

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 27 January** 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, J Griffiths, T Henderson, C Hunt, B Kellett, J Miller, A Reed, K Robson, K Rooney, A Sterling, S Townsend and C Varty.

Co-opted Members:

S Neale, Billie-Leigh, Luke and W Taylor.

Also Present:

Laura Counce – Service Manager for Children and Young People
Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care
Andrea Fletcher – Lawyer for Children, Adults and Health
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 Councillor J Charlton and from Co-opted Members J Bell, J Gamble and R Woods.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The following matters arising were reported:

- The alignment of elected members to children's homes in respect of Regulation 44 had been updated;
- Information had been circulated regarding the Care Leavers Challenge, however currently no members had indicated their participation. Members taking up the challenge were asked to inform Jayne Watson, Senior Partnerships Officer and Rob Johnson, Project Manager for Investing in Children;
- Information had been circulated to members in relation to Care Day which will take place in February;
- The initial 'Ask for Angela' meeting took place on 24 January, with IIC and leads from across the Council. It was agreed that the Project Manager for Investing in Children would meet with the young people to clarify their ask, which would then be followed up with relevant officers within the service and there will be further engagement with members when actions are agreed;
- Investigations are ongoing regarding the possibility of establishing a pooled budget from neighbourhood budgets, to support children and young people looked after and care leavers;
- The proposed date for the next joint CICC / CPP meeting was 27 April from 5:30 – 7:00 pm at the Sjovoll Centre. An invitation will be circulated to members.

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 total number of children looked after stood at 1,034 and, of those, there were 36 young people placed for adoption and 32 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. The number of care leavers stood at 293 which included 24 unaccompanied asylum seeking care leavers.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children informed the Panel that Ofsted recently carried out an unannounced assurance visit to Aycliffe Young People's Centre and further information would be provided in due course.

Laura Counce, Service Manager for Children and Young People was pleased to report that the recent Ofsted inspection of Newton Drive children's home judged the home good in all areas, with no recommendations.

Officers acknowledged the good outcome for Newton Drive was testament to the hard work carried out by managers and staff over recent months.

An assurance visit had also been carried out to Hickstead Rise children's home and members would be updated on the outcome as soon as possible.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

7 Proud Moments

Proud moments of the month were reported by the Service Manager for Children and Young People who shared examples of children and young people who were participating in their own decision making, understanding the positive and negative impacts of their choices, accepting responsibility for their actions and making good decisions as a consequence.

The Practice Lead for Children and Young People referred to Luke's commitment to supporting children looked after and care leavers in the work he does in addition to his contribution to the Corporate Parenting Panel and alongside his studies. The Practice Lead informed the Panel that Luke attends regular meetings with the Chief Executive to discuss what more the Council can do for young people in care and care leavers. The Panel commended Luke's commitment to championing the care community.

8 Children in Care Council Update

Billie-Leigh and Luke explained that under the Equality Act 2010 some characteristics are protected, therefore it is against the law to discriminate against a person because of these characteristics which include age, disability, pregnancy and religion. There are increasing moves for care experience to be recognised as a protected characteristic and Billie Leigh and Luke provided examples of local authorities throughout the country that have agreed to make care experience a protected characteristic. The young people of the Children in Care Council would therefore like Durham County Council to consider adopting care experience as a protected characteristic.

The Head of Children's Social Care requested that she and the Practice Lead for Children and Young People meet with the young people to discuss the processes which would be required to have the proposal formally considered by the Council.

Members spoke in support of the proposal and highlighted the good work done by the young people to bring the matter to the Panel's attention.

The Project Manager for Investing in Children commented that Luke and Billie-Leigh are shining examples of how committed the young people are and he encouraged members to attend the Care Day event on 18 February, as they will meet many more young people who share the same passion and who are planning some exciting activities for the day.

9 Language Update

The Panel discussed words and phrases posed by the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children, in order to consider whether their use was appropriate for children and young people and to suggest alternative words and phrases. The words and phrases considered were 'designated teacher', 'PEP Plan' (Personal Education Plan) and 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Officers highlighted that many words and phrases are used in line with statutory guidance. The Head of the Virtual School referred to work done in response to discussions on language held with young people, for example, a leaflet was designed with young people to help younger children understand the PEP process and how the young people's views had influenced policymaking.

Members referred to the increasing use of acronyms and abbreviations and suggested they should be avoided and, when they are required to be used, definitions should be included.

10 Virtual School Annual Report Summary

The Head of the Virtual School, Melanie Stubbs, presented a report and delivered a presentation which provided a summary of the Virtual School's annual report for 2021-22 (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the report focused on children and young people of statutory school age and that, at July 2022 there were 676 Durham children looked after of statutory school age, 47.5% of whom were of primary school age and 52.5% were secondary school age. The majority (80.3%) attended County Durham schools. The Head of the Virtual School explained that wherever possible children and young people are placed in schools which have Ofsted ratings of good or better and approximately 70% of the children attended a school with an Ofsted rating of good or better.

Information was provided on provision for those with special educational needs and education, health and care plans and the number of school moves.

The Panel noted that in 2021-22 there had been a decrease in the number of school moves of 52% from the previous year and good attendance rates were reported with overall attendance for the whole children looked after cohort being 92%. The presentation included graphs showing examination results with a return to formal examinations after the Covid-19 period at Key Stage 4. Despite the challenges, most of the young people performed in line, in the basics, when compared to the last formal examinations in 2019.

Actions for the future include the continued support for children and young people in the key transition years, ensuring the appropriate curriculum pathway for each child. Work will be further developed with the SEND team, the Full Circle therapeutic team and colleagues in health and social work teams and with the Children in Care Council. Work will also continue to increase the awareness of the impact of early trauma.

Councillor Walton referred to the dip in performance at Key Stage 2 and asked if there were any indications to show the situation is improving. The Virtual School Head confirmed that she will be holding meetings in the near future to monitor progress and pupil premium plus monies will be made available if additional support is necessary.

Councillor Coult highlighted that the number of children looked after continues to rise and asked what action is being taken to ensure there is sufficient provision. The Head of the Virtual School responded that statutory guidance recommends that in respect of school admission, the highest priority is given to children looked after and those previously looked after and there is an increasing amount of work being done to support special and mainstream schools with their offer.

Councillor Miller was pleased to see the support mechanisms in place for the mental health needs of children and young people. He referred to those not in education, employment and training and asked what options are promoted as alternatives to continuing in education. Councillor Miller also observed that the data presented emphasised performance by gender and he asked why it was necessary to do so. The Virtual School Head clarified that it was a requirement that the data includes a break-down by gender in order that historical trends can be monitored, which have traditionally seen boys outperforming girls in maths and girls outperforming boys in English. Further information on the offer for those not in education, employment and training would be provided later in the meeting.

Members commented on the good work by staff and young people who were working hard to achieve their goals.

Councillor Hunt referred to a lack of information available for kinship carers with regard to pupil premium plus monies. The Virtual School Head replied that schools must be notified before the October census to enable the funds to be allocated to the school budget for the following April and she agreed to discuss the matter with Councillor Hunt after the meeting.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

11 Supporting Care Experienced Young People into Education, Employment and Training

Helen Radcliffe, Strategic Lead for Progression and Learning presented an update on the support available to care experienced young people to enable them to progress into education, employment or training (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Summarising the report, the Strategic Lead updated the Panel on various programmes to support children in care and care leavers for their successful progression into post-16 learning. She explained that the DurhamWorks Programme for schools had worked with 157 young people since 2020 through a range of support including mentoring, careers guidance and employability skills. This year had seen a New Workplaces project to help young people with additional vulnerabilities to gain experience of work environments in order to make entering the workplace a less daunting prospect.

DurhamWorks, DurhamWorks 3 and DurhamWorks Futures programmes help those who need extra support to enter employment and to sustain it. Other programmes of support include the Sessional Employment Programme which enables care experienced young people to gain a paid work placement with Durham County Council. In addition, the pupil premium plus pilot for post 16 year olds provides a £20 per week incentive to attend a further education college. A bus pass scheme is also in place to assist those attending colleges in Durham.

The Strategic Lead for Progression and Learning pointed out the large cohort of care experienced young people and Durham's performance in respect of those aged 19-21 compared favourably both regionally and nationally.

In respect of those not known, the Strategic Lead confirmed that steps are taken to reach out to those young people adding that evidence had been observed that the Covid-19 pandemic had adversely impacted young people's mental health and levels of motivation.

The Panel noted that all Durham Works programmes are funded by the European Social Fund funded and that the funding will end in December. The service is therefore working hard to investigate other funding options.

The Strategic Lead agreed to discuss some specific issues with Councillor Varty after the meeting, with the Service Manager for Children and Young People.

Councillor Walton asked for assurance that Durham Council was doing all it could to maximise education, employment and training opportunities for care experienced young people. The Strategic Lead commented on the benefit of having a dedicated member of staff to focus on the Sessional Employment Programme and Pupil Premium Plus pilot scheme and the regular meetings held with officers of the Council to increase the support for young people. It was agreed that it would be helpful for the IIC to gather feedback from the young people themselves, to update the Panel at the next meeting.

Councillor Miller observed that the employment hubs are located in the larger towns and he expressed his concern that these would be inaccessible for young people in other locations of the county. The Strategic Lead explained that the employment hubs were developed by the Department for Work and Pensions during the Covid-19 pandemic and were focused on three main towns. She stressed that the Progression and Learning teams work in all areas of the county and staff travel throughout the county to visit young people and provide support where needed.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 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.

13 Quality and Safety Reviews – Response to the National Recommendation

The Practice Lead for Children and Young People presented a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

14 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 and agreed future reporting arrangements.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.