and Young People
Sharon Davey - Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Jodie Henderson – Practice Lead, Children and Young People
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Lee Peacock - Participation and Engagement Officer
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 C Bell, J Charlton, J Griffiths, C Hunt, A Reed, A Sterling and Co-opted Members, J Bell, C Brown, S Neale and R Woods.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor A Bell was in attendance, substituting for Councillor A Reed.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 October were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. Matters arising from the last meeting included the following:

- a discussion on Regulation 44 matters would be held in the private part of the meeting;

- the newly appointed Head of Children's Social Care, Rachel Farnham will take up her post in the new year;
- the Chair and Vice-Chair are looking into the possibility of creating a pooled budget, to support future projects.

4 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Number of Children Looked After and Care Leavers

Martyn Stenton, Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children informed the Panel that the number of children in care had reduced slightly from 1034 last month to 1028 this month and the figure included 44 children placed for adoption, 30 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and 228 care leavers.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children updated the Panel on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection of Aycliffe Secure Centre which was graded 'good' overall.

The inspection found education and learning is good, the young people are provided with good help and protection, leadership and management is effective and health is outstanding. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children read an extract from the report which praised the interaction between the staff and young people, how the staff help the young people to manage their feelings and the way staff work together, to encourage young people to make progress and celebrate their achievements. Ofsted found the health team to be excellent and commended the way practitioners encourage the young people to look after their health. The Panel noted the inspection covered activity over the past 17 months, during the gradual return to normal following the pandemic, and acknowledged the inspection framework could not take that into account. The Panel recognised the outcome of the inspection should be considered within the full context of the post-covid period and praised the continued hard work and commitment of the staff and young people at the centre.

Laura Counce, Service Manager, informed the Panel that a number of compliance notices had been issued in respect of Newton Drive Children's Home which had been judged inadequate in August. As a result, an action plan had been put in place. A monitoring visit by Ofsted held in October found that 4 of the 6 compliance notices issued had been met.

One of the notices could not be met as no further admissions had taken place and the outstanding notice related to a training exercise which was taking place that day. The Panel would be updated on the outcome of the full inspection in due course.

The outcome of the full inspection of Coxhoe Children's Home was good overall, findings included that the young people are provided with good help and protection and outstanding leadership and management.

During the period, a further two full inspections took place and information on those would be shared with the Panel on publication of the reports.

7 Proud Moments

The Practice Lead for Children and Young People, Jodie Henderson, read a letter from a care experienced young person to their social worker, which provided testament to their special relationship. The 'thank you' letter gave a very moving account of how much the social worker meant to the young person, who thanked the social worker for their selflessness, thoughtfulness, patience and empathy. The young person explained how these qualities had helped them to feel safe enough to have hope for the future, to take each day as it comes and had ultimately changed their life for the better. The young person concluded the letter by saying they hoped they had made their social worker proud. The Practice Lead spoke of the positive impact of these words from the young person and how much the social worker valued the sentiments.

8 Children in Care Council Update

Billie-Leigh and Luke delivered a presentation on the dangers of talking to strangers, a subject which had been raised by young people at a recent Children in Care Council meeting (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Billie-Leigh and Luke spoke of the somewhat contradictory messages given to young people who are warned of the dangers of talking to strangers, however, children looked after are often expected to engage and share information with adults who they may not be familiar with. Billie-Leigh and Luke reported that the young people feel very passionately that all children and young people should feel safe and they highlighted that there may be occasions when young people do not feel safe in their home and may need to discuss issues with a person outside the home. Therefore, to align with 'Signs of Safety' week Billie-Leigh and Luke asked for the Panel's support to expand the work.

They suggested it would be useful to launch a campaign similar to the national 'Ask for Angela' campaign which enables people to discreetly seek help by using a phrase to indicate that they require help with their situation.

Billie-Leigh recited a poem she wrote for the Signs of Safety conference, which was based on the thoughts of the young people of the Children in Care Council about the everyday objects and moments which give them comfort and make them feel safe. The poem resonated with Panel members and they praised Billie-Leigh's use of evocative imagery.

The Panel expressed support for further work to be undertaken, in addition to the signs of safety work already being carried out through the wider partnership. The Panel suggested that safety messages should be shared in local communities through joint working with parish and town councils, Area Action Partnerships and voluntary organisations. Acknowledging that the work must reflect the voices of the young people, the Panel requested that the Senior Partnerships Officer look into arranging a meeting to discuss how to progress the work.

Councillors Walton, Coult, Gunn, Townsend, Miller and Adcock-Forster indicated that they would like to be involved in the project, as it progresses.

9 Update on progress against themes from CiCC / CPP Joint Meeting

The Practice Lead provided the Panel with a progress update on priority areas identified by the Children in Care Council in May, as themes for focus over a six-month period. The key priority areas identified included staffing in children's homes and foster care, family time and personalised care.

The Panel noted work has continued with regard to the recruitment and training of children's home staff and foster carers, including exploring ways that young people can become more engaged in the recruitment work.

Referring to Family Time, the Panel heard that as a young person moves into the Children Looked After service, family time may take place on a less structured basis. It is recognised that not all young people are the same and some young people feel more comfortable in a more structured setting and the aim is to ensue the best fit for every young person. In response to a question from the Panel, with regard to the timeframe for the new Family Time formats to be put in place, the Practice Manager highlighted that as all sessions will be managed with the young people in a different way, it is difficult to set a specific timescale, however, it is hoped that the changes will be in place within the next six months.

Improvements to personalised care aim to ensure young people are fully engaged in their pathway plans and work is being carried out to develop a scrutiny panel of care experienced young people whose experience can provide an insight into how to drive improvements.

10 Language Update

The Panel noted the Council's commitment to children, young people and their families to use straightforward and family friendly language as outlined in the 'Language That Cares' document. The Panel formed groups to discuss words and phrases that may have negative connotations, including 'intervention', 'challenging behaviour' and 'placement'.

Members observed that 'intervention' implies an action that is being forced upon a person. Officers commented that 'intervention' is often used in education settings, to describe additional support provided and the Head of the Virtual School suggested practitioners should be encouraged to use the word 'support' as an alternative, where appropriate.

The Panel commented that the term 'challenging behaviour' implies both parties in the interaction are finding the situation difficult and it may be the case that professionals dealing with young people who they describe as having 'challenging behaviour' may need additional training. Officers explained that in some cases, a young person's behaviour is their language, for example, when a young person is distressed or confused, they may display this through their behaviour as in some situations it can be the only way they can communicate their feelings. In a similar way, a young person who refuses to engage or is unable to engage at all may also be described as 'challenging'. The Panel noted that 'challenge' can often lead to positive change such as the challenge provided by the Children in Care Council.

The Panel discussed the term 'moving placement', commenting that it was impersonal, implying the subject is an object rather than a person. Luke referred to all the hard work done by practitioners with regard to matching profiles to find young people their perfect home and he expressed the view that using the term 'moving placement' did not do the process justice. Billie-Leigh added that for her, the phrase 'moving placement' conjured up an image of being part of a production line.

The Panel recognised that in some contexts professional terms are appropriate and expected, however children and young people must be provided with information that they can understand and relate to and the 'Language That Cares' document is vital to the work.

11 Independent Reviewing Officer Update

The Panel received the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report for 2021-22 presented by Sharon Davey, Strategic Manager for Children Looked After and Permanence (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager explained the dual role of IROs to monitor care planning and ensure that the local authority's care plans are meeting the needs of children and young people. In addition, IROs chair child protection review conferences. The Strategic Manager highlighted that the timeliness of reviews had increased from 90% to 99% and that an Ofsted inspection held in May 2022 found that IROs know their children well and provide effective oversight of care plans. The Panel heard that IROs also chair disruption meetings for young people who have been in their placement for two years or more and who are moved in a managed way. The Strategic Manager highlighted the term 'disruption meeting' and questioned whether a more appropriate term could be found. Billie-Leigh suggested the meetings could be called 'new chapter meetings'.

The Strategic Manager spoke of the important work done with the Children in Care Council, including the production of the IRO animation video which explains the IRO service in a child-friendly way and the 'Mind of My Own' App which is used to gather meaningful feedback from children and young people.

The Panel heard that key priorities for the future include continued work with young people in respect of care planning the strengthening of the voice of children, young people and parents in the review process.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 Regulation 44 Visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Children's Residential Homes

The Service Manager for Children and Young People presented the monthly update on Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Panel discussed various issues relating to Regulation 44 visits.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.