

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 19 July 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton (in the Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, C Bell, J Clark (for Councillor S Townsend), S Deinali, C Hunt, A Reed, K Robson, K Rooney and J Watson

Co-opted Members:

Billie, Luke, Cory, Angelica and Bee representing the Experts Through Experience group, J McCarthy and W Taylor

Also Present:

Lucy Armstrong - Edge of Care Team Manager
Lesley Baldry – Service Manager, Children and Young People’s Services
Nigel Connah – Edge of Care Worker
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Rebecca Harrison – Project Worker, Investing in Children
Paula Jemson – Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence
Mel King – Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
Deb Loraine – Service Manager, Countywide Services
Chris Maughan - Peer Mentor Coordinator
Holli Meadows – Senior Practitioner, Quality and Practice
Anne Middleton – Service Manager, Fostering together with Foster Carers, Angela, Helen, Jennifer and Lesley
Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer
Mark Smith – Strategic Commissioning Manager
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
Dave Summers – Youth Justice Manager
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Mavin, A Savory, M Simmons, S Townsend and M Wilson, from co-opted member Julie Bell and from officers R Farnham, R Johnson and M Stubbs.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor J Clark substituted for Councillor S Townsend.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 21 June 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 Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children informed the Panel that the total number of children in our care continued to fall and currently stood at 1,190, including 26 young people placed for adoption, 78 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and 344 care leavers.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children was pleased to report that the first Ofsted inspection of Maple House found the home to be outstanding. Ofsted undertook an assurance visit to Aycliffe Secure Centre in June which went very well. An update on the outcome of the visit would be provided to the Panel in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Chair thanked the representatives from the Children in Care Council who attended the Council meeting to present the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report. The conduct of the young people had been an example to all and their presentation was a highlight of the meeting, with the young people keeping the audience fully engaged with their energy and positivity.

The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence, Paula Jemson, shared a story which featured at the recent foster carer awards ceremony regarding a foster carer's daughter who acted selflessly when she gave up her room and stayed with a friend for the weekend, to enable three siblings to stay together during a particularly traumatic time.

8 Experts Through Experience

The Service Improvement Manager, Rachel Harris, introduced 'Experts Through Experience' (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Panel heard that the Experts Through Experience group included young people from the Children in Care Council and the group was managed and supported by Children's Social Care. The group had worked with insight and sensitivity on the Experts Through Experience project and the presentation before the Panel provided a summary of the group's in-depth investigation into why brothers and sisters were separated.

Rebecca Harrison, Project Worker from Investing in Children was accompanied by Cory, Luke, Billie, Angelica and Bee who represented the diverse group of young people involved in the investigation, all of whom were driven by their shared commitment to continue to improve the experience of young people in our care.

The young people explained that the project began in April 2023 when they decided that they would like to carry out in-depth investigations into specific aspects of the social care system and they agreed that their first investigation would be to look into why siblings were separated. Luke provided information on the investigation methodology which encompassed the way in which the investigation was to be carried out, including what information the young people wished to gain from the investigation, who they wished to interview and where the interviews would take place. It was agreed that interviewees would include social workers, young people, professionals and carers and the interviews would be held in the young people's hubs. The interview questions were designed to be both informative and sensitive.

Following the interviews, data from the investigation was collated and analysed with assistance and support from senior managers from Children's Social Care who provided additional statistics. Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer, provided details of areas identified as working well. This included that 72% of respondents reported being in contact with at least one sibling and 60% said there was nothing they would like to change about coming into care. Almost all the young people interviewed considered that coming into care was positive. In addition, the Mockingbird model, which offers peer support and social activities to foster carers and their families, received positive feedback.

Luke shared information on the areas identified for attention. He reported that a high number of respondents said they did not fully understand why they came into care. Only half of the young people interviewed said they were happy with the amount of family time and some were not aware that they could request more family time. The interviews highlighted that there could be more pre-emptive support to prevent sibling breakdowns. Social worker inconsistencies were also highlighted as an area of concern.

Presenting the next steps and recommendations, Cory highlighted the overwhelming support from those interviewed, for the extension of the Mockingbird model and Life Story work and Later Life Letters were identified as important tools to help young people to understand their past. The investigation also highlighted the importance of responding to the voice of the child and respecting the wishes of all those within the sibling group.

In terms of recommendations, the investigation found that when all those in a young person's circle of support had good relationships, work together and communicate openly it could be of great benefit to support positive relationships between siblings. It was recommended that the views of young people with regard to family time arrangements should be given more weight, that there should be greater preparation time and family time settings should be fit for purpose. Cherished items such as family pets should be allowed to be a part of family time, as pets are often considered to be part of the family. It was also recommended that a process should be developed to review children's views around family time on a regular basis, including how much family time was offered and that young people should be involved in choices as to who they would like to see during family time.

The young people then shared their views on their learning from the investigation. They commented on the benefits to be gained when foster carers, social workers and birth families had good relationships. The young people also referred to the important role that social workers played in helping young people to understand their relationships and they recognised that when siblings decided not to stay in contact with each other, those situations required great sensitivity and care.

The young people observed that when siblings wished to increase the amount of family time, that often took a long time to facilitate and the young people said they would like to see that process improved. They also highlighted that family time venues played a key part in the experience and informal, family time settings were preferable.

The investigation also highlighted that all young people were different and whilst some siblings may benefit from having the same social worker, others may benefit from having different social workers. The investigation also showed that some young people were not aware that they could request more family time and some were hesitant about meeting separated siblings, fearing it may cause their sibling distress.

The young people spoke of how family time with brothers and sisters was different to family time spent with parents and they highlighted that some siblings may not wish to have family time with their parents, however, that should not prevent siblings from having family time with each other.

The young people acknowledged that one of the main reasons cited for sibling separation ie the lack of resources, was a national issue, particularly for large sibling groups and they suggested that, when it was necessary to separate siblings, more consideration should be given to placing siblings as close to each other as possible.

The young people also learnt how important it was to allow interviewees time and space to answer questions and that by ensuring the interviewee felt relaxed and supported, they could share their views and feelings with ease, in the course of conversation. The process had helped the young people to understand that it was natural to feel emotional when sharing personal experiences and they remarked on how difficult they found the investigation, being personally invested in the topics under discussion. They added that they were pleased that they had their support networks in place throughout the process. They also recognised the value in care experienced young people interviewing one another.

The Chair thanked the young people for their presentation and the wider group for all the work that had gone into the investigation. Comments and questions from the Panel were then invited.

Councillor Deinali congratulated the young people for the work and she added that the themes resonated with her and that she hoped that the learning will have a positive impact on young people's experiences of social care in the future. Billie informed the Panel that a meeting will be held with the Head of Children's Social Care in the near future, to discuss the findings, and a progress update will be provided to the Panel in due course.

Councillor Hunt also thanked the young people for addressing what was undoubtedly an emotional subject for all those involved. She also thanked the officers involved including the Participation and Engagement Officer and Project Managers from Investing in Children for their work to support the young people. Councillor Hunt referred to the pre-emptive support to prevent sibling breakdowns and she suggested that respite may help to build sibling relationships that may otherwise breakdown. Councillor Hunt asked whether, when siblings were separated, foster carers were introduced to one another to develop their relationships which, in turn, could benefit the relationships between siblings. The Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence replied that placement planning took all the young person's relationships into consideration and family time reviews could be brought forward if circumstances changed.

Councillor Reed commended the amount of work the young people had undertaken, saying the investigation had provided valuable insight. She asked whether there was a timeframe for the recommendations to be actioned.

The Service Improvement Manager replied that the young people were clear that they would like their investigation facilitate positive change as soon as possible and, following the meeting with the Head of Children's Social Care, an action plan will be developed, with input from the young people. The Service Manager for Children and Young People's Services informed the Panel that some changes had already been implemented, including a meeting had been held with the Children in Care Council, to gather their views as to what they would like to see included in Later Life Letters. In addition, the young people's views regarding Life Story work had been discussed with the Adoption Team to improve the way that children learn about their birth family. The views on venues for family time had also been considered and Sherburn Young People's Hub was now being used for family time.

The foster carers in attendance spoke of how they were facilitating family time in more natural settings such as at soft-play venues, restaurants and cinemas and how these settings had improved the experience for all those concerned, including birth parents. The foster carers commented that changes in family time arrangements were required to be implemented carefully, to ensure all those involved were comfortable with the changes. The young people echoed the comments with regard to the value of foster carers facilitating family time sessions.

The Chair acknowledged that there was more work to be done to make improvements and to address some of the issues the young people had highlighted as areas of concern, such as social worker inconsistencies.

In response to a question from the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children who asked the young people for their thoughts on a reasonable timescale for a progress update, the young people suggested that a reasonable timescale for a review would be six months. In the meantime, the young people would look forward to planning their next investigation.

Resolved:

That the presentation be noted.

9 Peer Mentoring Scheme

The Committee considered a report and presentation on the Peer Mentoring scheme presented by Lesley Baldry, Service Manager and Chris Maughan, Peer Mentor Coordinator (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Service Manager explained that the Peer Mentoring scheme was developed to help young people leaving care to build support networks and to feel part of their local community. Chris Maughan, Peer Mentor Coordinator, explained that the ethos of the scheme was that all young people were only one caring adult away from being a success. Links had been made with local businesses including Amazon, who kindly donated IT equipment, as well as colleges and universities, to help to raise the profile of the scheme. The Panel noted the scheme was progressing, with 10 mentors undergoing the recruitment process and training for mentors had been developed, including trauma informed training with the mental wellbeing worker, Nick Barwick. The scheme linked with the Lifelong Links programme to encourage joined-up working.

Councillor Reed asked whether the scheme included offering work experience, as members may be able to assist to identify volunteering opportunities within their networks. The Peer Mentor Coordinator replied that the scheme was in the initial stages of matching young people with mentors, however, the aim was to encourage volunteering opportunities in the future.

Councillor Hunt suggested that Family Hubs could benefit from having peer mentors.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Lifelong Links – Family Finding

The Panel received a report and presentation from Deb Lorraine, Service Manager, Nigel Connah, Edge of Care Worker and Lucy Armstrong, Edge of Care Team Manager on the Lifelong Links – Family Finding programme (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Deb Lorraine, Service Manager, introduced the presentation by informing the Panel that the work aimed to ensure that all care experienced young people were supported during their time in care, through the transition into adulthood and when they left care. Lucy Armstrong, Edge of Care Team Manager provided details of the structure and training for staff in the Lifelong Links team. Nigel Connah, Edge of Care Worker informed the Panel that 25 enquiries were ongoing and some young people had declined the offer of Lifelong Links support at the present time.

It was reported that the Lifelong Links Team Leader and the Peer Mentor Coordinator had met to discuss links between the two projects and embed shared working practices.

The Edge of Care Worker presented details of a case study in which a young person had discussed with the Lifelong Links Co-ordinator that they wished to reconnect with their brother and sister. Following preparation for the meeting, the young person met their sister and her baby son and they were able to share their previous experiences and common interests. After the meeting, the young person's sister contacted the service to say thank you for reuniting her with her sibling which had meant a great deal to them both. The initial meeting had led the young person to establish contact with many more people, including previous carers and social workers. The Edge of Care Worker clarified that meetings were arranged to take place either on an individual basis or by bringing all the people together at the same time and the format of the meetings was guided by the young person. The young people representing the Children in Care Council remarked that the case study was a perfect illustration of the scale of the impact of sibling relationships.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11 Youth Justice Service Update

The Panel received a report and presentation on the County Durham Youth Justice Service presented by Dave Summers, Youth Justice Manager (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Youth Justice Manager outlined that the Youth Justice Service was a statutory multi-agency partnership which formed part of Durham County Council's Children and Young People's Service, managed by Durham County Council. The report focused on the young people supervised by County Durham Youth Justice Service who were in our care, first time entrants to the criminal justice system and requests from Durham Constabulary for the transfer of young people who were denied bail, from police custody to Local Authority accommodation.

The Youth Justice Manager clarified that first time entrants occurred when a young person entered the formal criminal process. Only those for whom there was no acceptable alternative, due to the seriousness of the offence and/or their offending history, were those who were cautioned or prosecuted at court and were not offered a pre-caution disposal (PCD). The Youth Justice Manager highlighted that 3 out of 4 young people who were given a PCD did not go on to reoffend. An increase in the number of first time entrants had been observed within recent years and the increase was being monitored.

The Youth Justice Manager noted that as police prioritised neighbourhood crime, much of which was low level assault, this had a disproportionate impact on young people. In addition there was a greater likelihood of being caught for this type of offence as, in general, witnesses were involved. An improvement plan had been implemented in respect of reducing the number of first time entrants.

The Panel noted that 15% of the cohort were young people in our care which was significantly higher than the general population, however, the Youth Justice Manager pointed out that all young people remanded to secure accommodation were classed as children in our care and multi-agency plans took account of the impact of a young person's offending behaviour. In 2024, 10 young people were remanded to secure accommodation. Research into the criminalisation of children in care had provided assurance that the work done in County Durham was positive and young people were not unreasonably criminalised.

With respect to transfers from police custody, those occurred when young people who had been charged by the police were awaiting a court appearance. During 2023-2024, 13 of the 17 requests received from the police transferred to Aycliffe Secure Centre.

The Youth Justice Manager shared a proud moment by commenting on one of the young people within the service who had a history of minor offending. The young person was also a very talented pianist. As part of their reparation they visited adult residential care homes to play for the residents and that had been very well received. The Youth Justice Manager spoke of his experience which had shown him that every young person has unique qualities and the service prided itself on supporting every young person to make a difference to their lives.

Councillor Deinali commented on how encouraged she had been when she visited the Youth Justice Service and witnessed the positive impact the staff had on the young people and she thanked the staff for their commitment to help all young people to make positive life-changes. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children informed the Panel that a visit will be arranged to the Youth Justice Service in the near future, details of which would be circulated in due course.

Councillor Clark referred to the relatively high number of young people who transferred to Aycliffe Secure Centre and she asked why that was the case. The Youth Justice Manager pointed out that the county benefited from the proximity and receptiveness of Aycliffe Secure Centre. He added that Durham had developed a process for transfers which was considered best practice and which had been replicated in other areas of the country.

In response to a question from Councillor Hunt on funding available from the Ministry of Justice for young people remanded to secure accommodation, the Youth Justice Manager clarified that Ministry of Justice funding applied only to those young people who were remanded to prison service custody.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

12 Fostering Annual Update

The Panel received the Fostering Annual Update from Anne Middleton, Service Manager for Fostering and the Panel welcomed Anne and foster carers Angela, Helen, Lesley and Jennifer. Between them, the foster carers offered homes to nine children and young people including siblings. Two of the foster carers were also Mockingbird Hub carers (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Service Manager presented the Fostering Annual Report, outlining the work of the service and fostering panels during 2023-24, including a summary of activity and marketing, challenges and achievements and key priorities for 2024-25.

The Service Manager reminded the Panel that one of the key priorities discussed in 2023 had been to increase the number of in-house foster carers and during the last year, 23 new foster carers were recruited and 13 foster families were deregistered. Analysis of the data as to why foster carers left the service found a number of foster carers left due to retirement. The marketing strategy had been reviewed to offer a wider range of fostering options and the new Pathfinder Hub which comprised of the 12 local authorities in the North East working, together to increase the number of foster families, had led to an increase in referrals. Work was ongoing to improve timings to enable young people to be in permanent homes as quickly as possible. The team had also strengthened matching arrangements and worked to reduce unnecessary placement moves. It was reported that 72% of children in our care lived in fostering arrangements and the number of connected carers continued to increase. From 2023 – 2024, 65 connected foster carers were deregistered and 39 of those occurred as Special Guardianship Orders were made and 12 were due to children being returned to the care of their parents. The Service Manager clarified that for some connected carers it was not appropriate for Special Guardianship Orders to be sought.

The Service Manager concluded by highlighting priorities for 2024-25, including to increase sufficiency, to build on the success of the Pathfinder and Mockingbird Hubs, to progress early permanence plans, as well as increase the connected carers capacity and develop their training offer to align with that offered to mainstream foster carers.

The foster carers remarked that hearing the comments from the young people at the meeting, emphasised that a 'one size fits all' approach was not appropriate. The foster carers spoke of the benefits of the Mockingbird model which had established an alternative approach to foster care and they echoed the young people's comments with regard to the positive input from foster carers in family time arrangements.

The Chair commented on the difficult balance to be achieved in the family time offer as some of the processes in place which may be perceived as bureaucratic were safeguarding measures.

The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children commented on the success of the foster carer awards ceremony and how heart-warming it had been to meet the long standing foster carers and hear their feedback on the value in the training delivered by young people. He asked the foster carers for their views on how the foster care offer could be improved. The foster carers responded that improvements in the links between services would be of benefit, particularly during the transition from children's to adult's services. The foster carers commented that the young people in their care were part of their family and they experienced the same range of emotions as all parents did when preparing for their child to move on. The foster carers said they would like young people to be encouraged to stay in touch with their former foster carers, when it is in the young person's best interests. Luke spoke of the work done through the Next Venture Fund which aimed to support care leavers to build their networks on leaving care, to reduce feelings of isolation, which included maintaining links with their former foster carers.

The Service Improvement Manager responded that the service recognised the transition to adult services was challenging for young people and foster carers and work was ongoing to support the process.

The Chair thanked the foster carers for giving up their valuable time to contribute to the meeting, adding that they were welcome to attend future Corporate Parenting Panel meetings.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be agreed.

13 Such Other Business

Billie noted that there were copies of the 'Cherished' poetry books available for members to take if they wished.

Members were informed that Corporate Parenting Panel training will be held following the September Panel meeting and members were asked to send suggestions on any topics that they would like to see covered, to Jayne Watson, Senior Partnerships Officer.

14 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.

15 Regulation 44 Visits: Independent Children's Residential Homes

The Panel received a report of the Head of the Integrated Commissioning Service presented by Mark Smith, Strategic Manager, who provided an overview of Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings of the Independent Children's Residential Homes in which Durham children / young people are placed (for copy of report see file of minutes).

It was noted that timescales for improvements were flexible, depending upon the needs of the young people and the timeframes set by Ofsted.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

16 Such other business

Jo McCarthy, Co-opted Member and Deputy Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and Children in Care informed the Panel that the Integrated Care Board would be writing to all Corporate Parenting Panel Chairs to provide an update on the functions of the board, following recent changes.

The Chair informed the Panel that adoption marketing materials will be placed in members' lockers in the near future, for members to share within their networks.