

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 9 June 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, J Charlton, S Deinali, J Griffiths, C Hunt, L Mavin, J Miller, S Quinn, I Roberts, K Robson and C Varty.

Co-opted Members:

Billie-Leigh, J Gamble, Luke, S Neale and W Taylor

Also Present:

Laura Armstrong – Professional Practice Manager
Sharon Davey – Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence
Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care
Jodie Henderson – Practice Lead
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Helen McAloon – Strategy Team Leader
Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager for Children’s Homes
Martyn Stenton – Deputy Corporate Director, Children and Young People’s Services
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer
Julian Wilson – Lawyer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Henderson, McGaun, Reed, Rooney, Savory, Simmons and Townsend.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor B Coult was in attendance for Councillor K Rooney.

3 Minutes

With an amendment to include Councillor Charlton’s apologies, the minutes of the meeting held on 17 May 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Chair welcomed new members, appointed following the Annual Council meeting and thanked retiring members for their valuable input.

It was agreed that a refresher training session would be arranged to supplement the members' induction corporate parenting training. Members were asked to inform the Senior Partnerships Officer of any particular topics that they would like to be included in the training. It was agreed that the list of acronyms previously circulated should be recirculated, for the benefit of the new members.

4 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Number of Children Looked After and Care Leavers

The Head of Children's Social Care provided an update on the number of children looked after which stood at 1,082 including 34 children / young people placed for adoption and 288 care leavers. The national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) continues with 60 UASC children in care, 30 of whom are care leavers having UASC status. The number of UASC is expected to increase in the coming months, in line with Home Office targets.

6 Ofsted Updates

No new Ofsted inspections had taken place during the period. Officers were pleased to report that Maple House at Aycliffe Secure Centre is now open and will welcome its first residents imminently.

7 Proud Moments

Proud moments this month included a young person who had been absent from education, however, his attendance had improved since moving into the care of secure services. He has been developing his art skills and producing excellent work and he is proud that staff are pleased with the progress he has made. Members expressed that, with the young person's permission, they would like to see some examples of his work.

Jodie Henderson, Practice Lead, also spoke of good progress made by a young person who had previously had several missing from home incidents however, with the support of staff she is settling back into her home and she has returned to enjoying her hobbies.

A young person who has struggled with her self-esteem has been working with staff to improve her confidence and as a result, she is making plans to attend her school prom, wearing a bright red dress and being proud of the person she is.

Paul Rudd, Strategic Manager for Children's Homes spoke of how proud staff are of a young person who is moving on from her children's home into a 'staying close' tenancy. Staff are pleased at how well the young person is coping with the transition and how much she is looking forward to this new chapter of her life, knowing that she will have support of staff who are familiar to her, having cared for her for a number of years.

Members wished the young people well for the future and expressed how inspirational they are.

8 Children in Care Council Update

Luke and Billie-Leigh of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) delivered a presentation on recent activity (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Information reported included the following:

- Meetings had taken place with the Full Circle to discuss ideas for the re-opening of their premises and the production of child-friendly marketing materials. It was agreed that some photographs of the artwork on display in the new premises would be brought to a future meeting of the Panel.
- Both CiCC groups had met with the service manager of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) team to consider approaches with regard to progressing their work with the CiCC;
- Life map work is being carried out and the young people are developing a 'Know, What, When' booklet to provide a timeline of expectations and entitlements at key milestones;
- The Education Fun Fund is being accessed by UASCs;
- The CiCC Life Skills survey is underway to gather young people's views on life skills and savings;
- CiCC members met with Durham's Participation and Engagement Officer to review communication approaches;
- Members of the CiCC continue to play an important role in foster carer training sessions.

Members congratulated the young people for their efforts to identify gaps in knowledge and how they are striving to ensure that as many children looked after as possible, not only those who are members of the CiCC, are informed through initiatives such as 'Know, What, When'.

The Investing in Children (IIC) Project Manager explained that in terms of communicating the CiCC's participation and engagement approaches, the work is ongoing and includes examining how the CiCC reaches out to young people on all levels, for example through the CiCC website, 'Know What When' and the 'Mind of My Own' app.

Sharon Davey, Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence, referred to the videos produced in conjunction with the CiCC on topics including understanding the process of Children in Care Reviews and Child Protection Conferences and she explained that the service is looking to commission a promotional video on 'Know, What, When'. It was agreed that the suite of videos should be shared with all members of the Panel, for their information.

9 Performance Update

The Panel considered the Performance Update presented by Helen McAloon, Strategy Team Leader, which provided an overview of performance in relation to looked after children and care leavers during quarter four of the year, to the end of March 2023 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Information provided included the following points:

- The number of children in care continues to increase and Durham's rate of children in care remains higher than the national average but below regional and statistical neighbours. During the year, 465 children and young people became looked after and 373 left care.
- The composition of the children looked after cohort has seen a decrease in the number of under 1s entering care and an increase in the number of 1-4 year olds and adolescents entering care.
- 44% of social workers have caseloads of 25 or fewer cases.
- Performance in relation to review health assessments remains stable and there had been a reduction in the number of initial health assessments being carried out within 20 working days of entering care, however, performance has improved in respect of paperwork received within timescales.
- The provision of stable homes continues to be an ongoing focus for the service during the period and it was reported that 9% of children looked after had three or more homes during a year.
- Monitoring is taking place in respect of the increase in the number of children going missing from home which had increased from 10% to 14%.
- The provision of suitable accommodation has improved and those deemed not in suitable accommodation are in custody.

- The number of young people in education, employment and training is above benchmarks.

In response to a question from the Panel as to what is considered to be a manageable caseload for a social worker, the Practice Lead explained that it was difficult to quantify as figures do not take account of the complexity of cases therefore two social workers with the same amount of cases may have very different workloads.

The Panel raised concern regarding the increase in missing from home incidents and officers explained the work done with young people and their support networks, in order to prevent missing incidents, with a dedicated Missing from Home team in place. This includes the young person having access to an independent person with whom they can talk openly about their circumstances. The Panel heard that evidence suggests that over-reporting of missing incidents occurs and that children looked after may be disproportionately more likely to be reported missing. However, the safety of young people who are the subject of actual missing incidents is paramount and in some circumstances it may be necessary to put active disruption plans in place. The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted that analysis of the figures shows that a small cohort of young people are responsible for a high number of missing incidents and it was agreed that more detailed information will be included in future performance reports as to the number of missing incidents which are actual missing incidents as opposed to those which are less concerning, for example when a young person is reported missing because they have forgotten to let their carer know that they will be returning home later than usual. Further information on missing from home work will be brought to future Panel meetings as part of the work programme.

Members were pleased to see that a high number of care leavers are in education, employment and training and the Practice Lead remarked that whilst this was pleasing, there is always room for improvement. In response to a question regarding social work recruitment, officers replied that it continued to be a challenge. The Panel heard that assessments will be taking place to recruit 20 social work trainees and interest had exceeded all expectations, with over 400 applications received. The Council aims to increase social work capacity over the long-term and attracting experienced social workers is an ongoing issue which is reflected nationally, therefore Durham is aiming to 'grow its own'. On a positive note, it was reported that a number of experienced social workers have recently returned to the employ of Durham County Council.

Members of the Panel referred to the increase in the number of children looked after in Durham and asked how this compared regionally. The Head of Children's Social Care explained the number of children looked after has increased regionally and nationally over a number of years.

Durham's rate of children in care is the fifth lowest in the north east and the levels of deprivation in some parts of the county were identified as a contributing factor.

Councillor Deinali spoke of the success of the Pause programme and the reduction in the number of children under the age of 1 entering care and she asked whether any themes had been identified for the increase in the number of children aged 1-4 entering care. The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of the many reasons why children and young people become looked after, with the main reasons being abuse and neglect. The Practice Lead referred to observations of an increase in the number of adoptions where there had been a maternal history of substance misuse. As a result, this is being monitored.

Councillor Charlton asked what action is taken in respect of families who have multiple children taken into care. The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted that the work of the Pause programme had reduced the number of under 1s entering care by engaging with mothers who had multiple babies removed. The mothers are encouraged to take a pause and to access support in order to avoid repeating their behaviour.

Councillor Hunt asked whether the government's plans to tackle anti-social behaviour would lead to more young people entering care. Officers responded that whilst tackling anti-social behaviour is part of the wider work done to support families, very few children enter care due to their own behaviour.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

10 Annual Report on the Adoption Service

The Panel received the Annual Report on the Adoption Service 2022/2023 presented by Jodie Henderson, Practice Lead for Children and Young People's Services (for copy of report and presentation see file).

The Practice Lead delivered a presentation which provided information on the increased number of enquiries during the year and the positive feedback received in respect of the recruitment process and support available. The officer highlighted the success of activity days held with Coast to Coast partners to enable children and prospective adopters to meet and socialise.

The Panel heard that issues in relation to obtaining medical information had resulted in delays for some adopters and measures were therefore put in place to track and address the issue.

A particular focus during the year had been early permanence plans which aim to place children with foster carers who can become adopters at the earliest opportunity. An area of work which had seen an increase in volume and complexity had been step-parent adoption.

The Practice Lead explained that plans for the future include the aim to widen the membership of the Adoption Panel and she requested members to consider a position on the Panel, with those interested in gaining further information being asked to contact the Senior Partnerships Officer.

The Chair commented that it was pleasing to see the progress and she added that it would be useful for the Panel to have more information on the work carried out to identify future priorities. The Practice Lead acknowledged the comment and used the example of work carried out on timeliness to ensure that adoptions take place within the timeframe. The Practice Lead also suggested that it may be useful to align the presentation of the Annual Adoption report with the Coast to Coast report at future Panel meetings.

Resolved:

That the recommendation in the report be approved.

11 Progress report on Children Looked After in the Virtual School: Update for Autumn and Spring Term

The Panel received a progress report on children looked after in the virtual school for the autumn and spring terms (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Sarah Blenkinsopp, Virtual School Manager, presented the update which covered the period from September 2022 to April 2023. The Panel received information on the profile of the cohort which stands at 726 children looked after of statutory school age, with slightly more in secondary education (53.5%) than in primary education (46.5%). 21% of the young people are supported by an EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan). It was reported that Durham's children looked after are performing better than the national average in terms of attendance. There is some evidence of Covid-19 related anxiety particularly in young people within years 9 to 11 and support is provided for these young people through their cares and within schools.

One permanent exclusion had taken place since 2022 and the Panel heard that all alternatives to exclusion are explored. The casework team have been challenging schools to ensure the PEP (Personal Education Plan) sign off period is actioned within a ten day window and there has been recent improvement from the autumn term when only 79.9% were rated as green to 85.3% in spring, indicating the challenge had a positive impact.

The Virtual School Manager also provided details of the key priorities for 2022-23 which include developing the work with foster carers, supporting children looked after with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and working with the Full Circle to raise awareness in schools of the impact of trauma.

In response to a question from a Panel member as to the circumstances that had led to the exclusion, the officer explained that the decision to exclude the young person was taken in their best interests as it had not been possible for the pupil to return to the school. The young person is currently being educated at the Pupil Referral Unit with support from the Virtual School.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

12 Any other business

Members were invited to attend the Foster Carer Awards ceremony to be held on 13 June at the Gala Theatre and those wishing to attend were asked to register by using the link previously circulated.

Councillor Varty spoke of her disappointment that it had been necessary to defer some of the decisions at a recent fostering panel due to delays with the paperwork. The Head of Children's Social Care agreed to follow-up the matter, to prevent a recurrence in the future.

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

The Panel received a presentation from the Strategic Manager for Children's Homes on Children's Homes Regulation 44 recommendations (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the presentation be noted.