

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Corporate Parenting Panel

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2 County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 6 December 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton in the Chair

Members of the Panel:

Councillors J Clark, S Deinali, T Henderson, C Hunt, B Kellett, L Mavin, D Oliver, S Quinn, K Robson, K Rooney, C Varty and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Julie Bell, Billie, Cory, Louie, Luke and Wendy Taylor

Also Present

Lucy Armstrong - Edge of Care Team Manager
Mark den Hollander - Independent Visitor Coordinator
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Deb Loraine – Service Manager, Countywide
Helen McAloon – Strategy Team Leader
Holli Meadows – Senior Practitioner, Quality and Practice
Carmel Murray - Operations Manager
Jamie Paddock – Lawyer, Children, Adults and Health
Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer
Dr Christine Powell – Designated Doctor for Children in Care
Tracy Shaw – Team Manager, Care Leavers’ Service
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Jac Tyler – Practice Lead, Safeguarding
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

Prior to the formal business, the Chair welcomed Louie who was in attendance from the Children in Care Council.

The Chair informed the Panel that Zoe, the young person who had attended the meeting held in December 2023 to discuss how she had benefited from the Education Fun Fund, delivered the completed Christmas card orders for Members, prior to the meeting. The Panel viewed a photograph of Zoe presenting the cards to the Chair.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Simmons (Chair), R Adcock-Forster, A Savory and A Reed; co-opted members Courtney, Michael Johnson and Becky Woods and officer R Farnham.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 25 October 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 Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion, Martyn Stenton, informed the Panel that the total number of children looked after was 1216, of whom 37 young people were awaiting adoption, 74 were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and 383 were care leavers.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion reported that positive inspections had taken place at Coxhoe Children's Home and Aycliffe Secure Centre, which had undergone a full building inspection.

7 Proud Moments

The Service Improvement Manager, Rachel Harris, informed the Panel that Durham County Council was a finalist in the national Children and Young People Now 2024 awards for the Next Venture Fund project, led by a group of care leavers including Luke and Billie. Seven young people attended the awards ceremony and the Service Improvement Manager spoke of how proud the service was of the young people's achievement and of their excellent conduct at the ceremony.

The Chair informed the Panel that, in the Chair and Leader of the Council's Christmas card competition, first, second and third prizes were won by young people in our care.

The Service Improvement Manager also paid tribute to Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer, who was a finalist in two categories of Durham County Council's annual Inspiring People awards and she thanked Lee for his dedication to the role.

8 Supporting Solutions

8a Edge of Care and Family Group Conferencing

The Panel received an annual update on the development of the Supporting Solutions service presented by Lucy Armstrong, Edge of Care Team Manager (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Panel heard that Edge of Care support was available to young people from seven years of age and to parents and carers, where relationships had broken down and, without support, it was likely that the young person would require a placement move or they could become looked after. Family Group Conferencing was held to identify and establish a sustainable plan to meet the needs of the young person, within their family unit.

The Team Manager commented on the significant increase in the number of young people, parents and carers accessing assistance from Supporting Solutions and she provided information on factors related to young people on the edge of care. During the year, 87% of young people supported were assisted to remain at home, with their extended family or in their long term placement, which was a 4% increase on the previous year.

The Panel heard of recent developments in the service, including plans for a short break home (The Lighthouse), to provide an additional resource to prevent family breakdown. Multi-agency work will be further developed, recognising that many young people on the edge of care were subject to multiple risk factors in the home, such as substance misuse and domestic abuse. In addition, the service will continue to build regional networks, to share good practice.

In reply to a question from Luke, the Team Manager informed the Panel that links with the Mockingbird project were under consideration, as well as other ways to strengthen the support available.

Councillor Hunt asked for an update on the progress of the short break home and Jac Tyler, Practice Lead for Safeguarding responded that the work was progressing as part of the wider sufficiency plans and further information on progress would be available in the new year.

Cory commented on the benefits of having early intervention services to help prevent care proceedings, adding that he was looking forward to seeing future developments.

8b ERASE: Exploitation and Missing

The Panel received a report and presentation delivered by Deb Loraine, Service Manager, Countywide, which provided an overview of the functions and progress of the ERASE team (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Service Manager explained that during 2023/24, there had been 392 child exploitation referrals and of those, 87 were assessed as high risk, 252 medium risk and 53 low risk. A greater number of young people were referred due to criminal exploitation than sexual exploitation. A review of the child exploitation matrix had enhanced the identification of factors which would suggest a young person was being exploited, to enable a greater focus on the young people of most concern.

The number children going missing from home continued to rise, with the average age reducing from 16 to 15 years. A key area of focus was to ensure young people were offered a Return Home interview within 72 hours and, with additional staffing, this had increased to approximately 55% from 49% in the previous year. Analysis of data found that a significant amount of young people were returning home on Thursdays and Fridays and in response a seven day service had been implemented to enable return home interviews to be undertaken during weekends.

Councillor Hunt asked for information on the effectiveness of the relationship between the ERASE service and the police and the Service Manager clarified that the ERASE service was a partnership between Durham Police and Durham Children's Services. The Service Manager added that the good working relationship had helped to reduce incidents of young people being referred as missing when they were not, in fact, missing and there had been an improvement in challenging negative attitudes and victim blaming. In addition, joint work had been carried out with the police to investigate the effectiveness of the child exploitation process, to review the classification of risk and embed the work into the Child Exploitation Group which provided strategic oversight of young people who were most at risk of exploitation in Durham. The Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion pointed out that joint working with the police frequently involved multiple police forces, across county boundaries.

In response to a question from Louie who asked what was being done to raise awareness of child exploitation, the Service Manager replied that educating young people and families on safety issues was imperative.

The Service Manager undertook to attend a future meeting of the Children in Care Council, to continue to discuss exploitation and related issues with young people.

Councillor Oliver observed that missing incidents and child exploitation were national issues and he asked how the service shared knowledge with other authorities. The Service Manager informed the Panel that the service linked with other authorities to share data and good practice; that Durham was part of the Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership and it was also a partner in Durham University's research into contextual safeguarding, which shared knowledge on national developments.

Councillor Varty voiced concerns of incidents of transport police not reporting young people who they suspected were missing from home and the Service Manager provided assurance that the matter was being raised at meetings of the Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership, in terms of increasing awareness and training.

Resolved:

That the content of the reports be noted.

9 Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service

The Panel received a report and presentation which provided an update on the Independent Reviewing Officer service, presented by Carmel Murray, Operations Manager (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Operations Manager explained that, in Durham, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) carried out a dual role, chairing Child Protection Conferences and Children in our Care Reviews and that the benefit of combining the roles was that it led to smoother transitions when young people moved from being subject to a child protection plan, to becoming a child in our care.

In terms of performance, timeliness of Children in Care reviews had remained high at 96%, with 72% of children having a permanence plan agreed within six months of becoming cared for, compared to 51% in 2022. The participation of young people was also a strength with only 2% of children not contributing to their meetings. Over the year, through the scrutiny of children's care plans, IROs had identified delays and other areas for service development. Effective challenge to practice was provided through the Dispute Resolution Process to ensure young people's needs were at the heart of interventions and actions. In addition, IROs continued to provide comprehensive statements for final court hearings.

The Operations Manager identified areas of focus for the future which included the promotion of young people's participation in their review meetings. Consultation forms were being revised, in collaboration with a group of children in our care, with support from the Participation and Engagement Officer.

Cory asked for clarification on the percentage of young people who had a permanence plan agreed within six months of becoming cared for and how many plans were carried out to completion. The Operations Manager clarified that 72% of children had an agreed plan within six months and the plan aimed to be permanent, for example, adoption, living with a connected carer, or return to the care of parents. A review process was in place and plans could change, through the review process.

Billie asked whether the IRO service utilised the Mind of My Own app. The Operations Manager replied that the app was promoted, however, the group of young people who were involved in the review of the consultation forms indicated that they would prefer to use an online form with a QR code. Responses would then be collated through a Teams channel for onward transmission to Social Workers and IROs.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

10 Review of the Independent Visitor Service for Children in Care

The Panel received a report and presentation which updated the Panel on the role of the Independent Visitor Service based within County Durham Youth Justice Service, delivered by Mark den Hollander, Independent Visitor Coordinator (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Independent Visitor Coordinator reminded the Panel that Independent Visitors were volunteers and, in Durham, their ages ranged from 19 to 79 and they possessed a wide-range of skills and experience. From October 2023 to October 2024, 94 referrals had been made to the service and 57 matches had taken place. 50 matches concluded during the year, mainly due to changes in the circumstances of young people and the service rematched young people when Independent Visitors left the service. Currently, 27 young people were waiting to be matched and it was expected that the waiting list would be cleared by February 2025.

The Panel heard that measuring service impact was challenging, however after a young person had been matched with their Independent Visitor for over a year, a meeting would take place with the young person to discuss the service. A high satisfaction rate was reported, with young people commenting that they had benefited from having an Independent Visitor.

Furthermore there had been 99% positive feedback from Social Workers and other professionals about the impact of the service. During their supervisions, Independent Visitors were also asked about the impact they felt they had on young people and over 90% of Independent Visitors identified a positive impact and reported that they enjoyed the experience. More recently, the service had introduced group activities including training workshops, to provide opportunities for Independent Visitors and young people to meet their peers.

The Panel heard that additional finance in 2024/2025 enabled the recruitment of a part-time business support worker to support the future development of the service.

Cory asked whether care leavers were eligible to become Independent Visitors and the Independent Visitor Coordinator highlighted that the Council ran a dedicated scheme for care leavers who wished to support young people who were about to become care leavers, through its Peer Mentoring programme.

Councillor Hunt commended the progress of the Independent Visitor Service over the year.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

11 Care Leavers Service – Custody Audit Summary Update

The Panel received the Care Leavers' Service Custody Audit Summary Update presented by the Team Manager of the Care Leavers' Service, Tracy Shaw (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Team Manager informed the Panel that after attending the National Benchmarking Forum in 2023, at which a care leaver who had spent time in custody spoke of his experience and a lack access to support, she was prompted to consider the offer for care leavers in custody both in Durham and nationally.

During June and July 2024, the Care Leavers' Service management team undertook an audit of all care leavers in custody; the rationale was to understand the experiences of young people in custody, including offending factors. At the time there were 15 young people in custody. The audit found that offending behaviours were predominantly linked to violence, however, some related to sexual offences. The Team Manager provided details of the main key findings which included that young people had limited positive support networks, many had not been in education from a young age and, in many cases, there was little stability in the young person's life.

The audit highlighted areas of good practice including robust pathway planning and evidence of collaborative working between agencies and it was found that the links made with prisons as part of the Custody Project had made a positive impact. The audit also identified areas for improvement which were being developed into an action plan. These actions included to better understand the impact of not being in education from a young age. The audit also highlighted indicators of future violent behaviours which could result in offending, including the impact of domestic violence, neglect, alcohol and substance misuse and mental health issues.

The Team Manager commented that the service will continue the work to facilitate links within prisons to ensure more support is in place for young people. The Panel heard that the Custody Project had reached 83 care leavers within HMP Durham and care leavers in HMP Durham from outside the county had been linked with the local authority which was able to support them. Work with prison and probation staff will be developed further to enhance multi-agency plans for release from custody.

The Team Manager spoke of her attendance at the 2024 National Benchmarking Forum where she addressed the forum on County Durham's Custody Project. The young person who had presented to the forum in 2023 was also in attendance and he spoke to the Team Manager of how pleased he was that he had been listened to and that they had been able to work together to make a difference for care leavers in the future.

Resolved:

That the recommendation in the report be approved.

12 Performance Update

The Panel received the quarterly update report presented by Helen McAloon, Strategy Team Leader (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Summarising some of the main points in the report, the Strategy Team Leader commented that whilst the number of children and young people in our care had increased, the number of children entering and exiting care was beginning to align more closely than in previous quarters. The number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking young people had reduced slightly however this was expected to increase in the coming months. Performance with regard to initial and review health assessments had reduced and long term placement stability continued to be an area of focus, being slightly lower than benchmarks.

With regard to missing from home, the summer months had seen a slight increase in incidents and, with an increase in staffing, the percentage of return home interviews completed within 72 hours had increased to approximately 80% during the quarter.

Referring to care leavers, the Strategy Team Leader explained that the proportion of care leavers in suitable accommodation aged 17-18 and 19-21 was above benchmarks however the proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training aged 17-18 was in line with the north east average however this was below the England average. For those aged 19-21, the percentage was 48% which was also below benchmarks. In response, contact was being made with authorities in the north east who were performing well, including South Tyneside and Darlington, in order to share learning.

Councillor Hunt asked whether a reason had been identified for the dip in performance in relation to health care reviews. The Practice Lead for Safeguarding referred to some issues being beyond the service's control, for example delays in gaining consent from the young people and / or their parents or carers. She highlighted that work was being developed to include the initial health assessment paperwork within the Council's LiquidLogic system which could save valuable time by prepopulating the document. Dr Christine Powell, Designated Doctor for Children in Care added that the increase in the number of reviews over the summer period had placed an additional strain on resources, however, the situation was becoming more manageable and an increasing number of young people were being seen within 10 to 15 days. The Practice Lead for Safeguarding highlighted that an escalation processes had been implemented.

Cory referred to data on missing young people and missing incidents and he observed the figures indicated that children in care were more likely to have repeat missing episodes than young people in the general population and he asked what action was being taken to address the issue. The Service Manager, Countywide, responded that many children in our care were likely to have experienced trauma and instability in their lives and strategy meetings were held with partners and missing co-ordinators to improve oversight. Consideration was being given as to whether it was possible to analyse the data to establish how long a young person remained in their particular risk category, in order to assess the impact of interventions.

Councillor Quinn asked whether the LiquidLogic system was embedded throughout the service and the Service Manager, Countywide clarified that the LiquidLogic electronic system was implemented a number of years ago.

The Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion commented that embedding the system into children's residential homes was taking time and this matter could be discussed further with the Strategic Manager for Children's Homes, Paul Rudd, at a future meeting.

Resolved:

That the recommendation in the report be approved.

13 Any Other Business

Co-opted Member and Designated Nurse for Children and Children Looked After, Karen Watson, informed the Panel that the Integrated Commissioning Board held events during October at which young people from the Children in Care Council hosted sessions which were extremely well received. The Panel requested that Karen provide highlights from the sessions, specifically relating to Durham, to a future Panel meeting.

Billie invited the Panel to a carol concert which was to be held on Thursday 12 December 2024 on 7.00 pm at Elvet Methodist Church.

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

15 Regulation 44 Visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Independent Children's Residential Homes

The Panel received an update on external children's home Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings presented by Dawn Wilson, Senior Commissioning Officer (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.