

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

10 March 2023

Reducing Parental Conflict in County Durham (Relationships Matter)



Report of John Pearce, Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CYP OSC) with an update on Durham's progress on the national Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme since CYP OSC's last report in February 2022.

Executive Summary

- 2 In 2018, the DWP launched the national 'Reducing Parental Conflict' Programme which Durham refers to as 'Relationships Matter'. Research found that children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can be negatively affected in the short and longer term. Local Authority (LA) areas were awarded grant funding to raise awareness and drive the RPC agenda across the wider partnership/system. The DWP Local Grant will continue to fund LA until 2025 subject to performance.
- 3 Durham has a well-established multi-agency RPC Working Group who drive the agenda and report directly to the Prevention and Early Help Partnership. Progress to date includes a significant number of practitioners and managers across the Early Help system being trained in RPC. The development of a graduated response from information, advice and guidance, self-help, digital tools including on-line parenting programmes to more specialist relationship support programmes such as 'Parenting When Separated' are all part of Durham's offer. Opportunities to strengthen joint working approaches to facilitate early identification of parental conflict is ongoing with midwifery colleagues and Durham Constabulary.

- 4 Durham's RPC Working Group agreed to use the DWP Local Grant to establish an Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) model which is a parent peer support model. Grounded in research and evidence base this would complement Durham's existing 'professional led' parenting offer and go some way in building resilience and capacity in communities but also increase engagement and help remove stigma in parents requesting and accepting help. Furthermore, the group identified priorities such as progressing the work already started relating to how effective we are as a system at engaging Dads/Male Carers in Family Support work which is integral when wanting to improve the co-parenting relationship. The group also wanted to explore how we could work more creatively and effectively with regional neighbours to deliver the agenda.
- 5 Embedding the RPC agenda is not without its challenge and there is a worry that thus far identification of parental conflict remains too high and is overlooked at a lower, universal level. As RPC is fundamental to the national Family Hub developments it is a real opportunity to knit the two agendas together and embed within the Best Start for Life universal offer. It is also a hope to increase uptake of the digital self-help parenting programme that is available as part of Durham's graduated response to parental conflict.
- 6 Priority areas for 2023 are to offer a flexible model of 'Parenting When Separated' (specialist intervention) to be more flexible, accessible and inclusive; further develop Durham's EPEC Hub; progress work to better engage Dad/Male Carers and work with regional neighbours to develop consistent messages and approaches.
- 7 In summary however, Durham has a vibrant partnership group driving the RPC agenda and has made good progress. There is an awareness of where we need to make improvements and we have a clear focus and drive to achieve these. All awarded funding to date has been utilised to progress Durham's RPC priorities.

Recommendation(s)

- 8 Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee are recommended to:
 - (a) Note the contents of the report and the progress of the development and implementation of Reducing Parental Conflict support in Count Durham.

Background

- 9 Parents play a critical role in giving children the experiences and skills they need to succeed. However, studies have found that children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can be negatively affected in the short and longer term. It can impact on children's mental health, their early emotional and social development, their educational attainment and employability, limiting their chances to lead fulfilling, happy lives.
- 10 The national research shows that in 2017-18, 12% of children in couple-parent families were living with at least one parent reporting relationship distress. Children living in workless families are 2 times more likely to experience parental conflict than in families where both parents are in work. Further research can be found at Early Intervention Foundation.
- 11 In 2018, the government launched the Reducing Parent Conflict (RPC) Programme, which aims to promote improved outcomes for children, with a focus on disadvantaged families.
- 12 The aims of the programme are to:
 - (a) increase awareness and understanding of the impact of parental conflict on children across all relevant organisations;
 - (b) develop further understanding among senior leaders and commissioners of local needs in relation to parental conflict;
 - (c) increase capacity in responding to parents/separated parents/expectant parents with relationship difficulties;
 - (d) up-skill the workforce to increase the confidence of staff to work proactively with parents around relationships; *and*
 - (e) improve support to parents using a range of digital platforms and media.
- 13 On commencement of the RPC Programme a multi-agency RPC Working Group was established in Durham to steer the agenda and provide governance and accountability of how funding was spent, how partners were performing and what impact this was having on reducing the impact of parental conflict on children and young people.
- 14 In March 2022, the specialist interventions which Durham and neighbouring authorities had as part of a Northeast Package, commissioned by Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), came to the end of its contract. However, in March 2022, the DWP announced a further 3-year extension of the national RPC Programme between (2022-25). LA areas were asked to apply for a new round of funding,

known as the RPC Local Grant, and using a Theory of Change model outline how they would further drive the RPC agenda in their area. Durham's multi-agency RPC Working Group identified the following priorities they wished to progress using Local Grant funding:

- (a) Establish an Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) Hub in Durham to deliver a range of parent/peer led parenting programmes
 - (b) Better engage Dads/Male Carers in Family Support
 - (c) Review Durham's public facing 'Relationships Matter' website with a view to developing an agreed Northeast regional digital platform
 - (d) Market and promote a range of parental conflict/relationships matter support materials to families and to practitioners from across the system including those in universal and targeted services
- 15 Subject to ongoing performance management by the DWP, Durham has been awarded £67,959.85 for 2022-23, £53,046.75 for 2023-24 and £53,198.93 for 2024-25. This offers a real opportunity for Durham to develop a graduated menu of relationship support to Durham families based on an i-THRIVE model.

Progress and Impact

- 16 As of January 2023, 625 practitioners have completed RPC Training which has evolved since 2019 and now incorporates training on the use of Digital Tools and One Plus One's 'How to Argue Better'. 507 practitioners and managers have attended Staff Briefing Sessions and 24 practitioners have been trained in the specialist intervention 'Parenting When Separated'. Durham chose to establish a 'Train the Trainer' model to help build a sustainable workforce development programme. The impact training has had on frontline practitioners can be evidenced. Post training evaluations report that practitioners/managers have an improved knowledge of RPC and improved confidence in talking to families about relationship quality and finding the right help. A small case audit (in 2021) supported these findings and found evidence in practitioner's recordings of parental conflict being discussed with parents/carers, and most importantly with children and young people. The audit is being repeated again in March 2023 using a regionally agreed auditing tool to help demonstrate the continued impact on practice from workforce development.
- 17 An additional Durham RPC E-Learning module is in development to contribute to our Workforce Development offer which is targeted at Schools and partners who may not directly deliver whole family support

but who play a crucial role in identifying Parental Conflict. This is due to be rolled out from April 2023.

- 18 Durham's current graduated model of support consists of a digital offer through a parent/carer developed 'Relationships Matter' website which hosts information, advice, guidance, top tips and 3 on-line Parenting Courses. Durham also purchased 'Getting on Better' cards which have been distributed to all Durham's expectant parents. Durham has a system-wide trained workforce in Reducing Parental Conflict and One Plus One's 'How to Argue Better' who can have open and honest conversations with parents, carers, children and young people about relationship quality and how to improve it. Durham also has the specialist intervention, 'Parenting When Separated' (Parents Plus), for parents who are separated/ considering separation and later in 2023 will be delivering, 'Being A Parent Together' which will be delivered by parents to parents (EPEC model) and is for parents who are together and experiencing relationship distress. Appendix 2 is a brief case study of two parents attending 'Parenting When Separated', names have been changed to protect identity.
- 19 By training the workforce on the importance of healthy relationships and educating them on the impact parental conflict has on children, we are ensuring that positive co-parenting is understood through practitioner assessments, is a key feature in Child and Family Plans and weaved within existing provision such as universal Health Needs Assessments, Expectant Parenting Packs, Young Parent Programme and a range of Parenting Programmes. This is in an attempt to remove stigma around the topic and therefore remove barriers to parents/carers receiving relationship support.
- 20 Durham is working closely with the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) to ensure parental conflict and relationship support is at the heart of Durham's Family Hub offer.
- 21 Durham is working closely with regional LAs and, where possible, collaboratively developing joint communications through an RPC Northeast (NE) Twitter page. A shared NE Relationships Matter webpage is in development to provide a single point for parent/carers, children and young people to access which will then direct them to their respective LA sites where they will find local support. This is also useful for partners who work cross-boundary who are signposting families.
- 22 It has been agreed for Durham's Young Parent Programme (YPP) to work with Changing Futures (CF) Northeast and, as part of a pilot, support young parents to work through any conflict with their co-parent or extended family members. This is to support them in being able to establish a positive Family Support Network in line with Durham's Signs

of Safety practice model. By helping young parents identify the most important people to them and by removing potential barriers to those individuals offering support to the young parent, this network will help empower and build family resilience. The pilot will commence in February 2023 and run for approximately 4-6 months. CF Northeast are in the process of applying to Challenge Fund to extend the pilot and will be notified of the outcome in the coming months.

- 23 During the course of the RPC Working Group a primary school 'Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) Learning Resource' was developed by one of Durham's Head Teachers and the LA's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Advisor, with an accompanying E-Learning Module. This was to help support schools in actively encouraging children and young people to discuss relationships and also establish a school culture to positively role model healthy relationships. Unfortunately, despite best efforts this has not 'landed' in schools. Feedback has been minimal and reflected a difficult time in schools currently, where other priorities, post Covid, have had to take priority. Where these resources have been used, schools have fed back that they found them useful, and they have raised awareness amongst all school staff. School colleagues have not felt they needed the lesson plans as their "bought in" PSHE curriculum schemes have covered healthy relationships and conflict for pupils. It is therefore being proposed, by the RPC Working Group, to develop a staff training session/workshop which will be recorded and can be used in a group or individual basis to support continued professional development. Plans are in their infancy, but it is hoped potential roll out would commence from September 2023.
- 24 As reported in Overview and Scrutiny's last RPC Briefing, Durham's 2021 RPC Community Engagement Commission's findings mirrored the national challenge of engaging Dads/Male Carers in relationship/co-parenting support. This was the catalyst for Durham in reviewing how, across the system, we can better engage Dads/Male Carers in all family support work.
- 25 Durham has made good progress and now has an established Dad/Males Project Group, developed a comprehensive and multi-faceted Project Plan and has 15 practitioners trained as 'Dads Champions'. In scope of the project is to recruit Durham Dads/Male Carers to form a 'reference group' which will help shape the services we offer to families that feel more inclusive to Dads/Male Carers. We are using DfE funded 'Behavioural Insights' Research that has been carried out with Durham Dads/Male Carers to ensure marketing and promotional materials are appealing and inclusive to all. Although in its infancy this group will influence Family Hub developments with RPC being an integral part of Durham's offer.

- 26 Durham's RPC Working Group continue to work closely with Durham Constabulary colleagues and are in the process of delivering refresher training to Neighbourhood Policing Teams in Parental Conflict to enable them to differentiate between Parental Conflict and Domestic Abuse more accurately. A pathway has been developed which aims to support the Police in identifying, reporting and connecting families to the right support, by the right service at the earliest opportunity.
- 27 In line with 'County Durham Together's' vision of building family and community resilience, from findings from Durham's Community Engagement Commission and using RPC Local Grant funding we have embarked on a peer parent support model called 'Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC). This model of parent peer delivery will complement Durham's existing Parent and Wellbeing Programme offer. An EPEC Coordinator has been appointed to establish an EPEC Hub (virtual) for Durham. The response from partners has been extremely positive and parent/carers are enthused by this new offer which is aimed at harnessing the skills of Durham's own Parent/Carers, empowering them as the experts in their own lives to support their peers. This also goes some way in trying to remove barriers and stigma attached to parent/carers seeking professional support or simply asking for help. 6 Train the Trainers (including 2 parents) and 4 Parent Group Leaders have completed training in 'Being A Parent'. 'Being A Parent' is a universal programme aimed at parents of 2-11 year olds. Durham's first tranche of delivery by parents to parents started mid-January 2023 and 20 parents are attending. This is extremely exciting for Durham and the next level of training in 'Being A Parent Together', which has a Parental Conflict theme, is in progress. This model will help strengthen the sustainability of relationship support for families in Durham at a community level. Appendix 3 provides quotes from Durham parents who which have trained as Parent Group Leaders (PGL) and from parents attending the course delivered by PGLs.

Challenges

- 28 Despite Durham making good progress in accordance with DWP expectations and performance (Management Information returns), the RPC Working Group do not feel that the RPC Agenda is 'landing' at a universal level and identification still remains at too higher level. Case discussions and referrals for support evidence that parental conflict is being identified when there is 'significant' conflict, albeit not domestic abuse, and could have been identified at a much earlier stage. To address this we are using the Family Hub agenda to refocus practitioners during their universal contact and support with families.
- 29 As part of Durham's graduated response, and at the request of parent/carers a suite of 3 x on-line parenting programmes were

commissioned to provide the 'self-help' offer that was being requested. Reports tell us that very few parents are accessing these. To address this, we have developed a specific briefing for practitioners on how to use the Digital Tools with families. Additionally, we are reviewing Durham's Relationships Matter Webpage where these are promoted, advertising in Early Help Newsletters and have plans to create a QR code resource for Health colleagues in the hope to increase uptake.

Future Plans

- 30 We intend to promote and build on the offer of 'Parenting When Separated' (PWS) by offering both a face to face option and a digital offer. This is what some families are asking for and would remove some barriers of transport and childcare. Many Dads/Male Carers have also said they would be able to engage in the programme after work, on an evening, therefore providing a more inclusive and accessible offer.
- 31 We intend to continue to support and develop relationship support using the RPC agenda in and through Family Hubs.
- 32 Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) requires significant time and investment to develop Durham's (virtual) EPEC Hub. Recruitment of parents to become 'Parent Group Leaders' (PGL) is critical as this is the premise of EPEC which is to deliver a peer support model. PGL's being trained in 'Being A Parent Together', which has an RPC focus, builds on the EPEC foundation module of 'Being A Parent'. This is a key priority as is integral to the Family Hub offer and also funded through the DWP Local Grant.
- 33 Durham will continue to work closely with regional neighbours to promote the importance of healthy parental relationships in a consistent and structured way to families and to partners. Shared learning and pooling of resources and ideas means collectively our approach to RPC is much more efficient and hopefully more impactful. The development of a shared regional digital platform is planned for April 2023 and will also provide the potential for future social media/radio campaigns at a regional level (subject to funding).
- 34 Engaging Dads and Male Carers will remain essential to the effective delivery of parental relationship support therefore progressing Durham's Dade/Male Carers Project Plan and applying the findings of the DfE funded Behavioural Insights research will also be a priority for 2023.

Conclusion

- 35 Research tells us that parental conflict can have significant, long term negative impact on a range of outcomes for children and young people. Removing stigma for families accessing relationships support is a

priority for partners in Durham. To date, Durham has progressed the national RPC Programme well and continues to embed relationship help through a graduated menu of support available to parent/carers, children and young people from digital, self-help tools through to specialist interventions. Durham's focus for 2023 is to establish the parent peer led model, EPEC and support, grow and nurture the lived experience of Durham's parent/carers. Durham will continue to work closely with regional neighbours to embed the importance of healthy co-parenting relationships on outcomes for children and young people.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications. The DWP Reducing Parental Conflict Programme is not mandated and DWP funding is paid in arrears to LAs on actual spend.

Finance

The Reducing Parental Conflict Programme is funded by the DWP. Durham is performance managed by the DWP through quarterly Management Information returns. Funding is paid in arrears to LAs on actual spend.

Consultation

None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Equality of opportunity for parents and carers to access Reducing Parental Conflict support.

Climate Change

None

Human Rights

Equal opportunities

Crime and Disorder

None

Staffing

None

Accommodation

None

Risk

None

Procurement

None

Appendix 2: Case study - Parenting when separated

(Names changed to protect identity)

Sarah (Residential Parent) Craig (Non – Residential Parent)

At the start of the programme, it was evident that the relationship between Sarah and Craig was acrimonious. Both spoke poorly of each other, and both were hurt by each other's actions, and believed that each other were in the wrong.

Moving into week 4 of the programme, Sarah has stated that she has begun sharing more information about the children with Craig as she knows that he is missing out on part of the week by not being there all the time. Sarah has been able to identify how Craig will be feeling by not being with the children all of the time.

Sarah has stated that they now know not to react and think the worst of each other. Sarah stated that she had an appointment so had asked Craig to collect the children a little later than agreed. Sarah stated that Craig was not happy with this and sent texts that he wanted to collect the children earlier instead. Craig and Sarah stated that generally this scenario would have ended with them arguing back and forth. They both said that they took a deep breath and politely agreed that Craig could collect the children early. They both recognised that this saved the children from seeing both parents angry, which would have escalated from text to face to face when the children were collected.

Craig and Sarah both report that already the children look more relaxed and happier when handing over for contact.

Appendix 3: Quotes From Durham Parents

The following are quotes from Durham parents who have been trained as Parent Group Leaders and delivering training to other Durham parents:

“The PGL training has helped me develop so many skills and I have a newfound confidence in myself. I was supported all the way through the training and the course was interactive and fun; it was the favourite part of my week!”

“I love that the EPEC course is delivered **by** parents **for** parents. The "being a parent" programme gives parents and carers a chance to come together and learn together in a non-judgemental environment. Absolutely everyone can learn something new and can take something valuable away from it...even if that is making a new or the realisation that you are not alone.”

“Great experience personally as a parent. It showed me how to deconstruct and use the clear simplistic parenting strategies that have been extremely useful, especially for moments we think we could handle in better ways. Continuous use has reduced miscommunication and has begun the process of understanding how they feel as individuals and as a family. We learnt to empower ourselves, our children, our family and our community”

The following are quotes from parents who are attending the ‘Being A Parent’ course which is facilitated by other Durham parents (Parent Group Leaders):

“Don’t feel pressured or like your being judged”

“I attend because it’s parents teaching us not professionals so different vibes”

“I learn something new each session”

“I learn from parents as everyone has kids so understands”

“I love talking to other parents”

“It’s a local, comfortable environment, ran by parents not ‘professionals’, friendly, kind, caring, understanding, very helpful and brilliant strategies”

“parents understand”

“I feel like a better parent already, listening to REAL parents”

“Couldn’t have chosen better people to run the course”

“It makes you feel more at home and not lie you’re being judged”

“Non-judgemental. Some things we do as Mams probably aren’t textbook, but others understand”

“makes you feel comfortable”