

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Corporate Parenting Panel

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 17 May 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, S Deinali, J Griffiths, C Hunt, B Kellett, S Quinn, K Robson, K Rooney and C Varty

Co-opted Members:

J Bell, Mason, E Reed and W Taylor

Also Present:

Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care
Anne Haigh – Aycliffe Secure Services Centre Manager
Paula Jemson – Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Hollie Meadows – Senior Practitioner
Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer
Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children’s Homes
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Jac Tyler – Strategic Manager
Sharon Walker - Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Charlton, Henderson, Savory and Simmons, from co-opted members Billie-Leigh and Luke and from officer Martyn Stenton.

2 Substitute Members

Mason was in attendance as the Children in Care Council representative.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 April 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

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, Rachel Farnham, informed the Panel that the number of children in our care had reduced from 1,211 in April to 1,206 in May. The figure included 78 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC) of whom 32 were care leavers. The total number of care leavers was 337 and there were 23 children placed for adoption.

6 Ofsted Updates

No Ofsted inspections had taken place during the period.

7 Proud Moments

The Head of Children's Social Care welcomed Mason to the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting. She informed the Committee that she had been proud of the effort Mason made to attend her recent meeting with representatives of the Children in Care Council and she thanked him for his valuable contribution to the meeting.

The Head of the Virtual School, Melanie Stubbs, spoke of her attendance at a recent Children in Care Council meeting which took place just before GCSE exams were about to start. At the meeting, the young person discussed how exam anxiety was triggering negative feelings about events in their past. Unfortunately, the following week, the young person was given a two day suspension. Upon arrival at the Inclusion Unit, the young person told staff that they felt they had let Melanie down. The member of staff at the Inclusion Unit reassured the young person that was not the case. A Teams call was arranged between the Head of the Virtual School and the young person, at which the Head of the Virtual School and the young person discussed the situation and they agreed a way forward which included a phone call with the Head of the Virtual school after each exam, to talk about how the exam had gone. The Head of the Virtual School spoke of how proud and encouraged she was that they were both invested in getting the best outcomes for the young person. The Chair requested the Head of the Virtual School to ask if the young person would agree to share their progress with the Panel, after their exams.

Members also shared some of their proud moments. Councillor Varty commended the practitioners involved in the Fostering Panel for all their hard work during an extremely busy period.

Councillor Hunt paid tribute to a social worker who had shown great compassion and care in a matter that she had been involved in. The Head of Children's Social Care agreed to ensure the comments were fed back to the relevant officers.

The Head of the Virtual School confirmed that 'Good Luck' cards had been sent to pupils taking their SATs and GCSE exams.

8 Children in Care Council Update

The Project Manager for Investing in Children and Mason, representing young people of the Children in Care Council (CiCC), delivered a presentation on activity during the month (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The presentation followed the exercise undertaken at the April Corporate Panel meeting at which the Panel discussed their interpretation of the words in the title of the government's strategy for the reform of Children's Social Care 'Stable Homes Built on Love.' At the meeting, the Panel requested that the same exercise be carried out by the Children in Care Council to identify whether the young people's interpretations of the words differed to those of the Panel.

Mason described how the older CiCC group compiled a list of how they interpreted the words which were included in the report and he highlighted some of the words that particularly resonated with him. Mason explained that one of the main themes the young people felt was important was the element of respect in relationships and they recognised that mutual respect was essential for good relationships.

Referring to home, Mason spoke of how the young people felt that home should always be a place where a young person can go back to and be supported, in any situation. When the young people discussed safety, they differentiated between feelings of physical and emotional safety and also how worry and stress can impact emotions. The young people also related feeling safe to being surrounded by people who care and who are there for the young person throughout good times and bad. That led the young people to discuss the importance of positive role models and mentors.

In terms of stability the young people felt that being kept informed played a role in feelings of stability and, regardless of whether circumstances were good or bad, the young people felt that being kept informed was important. Mason also highlighted having routines and being occupied were also factors in stability.

The Project Manager for Investing in Children then presented themes identified by the older CiCC group for further discussion at a future joint CiCC/ CPP meeting. The themes were emotional and physical wellbeing, feeling safe, positive people in life and being listened to.

The Chair commented that the observations of the young people, in the main, mirrored those of the Panel, however, the young people discussed feelings of emotional safety as well as physical safety, whereas the Panel's discussion focused on physical safety.

Councillor Hunt commented that the use of clear and understandable language applied to both young people and adults and she highlighted that many adults were not familiar with urban slang terms used by young people.

9 Pre-Birth Intervention Update

The Panel considered the Pre-Birth Intervention Update, presented by Jac Tyler, Strategic Manager (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager informed the Panel that the Pre-birth Intervention Service (PBiS) was established to enable babies to remain with their parents or with the birth family when safe to do so. When that was not possible, the aim was to permanently place the baby with alternative carers, as soon as possible after birth.

The Panel noted the criteria for eligibility for the service, and that for a referral to be accepted into the team, the referral must be made prior to 21 weeks gestation. The Strategic Manager provided details of the work undertaken over the past year, with a total of 96 unborn children supported and she explained how new pathways had been developed for assessments to be tailored to the needs of the individual family, including young parents; those families who had previously experienced care proceedings and for parents with learning needs.

The Strategic Manager described case studies which illustrated how the PBiS linked with other areas of children's services and the commitment and dedication of the practitioners involved.

Councillor Walton asked whether families engaged freely with the service and the Strategic Manager clarified that meaningful consent was required to be provided by parents. She described how the support was intensive and those families who committed to the service engaged well.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Future Hope

The Panel received a report on the Future Hope service, formerly known as Pause Durham, presented by Jac Tyler, Strategic Manager (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager explained that Pause Durham was rebranded in 2024 and with the help of women involved in the service, it was given a new name, Future Hope. The Future Hope service aimed to reduce the number of women who had previously had one or more children permanently removed from their care. In total, the service had worked with 84 women, 45% of whom were care experienced. The Panel noted there had been no further sets of care proceedings or further children removed from the women who had graduated from Future Hope.

The Strategic Manager informed the Panel that 24 women were currently engaged with the service, ranging between the ages of 21 and 39 years and 57% of the women were care experienced. The Panel noted that areas of need being addressed by the programme included domestic, alcohol and substance abuse and mental health. Feedback from those having received the service was overwhelmingly positive and outcome surveys showed improvements to women's confidence and emotional and mental health, which may not have been achieved were it not for the support of Future Hope.

Concluding the presentation, the Strategic Manager presented a case study and audio clips from women supported by the service who spoke of how the support had made a positive difference to their lives.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11 Such other business

In response to a request from Councillor Simmons for more information on the number of children in our care who were missing school on a regular basis, the Head of the Virtual School informed the Panel that from September 2023 to Easter 2024, the overall attendance for children looked after in Durham was 90%.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, attendance was approximately 97.2% and the aim was to return to the pre-Covid-19 attendance levels. An Educational Welfare Officer was now in post, with responsibility for young people with a social worker and children looked after.

During the September to Easter terms, 52 children had attendance which had fallen below 50%, 103 of the 780 statutory school age children had 100% attendance over the two terms and 300 children had attendance between 95% and 99%. The attendance target was 96% and children whose attendance fell below 95% were supported to achieve attendance targets, with the help of their schools and carers.

The Head of the Virtual School clarified that 18 young people were not attending school as they were not on a school roll, 12 of whom were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. Some young people with an Education Health and Care Plan were awaiting an identified special school placement.

The Head of the Virtual School highlighted that analysis of the data indicated positive attendance from reception to year 8 however attendance dipped from year 9. This was to be the subject of deeper analysis to identify the underlying reasons. A further cause for concern was that 52 children had been removed from school for holidays and all Head Teachers had been requested to identify such absences as unauthorised absences.

The Chair thanked the Head of the Virtual School for the information which would be feedback to Councillor Simmons.

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 involved the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

13 Regulation 44 Visits Aycliffe Secure Centre Homes

The Panel received a summary of activity in relation to Regulation 44 visits to Aycliffe Secure Centre and Maple House between January and March 2024, presented by Anne Haigh, Aycliffe Secure Services Centre Manager. The report also provided an overview of the first Ofsted inspection of Maple House which was rated as outstanding in all areas (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

It was agreed that an overview of educational outcomes for the young people at Aycliffe Centre and Maple House would be provided within the next Aycliffe update.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.