

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL
CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 21 June 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), S Deinali, L Fenwick, J Griffiths, C Hunt, B Kellett, L Mavin, A Reed, K Robson, K Rooney, A Savory, C Varty and M Wilson.

Co-opted Members:

Courtney, Luke and W Taylor

Also Present:

Lesley Baldry – Service Manager
Sarah Blenkinsopp – Virtual School and PLAC Manager
Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care
Paula Gibbons – Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Kate Lonsdale – Lawyer, Children and Adults Services
Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer
Rachael Riley – Operations Manager, Children Looked After and Care Leavers
Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager, Children’s Homes
Tracy Shaw – Team Manager
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Adcock-Forster, C Bell, D Oliver and S Quinn; from Co-opted Members Billie-Leigh, Fiona Tweddle and Rebecca Woods and from officers M Stenton and M Stubbs.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor L Fenwick substituted for Councillor S Quinn.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 17 May 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of interest

Councillors A Reed and A Savory as serving Magistrates, declared interests in agenda item 10, the Care Leavers Custody Project.

5 Number of Children In Our Care and Care Leavers

The Head of Children's Social Care, Rachel Farnham, informed the Panel that the total number of children in our care continued to fall and currently stood at 1,201, including 27 young people placed for adoption and 76 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people (UASC), of whom 44 were care leavers. There were 334 care leavers in total.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that a local area SEND inspection was underway. Inspections had also taken place at Moorside children's home and Aycliffe Centre, with positive feedback. Further details of the outcomes would be provided to the Panel in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Strategic Manager for Children's Homes, Paul Rudd, spoke of how proud he was of the hard work by staff and young people at Moorside children's home which resulted in such a positive Ofsted visit.

The Participation and Engagement Officer, Lee Peacock, commended the 'Experts Through Experience' group of young people who had carried out enquiry work on brothers and sisters. The group presented their work, including well-considered recommendations, to senior management. The work will also be presented to a future meeting of the Panel.

The Service Improvement Manager, Rachel Harris, was pleased to report that Mind of My Own had achieved an outstanding organisation award which was well deserved recognition of the commitment from the staff and young people involved.

8 Care Leavers Service: My Plan, My Future

The Panel received the Care Leavers Service: My Plan, My Future report presented by Lesley Baldry, Strategic Manager (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager described how the My Plan, My Future tool enabled young people to review their pathway plans and Young Person Advisors (YPAs) use the tool with young people, in their direct work sessions. The Panel noted that the initiative was adapted by Durham's Care Leavers service using a model set up by another local authority and young people from the Children in Care Council were consulted in its design.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel:

- (a) considered this direct working tool developed alongside young people; and
- (b) agreed that the tool may be used for pathway plan reviews for young people who have left care.

9 Children in Care Annual Survey 2024

The Committee considered the Children in Care Annual Survey 2024, presented by Rachael Riley, Service Manager and Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The officers highlighted that surveys were one of the key tools used to ensure children and young people's voices were heard, to develop services and achieve the best outcomes for young people. Respondents provided their views on the support they receive, what is working well and areas for further development.

A total of 30 surveys were completed which was lower than the service had hoped for, however, the rate of return may have been impacted by the fact that a number of surveys were being conducted at the same time. Positive views included that 93% of the young people who responded said that their worker did what they said they would do; that they felt involved in decisions about their lives and that they felt safe. 90% of young people said their worker took the time to get to know them; 89% responded that they found their worker friendly and easy to talk to and 86% said their worker helped them to understand.

The responses included areas for further consideration, for example, only 83% of those who responded said their worker helped them to understand why they could not live with their family. Only 89% of respondents said they were helped to see their family and friends as often as they would like, 74% said school was good, 82% said their health and wellbeing was good and only 60% said they found it easy to understand their care plan.

Analysis of the survey found that broadening the survey questions may have led to greater context, for example. the survey asked how many workers young people had since entering care however it did not ask how long the young person had been in care.

Luke commented on the relatively low response rate and he stated the view that young people may need tangible evidence to believe that survey results lead to change. He added that whilst surveys which were quick and easy to complete may have a good rate of return, the information gathered may be too brief to be meaningful.

In response to the learning from the survey, Rachael Riley, Service Manager acknowledged that changes in the workforce greatly impact young people's relationships with professionals. She informed the Panel that 'About Me' profiles were to be rolled out across the Children in Care teams to ensure young people were provided with details of their social worker. In addition, there had been investment in 'Clarity and Confidence' to empower practitioners utilise tools to develop confidence to support young people during their journey through care.

The survey found that some young people were not happy with their education which highlighted the importance of young people's views being heard at their PEP meetings. Some young people reported that they did not understand their care plan, therefore the service would continue to improve work around communication and care planning. In addition, the service was planning to develop a consultation group with children and young people to collate questions for the next annual survey for children in care. Surveys for parents and carers were also being considered, to gain their views on services.

Courtney spoke anecdotally of young people in the care of independent foster agencies who had not been made aware of, or encouraged, to complete the annual survey. The Service Manager confirmed the survey was circulated through the Commissioning service, however, Courtney's comment would be followed-up.

Councillor Walton, Vice-Chair, was pleased to hear that local authority foster carers had promoted the survey and she asked whether there had been any follow-up work undertaken with practitioners and carers as to what steps they

had taken to encourage young people in their care to complete the survey. The Service Manager highlighted the competing priorities that exist for carers and practitioners and whilst the Vice-Chair recognised the demands, she stressed that the work warranted a high priority as young people's views were fundamental to inform the direction of travel in the future. The Head of Children's Social Care commented that there was more work to be done to review the range of tools available to ensure as many young people as possible share their views and to increase the reach of the 'you said, we did' messages to demonstrate to young people that their views make a difference.

The Panel noted that work was ongoing to explore how survey work could be incorporated into engagement activities.

Councillor Hunt that suggested that as the survey was an annual survey, there would be scope to broaden the questions in the future, to gain better quality information.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel:

- (a) Considered the content of this report.
- (b) Agreed with its recommendations.
- (c) Agreed that the survey should be repeated annually.

10 Care Leavers Service Custody Project

The Panel received a report and presentation on the Care Leavers Custody Project which was delivered by Tracy Shaw, Team Manager and Lesley Baldry, Service Manager (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that 13 Durham care leavers were currently in custody and care leavers in custody at HMP Durham included Durham care leavers as well as care leavers from other areas of the country. HMP Durham was a reception prison for those who were either awaiting sentencing or waiting to be transferred to other prisons.

The Team Manager explained the aim of the Care Leavers Service Custody Project was to engage with care leavers in custody, to offer support and promote awareness of the local offer which all care leavers were eligible to receive.

The project worked in partnership with prison staff to continue care planning for young people whilst in custody and a link had been established with the Care Leaver Lead at HMP Durham. Monthly drop-in sessions were being held at the prison which 38 young people had attended.

Training sessions had been held for prison staff, to support them to better understand the needs of care leavers in custody. Future plans included the establishment of a group for care leavers in HMP Durham to help inform the work of the Youth Offending and Probation services with regard to earlier interventions. In addition, work was ongoing to develop a peer mentoring scheme. The project was being replicated in other authorities and officers involved in the project were forging links with prisons in other parts of the country to ensure Durham care leavers in custody were offered support. An audit of young people in custody was due to complete in the near future, in order to establish a baseline custody offer.

The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of how proud she was of the work which had led the Probation Service to consider extending the scheme throughout the country. The Team Leader informed the Panel that a recent inspection of HMP Durham found the approach to be of a 'gold standard'.

In response to questions from Councillor Kellett, the Team Leader explained that links had been made with other prisons including female establishments and support was offered up to the age of 25, to align with Durham Care Leavers Service offer.

Councillor Walton, asked for further information on the training provided to prison staff and the Team Leader responded that approximately 30 prison officers had been trained which included providing information on adopting a trauma-informed approach. The feedback had been overwhelmingly positive and further training sessions had been offered. Councillor Walton commented that she would like to see the training being incorporated into the standard training programme for all prison staff.

In relation to a question from Councillor Walton as to the number of young people in custody who had been allocated a peer mentor, the Team Leader replied that at present the peer mentoring scheme was in the early stages of development and Durham's Peer Mentoring Service was investigating establishing a peer mentoring scheme within HMP Durham.

In response to a request from Councillor Walton, the Team Leader agreed that a summary of the audit of young people in custody would be reported to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Luke highlighted that young people in custody may be reluctant to inform staff of their care leaver status for fear of stigmatisation and he referred to discussions at previous Corporate Parenting Panel meetings on the subject of the possibility of Durham County Council adopting care experience as a protected characteristic as its adoption would provide further support for care leavers. The Team Leader agreed that whilst staff were sensitive to stigma and discrimination, the adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic would provide further protection.

Courtney asked whether support was available for young people in custody who were not care leavers and the Team Leader confirmed that a range of support was available including support for mental and physical health and drug and substance misuse.

Councillor Reed expressed concern at delays when care leavers enter custody who are not identified as care leavers for weeks or sometimes months thereafter. The Team Leader explained that the aim was to offer support as quickly as possible. Councillor Reed suggested that the question should be asked as soon as a young person comes into contact with the police, in order that prisons are aware, prior to young person entering prison. The Team Manager agreed to investigate whether there was scope to identify care leavers, within the initial screening process by the police.

The Panel congratulated the team on the work, recognising that the availability of the support provided by the Care Leavers Custody Project could be a pivotal moment for a young person when entering custody.

The Panel also congratulated the Team Leader on her nomination for the Social Worker of the Year award in recognition of the success of the project.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel noted the progress of the custody work of the Care Leavers Service and agreed the future plans.

11 Performance Report

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager, Stephen Tracey, provided an update on performance during the final quarter of the year in relation to children in our care and care leavers (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel heard that whilst the number of children in our care had increased since the same period last year, activity had slowed over the past six months.

The number of initial health assessments completed within 20 working days had decreased however performance in relation to new health assessments had improved. The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager highlighted that the majority of children looked after were fostered, within in-house provision. In respect of placement stability, there had been a slight increase in the number of young people having three or more placements within one year and this was slightly higher than the national average.

The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager corrected data within the report, informing the Panel that the number of children in our care with a missing incident was approximately 12% and the number of missing incidents per children in our care who went missing was approximately 6%, which was broadly in line with last year's figures. The number of missing episodes had decreased over the previous six months.

The number of unaccompanied asylum seeker children in our care had increased in recent years, many of whom had transferred to the care leavers service and 50 care leavers were recorded as UASC when first referred. Performance relating to suitable accommodation compared favourably with statistical neighbours. The number of young people in education, employment and training was low compared with previous data, with some being NEET (not in education, employment or training) due to pregnancy, parenting, illness or disability.

Councillor Walton referred to care leavers who had chosen not to use the service and she asked if they could re-engage with the service, should the situation arise. Officers explained that the service continued to contact young people who decided not to engage, three times per year, to inform them of the local offer and they could re-engage with the service. The 'Always Here' policy provided signposting and advice for young people over the age of 25. In addition, information on young people who decided not to engage with direct services was regularly reviewed for indicators which may suggest that a young person may benefit from the offer of support.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2023-24

The Panel received the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report April 2023 – March 2024, for agreement, presented by Jayne Watson, Senior Partnerships Officer (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the Corporate Parenting Panel's Terms of Reference form part of Durham County Council's constitution. The Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report was developed and designed with the help of the young people of the Children in Care Council and representatives of the Children in Care Council will attend the full Council meeting on 17 July 2024, to present the report for endorsement.

Members commended the breadth of the work over the year and the Head of Children's Social Care commented that the achievements would not have been possible had it not been for the engagement of the members.

In response to a question from Councillor Hunt, the officers agreed that the Annual Report would be circulated to all schools through Head Teacher briefings and Virtual School network meetings.

The Chair agreed to share the report at the next regional meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel Chairs.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2023-24 be agreed.

13 Adopt Coast to Coast

The Committee considered the Adopt Coast to Coast report presented by Paula Gibbons, Head of Adopt Coast to Coast (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel noted that the cost of living crisis had affected performance in an increasingly competitive market. Since the previous presentation to the Panel in 2023, the number of enquiries, matches and adopters had fallen and whilst enquiries were on the increase, enquiries did not always come to fruition. There were 15 approvals during the year and one of the main challenges over the year was the lack of adopters which continued to be a national issue. The service was proactive to raise awareness of the Adopt Coast to Coast brand, including the strength of the support offer, to provide assurance to potential adopters that the service will be there to support families throughout the adoption journey. The Head of Service thanked members for continuing to be advocates for adoption, throughout their networks.

In response to a question from Courtney as to how the service uses real life stories and profiles of children and young people to market the service, the Head of Service explained that confidentiality is maintained by using anonymised profiles and the use of images was possible only if permission was granted.

Courtney then asked what process was in place when adoption placements did not succeed. The Head of Service informed the Panel that in those circumstances a meeting would be held with the adoptive family and professionals to identify the cause.

In reply to a question from Courtney as to what work was carried out to facilitate links with brothers and sisters, the Head of Service spoke of the drive to ensure opportunities exist for young people to connect with their birth family.

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that whilst the report being considered focused on marketing activity, a further report was to be considered at a future Panel meeting on adoption practice and Courtney was welcome to submit questions, for the answers to be included within the report.

Resolved:

The Corporate Parenting Panel received the presentation and marketing activity update.

14 Such Other Business

Councillor Deinali reported that at a recent Planning Committee meeting it was apparent that some members were not familiar with the functions of unregulated care homes and she suggested that refresher training would be beneficial for all members of the Council.

The Senior Partnerships Officer highlighted that a refresher session of the Corporate Parenting Panel induction training will be held on 13 September 2024, following the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting.

It was agreed that the Senior Partnerships Officer would liaise with Members' Support with a view to arranging a member development session for all members on the role of corporate parents across the functions of the Council.

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: Durham County Council Homes

The Panel received a presentation from Paul Rudd, Strategic Manager, which provided an overview of Durham County Council's Children's Homes provision (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.