

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 17 February 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, J Charlton, B Coult, S Deinali, O Gunn, C Hunt, B Kellett, J Miller, A Reed, K Rooney, A Sterling, S Townsend and C Varty.

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, J Gamble, Luke, S Neale and W Taylor

Also Present:

Laura Counce – Service Manager for Children and Young People
Sharon Davey – Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Lindsey Herring – Project Manager, CYPS Accommodation
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
Emma Todd – Senior Marketing Officer
Sharon Walker – Lawyer
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cochrane, Griffiths and Henderson, from Co-opted Members Billie-Leigh and R Woods and from officers R Farnham and J Henderson.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The following matters arising were reported:

- following the previous discussion under proud moments, the Head of Children's Social Care is considering ways to thank young people for their contributions and to celebrate their achievements;
- the 'Ask for Angela' campaign and the request from the young people to have care experience adopted as a protected characteristic have been added to the work programme;
- the discussion on the employment opportunities available through Durham County Council was followed up with the Children in Care Council and the young people said they would welcome early discussions with practitioners regarding the opportunities available.

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 1,048 which included 36 young people placed for adoption, 30 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC) and 292 care leavers.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children updated the Panel in relation to recent Ofsted visits.

7 Proud Moments

This month's proud moment was reported by Rachel Harris, Service Improvement Manager who had met a young person who had previously been in the care of Durham County Council and who was now working as a Young Person's Advisor with plans to train as a Social Worker. She reported how well the the young person was progressing and how the young person spoke very positively of their care experience.

The Panel discussed whether there was more the Council could do in order to promote all the good work being done throughout the care community. Officers highlighted that achievements are celebrated though events such as Care Day and World Social Work Day and they are also included in the Corporate Parenting Panel annual reports.

The Senior Partnerships Officer informed the Panel that a strategy to transform children's social care had been published for consultation, in light of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

The Council will produce a coordinated response and progress updates will be brought to future Corporate Parenting Panel meetings.

The Panel asked that the link to the consultation be circulated to all elected members.

8 Children in Care Council Update

Luke delivered a presentation on Care Day which celebrates care experienced children and young people. Luke informed the Panel of some of the activities that would take place at the event, including an ideas area for young people to share their views on how to continue to improve the future for young people in care. The Panel also considered a letter from Investing in Children which sought support for a campaign highlighting the findings from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (for copy of presentation and letter see file of minutes).

A short film to promote the campaign was shown, entitled 'Don't Forget Us!' Billie Leigh was involved in developing the script for the film. The film raises awareness of the issues facing children in care and requests viewers to challenge negative attitudes and to lobby local MPs to prioritise the rights of children in care. The Children in Care Council requested the Panel's support to promote the film and to show the film in public areas of Council buildings. They also requested that consideration be given to showing the film at Lumiere 2023. Emma Todd, Senior Marketing Officer, agreed that a meeting should be arranged, outside of the Panel meeting, to discuss the various options available to promote the campaign.

Members discussed that the film should be shown in all schools and that it should be promoted as widely as possible within communities, ensuring that it reaches the smaller and more rural towns and villages. It was also agreed that the film should be shown at a meeting of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Panel discussed alternative routes into social work and the view was expressed that there may be many people who have the attributes to be a good Social Worker however their lack of a degree level education may be preventing them from coming forward.

In response to an observation from the Panel on the frequency of Social Worker change, officers highlighted that the issue is reviewed through regular performance monitoring. The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence explained that, following a restructure of the service in 2022, a change of Social Worker is no longer required when a young person reaches the age of 16.

The Strategic Manager emphasised that many changes are often planned and positive changes. In response to a question from the Panel as to how young people are engaged when change occurs, the Strategic Manager stated that tools such as the Signs of Safety practice model 'Words and Pictures' can be used to help to explain each step of a young person's journey. Officers commented that further information on planned and unplanned changes and alternative routes into social work could be provided at a future panel meeting.

During the discussion, the Panel also acknowledged the value that kinship carers bring to the service.

In response to the request from the young people to raise awareness through MPs, the Chair informed the Panel that a letter would be sent to local MPs on behalf of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

9 Participation and Engagement, Safeguarding and Professional Practice Service, Children's Social Care

Rachel Harris, Service Improvement Manager and Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer presented the Participation and Engagement, Safeguarding and Professional Practice Service report (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Service Improvement Manager explained that participation and engagement ensures young people and their families are involved in the development of the service and this approach enables practitioners to see matters from a service user's perspective. Information was provided on actions to strengthen the voices of children and young people, including the Mind of My Own app. The Panel noted that the Ofsted inspection in May 2022 highlighted the use of family feedback which is of benefit to inform practice. Audits show significant improvements have been achieved with regard to the use of language and the 'Language that Cares' guidance continues to be used in staff training and practice. The Service Improvement Manager referred to the value of the support provided by a care experienced youth support apprentice who works alongside the Participation and Engagement Officer.

The Panel noted that the participation and engagement work supports the work of the Children in Care Council and this is reciprocated by the Children in Care Council through their involvement in various consultation, training and participation groups.

The Service Improvement Manager outlined key priority areas for the future which include analysing learning from young people and their carers to identify suggested actions.

Work had commenced on improving access to personal records, following conversations with the young people and, in response to discussions at Corporate Parenting Panel meetings, plans are in place to develop a poetry book. Further work will be undertaken to support those young people who live outside the county, to ensure their voices are heard and plans are progressing to establish a care experienced scrutiny group, to further influence developments within children's social care.

The Panel welcomed the plans for the poetry book and requested that the book should be made available to all schools in due course.

In response to a question as to how the voices of children with special educational needs are captured, officers highlighted that they have a dedicated participation and engagement group and direct work is carried out by specialists within the Children with Disabilities team who have a range of tools at their disposal to capture the views of non-verbal children. The Participation and Engagement Officer added that he carries out work alongside the Children with Disabilities team to enhance the participation and engagement work. In addition, practitioners are offered 'Theraplay' training to better understand how to support relationships through play-based activities.

In response to a comment from the Panel as to how the service measures the success of the Mind of My Own app, the Service Improvement Manager pointed out the app is one of many communication tools, in addition to the direct work conducted by practitioners. She acknowledged that take-up of the app could be improved and that the situation was being monitored. She highlighted advantages of the app include that information from the app enables themes to be established and the app provides young people with the opportunity to write directly in their file.

Councillor Hunt requested an update on the work of the Adolescent Sexual Exploitation Team (ASET) and officers clarified the area is the remit of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, however information which had previously been presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in respect of the ASET work would be recirculated to Councillor Hunt.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

10 Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children Looked After and Care Leavers 2022-24

Lindsey Herring, Project Manager, presented the new Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for children looked after and care leavers. The Panel received a report and presentation which outlined the strategic approach to securing sufficient accommodation (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted the increased demand on councils to meet their sufficiency duty was highlighted in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. The Project Manager explained that the increasing number of children in care, including older teenagers and unaccompanied asylum seeking young people posed additional challenges for the service and had led to an increase in placement moves and the use of external residential provision.

The Project Manager outlined the strategy's six overarching objectives which include increasing the number of in-house foster carers and adopters, developing the children's home and accommodation offer, improving the offer for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASCs) and the short breaks offer for disabled children and their families. The report provided details of the work undertaken in collaboration with Investing in Children to ensure the young people play a role in shaping the services which have a direct impact upon them.

Referring to the objective to reduce the waiting times for UASCs, the Panel heard that Durham had received a larger proportion of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people than neighbouring authorities which had led to delays in the initial stages, however, the situation had resolved and there was confidence that Durham is well placed to receive these young people in a timely manner in the future. The Panel commented on the lack of information provided in the report on kinship care and the Project Manager agreed to take the comment back to the service for more detail on this to be included in future reports.

In response to a question from the Panel on the number of young people currently in unregulated provision, the Project Manager replied that, at present, there are 6 young people under the age of 16 in unregulated provision and the length of time that a young person typically spends in this type of provision varies according to individual needs. The Panel heard that unregulated provision is subject to weekly review meetings to ensure regular management oversight of all unregulated placements. Recognising that there is an increasing number of young people who benefit from smaller settings, Durham is currently developing its offer in respect of smaller children's homes and work is in progress to register two emergency children's homes in the near future.

In response to a comment from a Member who raised concern that the report stated it is usual for young people to move at least once whilst in care, officers clarified that a number of young people are supported to return home and this requires adjustment on behalf of the young person and their family, which may not be successful initially. Moves such as these may impact the figures. A clear plan is in place in terms of action moving forward in this area and additional support is being developed for wrap-around care arrangements.

The Panel asked whether any befriending arrangements were in place to help to welcome unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC). The Strategic Manager explained that work was underway to establish a dedicated team for UASC and she highlighted social inclusion opportunities through work with Investors in Children, the voluntary and community sector and access to Independent Visitors. In addition, the Mind of My Own app enables the young people to communicate with practitioners in their language, which is then translated. A Member pointed out that the culturally diverse nature of Universities may also provide social inclusion opportunities. Officers commented that further information on the services provided for UASC, including information on the number of UASC who had taken advantage of the Independent Visitor Service, could be provided at a future meeting.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11 Such other business

Members were reminded of the Care Day event taking place on Saturday 18 February 2023 at Framwellgate School. An invite had also been circulated for a Care Leavers' event at County Hall on Wednesday 22nd February which would feature a display of artwork produced by young people.

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 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).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.