

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 26 January 2024** at **9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor M Simmons (Chair)**

### **Members of the Panel:**

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, S Deinali, B Kellett, S Quinn, K Rooney, A Savory, S Townsend and C Varty

### **Co-opted Members:**

J Bell, Billie-Leigh, J Gamble, Luke and W Taylor

### **Also Present:**

Sharon Davey – Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence

Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager

Anne Haigh – Aycliffe Secure Services Centre Manager

Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children

Michelle Nicholson – Maple House Manager

Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer

Helen Radcliffe – Strategic Manager, Progression and Learning

Martyn Stenton – Deputy Director of Children’s Services

Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School

Bernadette Toomey - Practice Lead, Children & Young People’s Services

Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

## **1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton, J Griffiths, T Henderson, C Hunt, L Mavin, A Reed, K Robson, M Wilson and Co-Opted member Fiona Tweddle.

## **2 Substitute Members**

No substitute members were in attendance.

## **3 Minutes**

With an amendment to the minutes of the meeting held on 15 December 2023 to add Councillor M Wilson’s name to the attendees, the minutes were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Under matters arising, it was reported that an update on Christmas cards had been received from Demi and Zoe who had advised that the maximum number of Christmas cards they could produce was one hundred cards. The Senior Partnership Officer advised she will send an email to Members to check who would like to place an order.

#### **4 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **5 Number of Children in our Care and Care Leavers**

The Deputy Director of Children's Services reported that the figure for children in our care remained the same as last month at 1,202, including 22 young people placed for adoption, 80 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and 327 care leavers.

#### **6 Ofsted Updates**

The Panel noted the findings of the Ofsted visit on 14 and 15 November 2023 which focused on the Care Leavers' Service. An event was held to celebrate the successful visit and publication of the report, on 12 January.

The Practice Lead for the Children and Young Peoples Service, Bernadette Toomey, shared her reflections of the visit. She reported that Ofsted were impressed at the Council's response to young people transitioning from care and they recognised that the voice of young people is not only heard but that young people have meaningful collaboration. Quoting from the report, the Practice Lead highlighted that Ofsted found the voice of care experienced young people to be 'central to decision making'. Ofsted also recognised the commitment from practitioners to strive to do the best for young people to achieve their ambitions. Relationships between young people and their Young People's Advisers were considered to be strong and trusting and Ofsted acknowledged the importance of the links with partners and the wider care community.

The quality of written supervision records was an area highlighted for further improvement and the service was addressing the issue, to ensure all supervision records represent the breadth and depth of conversations.

Luke and Billie-Leigh commented that the experience of meeting the Ofsted inspectors had shown the young people how important their views are in helping to help shape the services of the future.

They spoke of how heart-warming the celebration event had been and they thanked Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer, for arranging such a fantastic event at short notice.

Billie-Leigh also shared a touching poem with the Corporate Parenting Panel, that she wrote and performed at the event as a 'thank you' to the Young People's Advisers for their belief in young people.

Service Improvement Manager, Rachel Harris, said the event felt very much like a family event and it brought people together. Luke and Billie-Leigh agreed with the positive comments and commented on how much they had enjoyed seeing the young people relaxing and enjoying themselves. The Practice Lead concluded by saying the comments bore testament to the positive report from Ofsted.

Councillor Varty expressed how proud members were to be part of such a wonderful event.

## **7 Proud Moments**

The Service Improvement Manager reported that she was proud to have Billie-Leigh joining the team as a sessional employee in the role of Junior Project Support Worker.

The team was looking forward to welcoming Billie-Leigh and the role will see her participating in a range of engagement work.

## **8 Children in Care Council (CiCC) Update**

Billie-Leigh and Luke delivered a presentation on CiCC highlights during the month (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Highlights included the quarterly meeting with the Chief Executive at which the young people shared their ideas and opinions on how the Council is meeting its corporate parenting responsibilities.

The 'Know, What, When' guide had been finalised and the guide will ensure that young people are aware of what to expect when entering care. The CiCC Christmas quiz was planned by the young people and it had been a resounding success.

The Panel noted that Care Day 2024 will take place on Saturday 17 February 2024 and the event will premiere the #morethancare film. Rob Johnson, Project Manager of Investing in Children, explained that a young person who is keen to study media at university had been central to the production of the film. Members were encouraged to attend the event and share the event leaflet, within their networks.

## **9 Children Looked After Strategic Partnership (CLASP) Update**

The Panel considered the Children Looked After Strategic Partnership update report presented by Sharon Davey, Strategic Manager (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager delivered the presentation which provided details of the eight key priority areas to achieve the CLASP vision. The Panel noted the work of the CLASP continues to build multi-agency partnerships and promote collaborative working to meet the needs of young people in our care and care leavers, up to the age of 25.

The Strategic Manager emphasised the importance of young people's engagement to achieve the key priorities and she spoke of the positive feedback received throughout the year with regard to how well the young people influence services. It was noted that young people were particularly proactive in the opening of the Care Leavers' Hub at Chester le Street; the production of the 'Know, What, When' interactive book and the setting up of an 'Experts in Experience' group.

The launch of a prison support pilot at HMP Durham has enabled Young People's Advisers to visit and support care experienced young people in the prison. The success of the pilot has led neighbouring authorities to offer the same support to their care experienced young people.

Priority actions in the workplan for 2024 include to build on the feedback received from the Care Leavers' Service inspection, to evaluate the newly formed education subgroups and the performance with regard to early permanence, with input from the Regional Adoption Agency Manager who is now part of CLASP. The Service will also work with CLASP members to establish a framework to measure success.

The Vice-Chair asked what support was provided to train staff who are engaged in providing employment opportunities for young people and the Strategic Manager responded that the establishment of NEET clinics help to track young people's progress. Information gathered at the clinics is then reported to CLASP meetings, bi-monthly. The Education Sub-Group provides additional support to Social Workers to ensure young people achieve their potential and the group includes representation from Strategic Managers, Residential Home Managers, the Virtual School Head and Durham Works.

The Chair announced that it was to be Sharon Davey's last meeting and the Panel expressed their thanks to Sharon for all her hard work and they wished her well for the future.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.

**10 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)**

Sharon Davey, Strategic Manager, presented an update on the work of the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) Team (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that most UASC arrive through the Home Office Transfer Scheme, however some arrive unexpectedly as spontaneous arrivals. The UASC Team was established in February 2022 due to the increased demand for social work capacity and care provision for UASC. UASC are represented on the Children in Care Council and work to establish the profile of UASC has assisted the Children in Care Council to tailor their UASC offer.

The Strategic Manager thanked all those who had provided support to develop the service, including the Early Help Service, the National Youth Advocacy Service and voluntary and community groups including local sports clubs and businesses whose contribution had helped the young people to feel part of the community.

The Vice-Chair referred to the diverse profile of UASC and asked whether translation services were available for the many different nationalities. The Strategic Manager replied that translation services were available and the Deputy Director of Children's Services explained that the Education Service also provides support through the English as an Additional Language (EAL) service. He highlighted that many of the young people have a good command of the English language on arrival and they are fully committed to learning English with many attending ESOL (English as a Second Language) courses. The Head of the Virtual School commented that support is also available through the FlashAcademy online language learning facility and a teaching agency may be used to provide lessons to young people awaiting a school placement.

Councillor Quinn spoke of the dedication of staff who are committed to breaking down barriers in order to do everything possible to support young people and she thanked staff for their good work.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.

## 11 Virtual School Annual Report 2022-23

Melanie Stubbs, Head of the Virtual School, presented an overview of the Virtual School Annual Report for the period September 2022 to July 2023 academic year (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that at the end of the academic year, the Virtual School had supported 766 children of statutory school age and delivered early years and post 16 young provision. 53% of Durham children had an identified special educational need in 2022-23, however this figure was approximately 3% below the national figure. The Head of the Virtual school highlighted that identifying a special need enabled the right support to be provided and a young person in receipt of an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) would continue to have access to the funding, if they were to move out of the county.

The number of school moves which had taken place during the year was reported as 52, which was slightly higher than the previous year and a total of 54 school moves were challenged by the Virtual School. Attendances were improving and there had been one permanent exclusion, 40 suspensions and 21 young people had more than one period of suspension. Short term support for suspended young people was available, which relieved pressure on carers.

The Head of the Virtual School provided details on continuing priorities and new priorities for 2023-24. A new priority had been the appointment of a dedicated Previously Child Looked After Officer. Other priorities include to continue the development of the support for UASC and to provide a cohesive system for children looked after who require a statutory assessment and an EHCP, to ensure needs are met in a timely manner.

The Vice-Chair highlighted the continuing priority to focus on attendance and asked how this would be carried out. The Head of the Virtual School replied that work is carried out with the Attendance Improvement Team (AIT) and Social Workers to promote a positive ethos around attendance and she added that attendance would be discussed in more detail at the forthcoming sub-group meeting. The Head of the Virtual School reminded the Panel that there were concerns, previously, regarding a dip in attendance of year 6 pupils on reaching year 7, however this was much improved due to the success of the new transition work.

The Chair thanked the Head of the Virtual School for the useful Appendix B to the report which provided definitions for abbreviations used within the report.

Councillor Deinali was pleased to see the appointment of an officer specifically for previously looked after children and requested further information on their remit. The Head of the Virtual School clarified that the officer would attend each young person's final Personal Education Plan meeting when the child is about to move for adoption, to build up an educational profile and they will liaise with the adopter and school, when a young person is moving out of the county, for up to two terms.

In response to a question from Luke as to whether the Education Fun Fund could be used as an incentive to promote school attendance, the Virtual School Head offered to meet with Luke to discuss the matter further.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.

## **12 Supporting Care Leavers into Education, Employment or Training**

Helen Radcliffe, Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning gave an update report and presentation on the support provided to care leavers to enable them to progress into sustained post-16 education, employment or training (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Information was provided on the Durham Works Programme for Schools which provides transition support and careers guidance to targeted pupils in years 10 and 11. The Workplaces Project, which began in June 2023, introduces pupils in years 10 and 12 to the world of work through visits to work premises and meetings with employers, in a sector of interest to each young person. Sessional employment opportunities provide paid work placements with Durham County Council and 26 care leavers have accessed these placements since October 2021. Currently 7 care leavers are apprentices with Durham County Council.

The Panel noted the Council has used Pupil Premium Plus Post-16 funding to appoint a dedicated officer to support care leavers who are enrolled in further education and an incentive scheme was introduced to encourage those in further education to maintain regular attendance at college. The Panel noted that 32 care leavers are studying at university and their Young People's Advisers work closely with the young people with regard to issues including accommodation and finance.

Current data produced by the Department for Education shows that the proportion of care leavers aged 17-18 and 19-21 for whom Durham County Council is the corporate parent, who are not in education, employment or training is lower compared to the average rates regionally and nationally. However, the proportion of care leavers, whose destination is not known in Durham is greater compared to the average rates regionally and nationally.

The Vice-Chair noted the relatively high rate of those whose destination is not known and the Strategic Manager responded that work is ongoing to investigate further and she referred to the increasing number of young people who have mental health and anxiety issues which may act as a barrier to engagement.

Luke provided the view that 32 care leavers at university out of a total cohort of over 300 seemed low and he asked whether more work should be done to raise awareness of the support available to those who decide to take the university route. The Strategic Manager highlighted that the support offered to young people attending university was one of the areas identified by Ofsted as a key strength and she added there is always more work to be done. The Strategic Manager undertook to make enquiries as to whether information was available from neighbouring authorities on the percentage of care leavers studying at university.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.

### **13 Bi-Annual Adoption Service Report**

The Panel received the six monthly review of the adoption service as a spoke in the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Sharon Davey, Strategic Manager, highlighted that within the reporting period, nine adoptive families had been approved. Matches for children with adopters continued to be carried out in a timely manner, to promote early permanence for children. In addition, non-agency adoption referral work was increasing. Eleven panels met during the period and work was ongoing with regard to the recruitment of new panel members to increase the central list. Members interested in joining the panel were asked to inform the Senior Partnerships Officer.

Post-adoption support is an area of strength, with 119 young people supported and 64 successful applications made to the Adoption Support Fund to purchase additional therapeutic support. The Adoption Support Fund includes kinship carers and Special Guardians, to ensure they receive the same level of support as adoptive parents. Support is also provided to birth parents to help them to write letters to adopted children.

Councillor Adcock-Forster spoke positively of his involvement in the Adoption Panel and he encouraged members to consider joining the panel in the future.

In response to an observation from the Vice-Chair on the number of enquiries received which seemed comparatively low, the Strategic Manager clarified that the report was a mid-point review, however, the number of enquires had reduced. This trend was reflected nationally and possible causes were cited as the aftermath of the pandemic and cost of living pressures. The Strategic Manager spoke of the continuing work to ensure messages are conveyed regarding the amount of support available, including the Adoption Support Fund.

Councillor Deinali thanked the team for their valuable work done to support birth parents to write letters to adopted children.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

**14 Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership (DSCP) Update**

The Panel received the Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership (DSCP) Update, for information.

**15 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.

**16 Regulation 44 visits Aycliffe Secure Centre**

The Manager of Aycliffe Secure Centre, Anne Haigh and Michelle Nicholson, Maple House Manager, provided a quarterly update on Aycliffe Secure Centre children's homes and Maple House transition home (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillors Quinn and Townsend reported that they had not been contacted by their NYAS representative and any other Members who had not been contacted were asked to inform the Senior Partnerships Officer who would follow this up with the Strategic Manager for Children's Homes.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.