

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 8 March 2024** 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, C Hunt, B Kellett, J Nicholson, S Quinn, K Rooney, C Varty and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Alex and Luke, J Gamble and W Taylor

Also Present:

L Armstrong – Professional Practice Manager
R Farnham - Head of Children's Social Care
R Harris – Service Improvement Manager
R Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
H McAloon – Strategy Team Leader
G McNulty – Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
L Peacock - Participation and Engagement Officer
P Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children's Homes
M Stenton – Deputy Director, Children and Young People's Services
M Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
B Toomey – Practice Lead, Children and Young People's Services
J Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

Prior to the commencement of business, the Chair reported, with regret, the death of Councillor Isabella Roberts. Attendees stood for a minute's silence to pay their respects to Councillor Roberts.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors J Charlton, T Henderson, L Mavin, K Robson and A Savory and from co-opted members Billie-Leigh, J Bell and C Brown.

2 Substitute Members

Councillors B Coult and J Nicholson substituted for Councillors L Mavin and J Charlton, respectively.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

5 Number of Children in Our Care and Care Leavers

The Deputy Director of Children and Young People's Services informed the Panel that the number of children looked after stood at 1,223, with 22 young people placed for adoption, 321 care leavers and 74 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care reported a busy period of Ofsted inspections. Initial feedback from the inspections was pleasing and the published reports will be shared in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of the great sense of pride she felt when a group of young people including Alex and Luke, presented an item at the recent management team meeting. During the presentation, the young people provided information on the Next Venture fund which has been made available by the Chief Executive, to develop ideas to improve outcomes for care leavers. The Chief Executive requested that the young people use the funding opportunity to expand their budget management and governance knowledge. The young people obliged by establishing a steering group, appointing a Chair, Treasurer and Secretary and an independent scrutineer. They also developed a referral process and criteria for accessing the fund which is aligned to care leavers' ambitions. The Head of Children's Social Care commended the young people on their professionalism in delivering the presentation at the high level meeting.

8 Children in Care Council Update

The Panel welcomed Alex and Luke to present the monthly Children in Care Council (CiCC) update (for copy of presentation see file of minutes). It was reported that Billie Leigh had tendered her apologies for the meeting as she was speaking at an event to celebrate International Women's Day.

The Panel noted that work is ongoing with Service Leads to align the CICC's work programme with the Children Looked After Strategic Partnership (CLASP) and Corporate Parenting Panel priority areas. Themes identified included the importance of feeling safe, creating memories, the benefits of positive role models and tailored support for young people. The importance of providing information in a way that is timely, relatable and understandable was also discussed as well as ensuring young people are listened to and are encouraged to be the best they can be.

Alex then presented a short film which she had produced, entitled 'We are more than care' which was launched on Care Day. The Panel congratulated Alex and all the young people involved in the production, saying the young people are showing great potential for the future.

The Vice-Chair referred to the theme of improving understanding and she referred to the work done to provide clear information, for example the 'Know, What, When' guide and asked whether this work is reaching all young people, or if there is a gap in communications. The Project Manager for Investing in Children clarified that the discussions had focused on building on the good work in place, to use various different techniques to provide information, based on the needs of individual young people.

9 Regional Pathfinder Project Update

Bernadette Toomey, Practice Lead for Children and Young People's Services presented a report on the regional pathfinder project 'Foster North East' (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that following the independent review of children's social care, all 12 local authorities in the north east collaborated to form a regional hub for recruiting new foster carers. The project, which commenced in September 2023, had led to an increase in expressions of interest in Durham for potential new foster carers.

The Vice-Chair commented on the merits of the activity summary to understand the marketing methods which have the most impact. In response to a request from Councillor Coult, the Practice Lead agreed to arrange for the links to social media pages to be supplied to all elected members to share within their networks.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be agreed.

10 Performance Update

The Panel received the quarterly overview of performance, covering the period September to December, in relation to children in our care and care leavers presented by Helen McAloon, Strategy Team Leader. The performance management framework aligns with the Local Government Association's key lines of enquiry for Corporate Parenting Panel members (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

It was reported that the net increase in the number of children and young people in our care continues, with an increase in the number of children entering care and the number of young people leaving care remaining steady. During the quarter, the age cohorts experiencing the greatest increase were the 1-4 and 10-15 age cohorts and the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in our care continues to increase.

The number of Social Workers with caseloads of more than 25 cases had reduced and it was reported that over 70% of Social Workers in the Children in Care and Care Leavers teams have fewer than 25 cases.

Performance with regard to initial and review health assessments had dipped, however the increase in the number of children in care impacted on this indicator. Placement stability continues to be an area of focus and, in response to a request made by the Panel at the previous meeting, the report included data in respect of the number of children and young people placed with friends and family.

It was reported that the colder weather was an influencing factor in the reduction in the number of young people in care with a missing episode during the quarter.

The proportion of care leavers in suitable accommodation was in line with benchmarks, however, the number of care leavers in education, employment or training (EET) had fallen below benchmarks during the quarter.

Responding to a question from the Vice-Chair as to whether any themes were emerging in relation to missing incidents, the Head of Children's Social Care explained that trend information is gathered from return to home meetings and further information will be provided when the matter is covered in more detail, at a future meeting.

The Vice-Chair commented on the support provided to care leavers to assist them to progress into post-16 education, employment and training, therefore it was surprising to see that performance had fallen below the benchmark.

The Head of Children's Social Care referred to the challenges for care leavers who can often face multiple barriers. In addition, a number of care leavers access benefits which can act as a disincentive therefore work was ongoing to incentivise further education, employment and training. Councillor Hunt asked whether there was evidence of discrimination against care leavers from employers. The Head of Children's Social Care responded that she was not aware of any direct discrimination, however, it is recognised that care leavers face barriers. The Head of Children's Social Care suggested that this may be an area of focus for further discussion, at a future meeting.

Councillor Reed referred to the young people who go missing and asked whether they do so in an effort to return to their family home. The Head of Children's Social Care replied that young people who go missing often return to their family home. Assessments may determine that the best outcome for a young person is to return home and when this is the case, intensive support will continue to be provided to the young person and their family on the return home. The Head of Children's Social Care clarified that those young people who were not offered a return to home meeting had not, in fact, gone missing as their whereabouts were known to the service.

Luke asked if further information was available as to why EET performance had dipped. The Head of the Virtual School informed the Panel that quarter three data may be subject to a lag as it can take time to gather information when young people leave statutory education and it may be the case that when all the information is available, actual performance may be better than reported. She added that the Virtual School's Post 16 Officer, together with the Progression and Learning team now track the progress of young people, from year 10, to ensure more information is available.

The Head of Children's Social Care highlighted that Durham's EET performance is broadly in line with that of statistical neighbours. She added that she would follow up the analysis of performance with the service, to identify whether a particular intervention accounted for the peak in performance during 2020-21.

Resolved:

That the content of the report and presentation be noted.

11 Corporate Parenting Panel Development Session and Action Plan Quarter 2

The Deputy Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services delivered a report and presentation on key areas highlighted for discussion at the development session held on 15 September 2023 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Members were asked to consider additional training that may be beneficial to their role and further improvements for the development of the Panel.

The Vice-Chair commented that the previous development session had been well received and it provided members with a useful opportunity to seek clarification on specific issues and she suggested that a regular newsletter could be issued to all elected members, as corporate parents to update them on current issues.

Councillor Quinn referred to information sessions previously held after full Council meetings and suggested that these could be re-established. Councillor Nicholson, Chair of the Council, added that she would be happy for the suggestion to be considered.

Councillor Varty suggested that members of the fostering panel could be invited to a future development session, to speak about their role.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

12 Poetry Book

Rachel Harris, Service Improvement Manager, presented the Poetry Book report (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Service Improvement Manager referred to discussions at previous meetings at which Members had requested that the young people be supported to curate their poetry work into a collection. With funding from Children's Social Care and the Virtual School and, in partnership with a local poet, Service Leads held poetry workshops and the young people were helped to create the 'Cherished' poetry book.

The Panel welcomed Melissa, Alex, Alannah and Kayden to the meeting together with their carers and the local poet who had helped with the project. The young people recited some of their favourite poems which were included in the book and the poet also shared a poem which she had written, drawing on the inspiration she had received from the young people.

The Service Improvement Manager thanked all those who assisted with the project. The book will be distributed to all schools, libraries, Beamish and Shildon Museums and Children's Social Care teams. The Panel requested that enquiries be made as to whether paper copies of the book could be obtained for circulation to all elected members. It was noted that an electronic version of the book was included in the CPP meeting papers.

The Panel congratulated all the young people who had contributed to the book and to those who had attended the meeting to share their poems.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

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

Paul Rudd, Strategic Manager for Children's Homes, delivered a presentation on the NYAS Regulation 44 recommendations for the period September 2023 to December 2023 and answered questions from the Panel (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager undertook to contact NYAS and provide an update to Panel members who are awaiting contact from their NYAS representatives.

Resolved:

That the presentation be noted.