

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2 County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 17 January 2025** at **9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor M Walton in the Chair**

### **Members of the Panel:**

Councillors S Deinali, C Hunt, B Kellett, D Oliver, S Quinn, K Robson, K Rooney, C Varty and M Wilson

### **Co-opted Members:**

Mason, W Taylor and K Watson

### **Also Present:**

Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care  
Andrea Fletcher – Lawyer, Children and Adults  
Anne Haigh – Aycliffe Secure Centre Manager  
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager  
Paula Jemson – Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence  
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children  
Paul McCormack – Aycliffe Secure Centre Deputy Manager  
Helen Radcliffe – Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning  
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion  
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School  
Keira Tame – Social Work Consultant  
Jayne Watson – Senior Policy and Partnerships Officer

Prior to the formal business, the Chair welcomed Mason, representing the Children in Care Council, to the meeting.

## **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clark and Simmons, Co-opted Members Julie Bell and Michael Johnson and from officer Bernadette Toomey.

## **2 Substitute Members**

No substitute members were in attendance.

## **3 Minutes**

With the addition of Karen Watson to the list of attendees at the meetings held on 6 December 2024 and 25 October 2024, the minutes of the meeting held on Friday 6 December 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 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 was 1,185, which included 33 young people awaiting adoption. 65 young people in the care population were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. The total number of care leavers was 402.

#### **6 Ofsted Updates**

The Head of Children's Social Care reported that visits had been made to Elderhirst Children's Home and Hudson House and the initial feedback received was very positive. The outcomes would be shared with the Panel upon publication of the reports.

#### **7 Proud Moments**

The Service Improvement Manager, Rachel Harris, spoke of how proud she was of the young people who were part of the Care Choir and all the young people who had participated in the recent carol concert. The young people helped to provide a fun and festive community event by being welcoming hosts and serving refreshments. One young person who initially had reservations about attending the event, not only attended but he did himself proud, confidently meeting and greeting attendees. Another young person who attended the event was brimming with enthusiasm when she spoke of the event, to the Ofsted Inspectors, who visited her home shortly afterwards.

Paula Jemson, Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence informed the Panel of a Christmas event that was arranged by the Children in Care Service for 16 and 17 year olds living in supported accommodation. The event, which was held at Stanley Hub, brought young people together to have fun and a special time was had by all.

#### **8 Annual Adoption Service Report – Six Month Update 2024/25**

The Panel received an update on the review of the Adoption Service for 2024/25, presented by Keira Tame, Social Work Consultant (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Social Work Consultant delivered a presentation which provided information on the structure of the Adoption Team. She explained the role of the service was, primarily, to find suitable adopters for children with a plan of adoption. The service also carried out non-agency adoption assessments; provided post adoption support and support to adults who were previously adopted, to access their adoption records. Details were also provided of performance from April 2024 to September 2024 in respect of adopter recruitment and matching.

The Panel heard of the changes to Keeping in Touch arrangements (previously known as Post Box contact), which were part of a national drive to promote direct contact with birth families, when safe to do so. It was reported that 28 birth parents had been supported to write Post Box letters, or, to understand the process and 289 letters were received and checked.

Key priorities for the service for the year ahead included the recruitment of elected members onto the Adoption Panel. The service also aimed to continue the work with Adopt Coast to Coast to recruit, assess and approve adopters in a timely manner; to promote early permanence and to improve the support offer, including post adoption support.

The Chair thanked the Social Work Consultant for the presentation and comments and questions were invited.

Councillor Deinali thanked the service for the creative work done to increase and improve Keeping in Touch arrangements.

Councillor Quinn asked whether those accessing their birth information had access to psychological support and the Social Work Consultant confirmed that access was available through external psychological support services.

The Chair referred to the 184 young people provided with post adoption support and she asked whether the figure included requests to access adoption records. The Social Work Consultant explained that the figure represented the number of young people aged 0-25 who had received post adoption support in terms of therapeutic services.

In a further question, the Chair asked whether information was available on the number of requests for access to personal records and whether this had increased with the rise in awareness of access to personal information. The Social Work Consultant confirmed that data was available on the number of access requests and she added that it was likely that requests would continue to increase. The Chair remarked that it would be useful to have more information on the number of access to records requests, in future reports.

Referring to the Keeping in Touch arrangements, the Chair asked whether videos were used as a method of keeping in touch. The Social Work Consultant responded that videos had not been used, however, they may be considered in the future.

In response to a question from the Chair regarding recruitment and whether data was collected on the performance of marketing techniques, the Social Work Consultant highlighted that a dedicated member of staff was responsible for marketing and data was gathered and analysed on the number of enquiries generated from events, social media and advertising campaigns. The Social Work Consultant added that further information on marketing would be included within future updates.

The Chair had been surprised to find that many elected members were unaware that all elected members were eligible to join the Adoption Panel. Councillor Hunt suggested that it would be useful to communicate this to elected members and the Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion referred to plans in place to clarify that in the induction programme for elected members, following the forthcoming local election.

The Project Manager for Investing in Children, Rob Johnson, spoke of how the work done to improve the Keeping in Touch arrangements was close to the hearts of the young people of the Children in Care Council. The Project Manager praised the good work carried out by Courtney, to promote keeping in touch and the improvements that she had helped to make, to the wording of keeping in touch letters.

**Resolved:**

That the content of the report be noted and the proposed priorities agreed.

**9 Supporting Care Leavers into Education, Employment or Training**

The Panel received a report and presentation from Helen Radcliffe, Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning which provided an update on the range of support offered to care leavers to assist them into education, employment or training (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning provided details of a number of education, employment and training programmes and initiatives, designed to support young people. These included support for the pre-16 cohort through the DurhamWorks Programme and the Workplaces Project which provided opportunities for young people in years 10 and 12, through bespoke visits to employers.

The Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning also highlighted that the Progression and Learning Service, the Virtual School and Children's Social Care invested resources to support a multi-agency Personal Education Plan process for an increasing cohort of children in our care and care leavers.

The Panel heard that the post-16 care leaver pathway consisted of DurhamWorks post-16 Programmes, a Sessional Employment Programme, a Pupil Premium Plus Post-16 Programme and support for care leavers in higher education. Durham County Council continued to deliver the government's Pupil Premium Plus Post-16 programme which included a financial incentive paid on a termly basis. Care leavers had also been supported into Durham County Council through a number of apprenticeship vacancies, ringfenced on an annual basis. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had led to a reduction in the number of ringfenced apprenticeship opportunities and the Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning requested the Panel's support to increase the number of ringfenced apprenticeships.

Concluding the presentation, the Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning spoke of proposals to enhance the offer of support by extending the Sessional Employment Programme. In addition, the service will continue to collaborate with learning providers and colleagues to develop pathways into Durham County Council's entry level job roles and increase ringfenced apprenticeship and work experience opportunities with Durham County Council.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning for the presentation and she invited comments and questions from the Panel.

Mason raised the issue that many young people were in a better financial position when claiming benefits as opposed to being in employment. The Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning acknowledged the issue, however, she highlighted that the service was there to help and support young people to consider their individual circumstances. She added that, in many cases, a small reduction in income initially could be a small price to pay to be in a better financial position in the longer term.

Karen Watson asked whether links had been established with the NHS which ran the Universal Family Programme, which was a similar initiative to support care leavers. The Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning confirmed that links were established with the NHS, however, she would welcome further information on the programme from Karen Watson.

Mason asked whether data was available on care leavers' outcomes, for example, how many care leavers went on to claim benefits as opposed to gaining employment.

The Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning responded that she would investigate whether those details were available and the Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence clarified that 54% of care leavers were currently engaged in some form of employment, education or training.

Councillor Hunt referred to a lack health care staff and she suggested that the service could link with those sectors, to help to address skills shortages.

The Chair referred to the support provided to young people to gain experience by visiting workplaces and she asked whether any incentives were offered to employers to encourage their participation in the programme. The Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning spoke of the great effort made by staff to engage with employers and she was pleased to report that many employers were more than willing to welcome young people into the workplace.

Councillor Quinn highlighted that the Council engaged with many employers and partners through day-to-day business and she suggested that this provided an avenue to promote opportunities for young people, which could also benefit employers.

The Chair highlighted that a report would be brought before full Council at the meeting on 22 January 2025, to consider that care experience be adopted as a protected characteristic in County Durham. This would further raise the profile of care experienced young people and help to shape Council policies and practices to support care experienced young people. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that, should full Council agree the motion, it would ensure that care experience as a protected characteristic would be considered when conducting equality impact screenings, as part of decision making processes. In addition, in the future, proposals contained in the Children, Wellbeing and Schools Bill would extend the responsibilities of Corporate Parenting Panels.

**Resolved:**

The Corporate Parenting Panel:

- a) Noted the information contained in the report.
- b) Agreed to support efforts to increase the number of ringfenced apprenticeship and work experience opportunities for care leavers within Durham County Council.

## 10 Virtual School Annual Report Summary

The Panel received a report and presentation which provided an outline summary of the full Virtual School annual report for 2023-2024 presented by Melanie Stubbs, Virtual School Head (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The summary focused on children and young people of statutory school age ie from Reception to year 11. The Panel noted that, as of July 2024, there were 779 Durham children in care of statutory school age which was an increase of 1.7% from the same time in 2023. Just over 75% were educated in schools based in County Durham.

The Head of the Virtual School provided details of the support provided for the approximately 54% of Durham children in care who had an identified special educational need in 2023-24, which was a slight increase of just over 1% on the previous year.

The Panel heard that in the 2023-2024 academic year, there were 69 school moves, however, 25% of school moves were to support a young person's move to a permanent placement or due to distance. Attendance for the whole children in our care cohort was 90% which was approximately 1% lower than the previous year. There were 2 permanent exclusions and 60 suspensions during 2023/24.

The Head of the Virtual School concluded the presentation by outlining the key priorities for 2024-25 which included to support more children to achieve higher levels in KS2 and KS4. Work will be developed with children's homes to support school anxiety and other barriers to education and to continue to integrate joined-up processes with health and social care, to promote a holistic approach to support learning. The report included, for members' information, a briefing note and presentation slides on the role of the designated governor for children in care/previously in care.

Thanking the Head of the Virtual School for the detailed report, the Chair asked the Panel for comments and questions.

Councillor Hunt asked that when children in care were late for school, whether they were marked as absent. The Head of the Virtual School explained that the matter was regularly discussed at Designated Teacher meetings and, a child in our care would need to be significantly late, without a valid reason, to be marked as absent. The Head of the Virtual School undertook to request that Designated Teachers consider how they mark a child in care as 'late'. In addition, the Head of the Virtual School was provided with regular reports and the November figures would be discussed at the forthcoming Corporate Parenting School Sub-Group meeting.

The Chair referred to the 83 young people in the year 11 reporting cohort, of which, 53 had an identified special education need and she asked whether any adjustments were made as to the impact on the overall results. The Head of the Virtual School clarified that the chart shown in the presentation represented only those young people who had sat GCSEs, however, not all young people sat GCSEs and some young people followed a different curriculum, according to their particular setting.

The Chair requested members who were school governors to share the briefing note and slides with designated governors for children in care. The Head of the Virtual School commented on the value of designated governors and the support they provided to designated teachers.

**Resolved:**

- a) That the contents of the full annual report be noted.
- b) That the Virtual School Head should ensure that children and young people in our care remain a priority focus within the wider team since the extension of the role to all children with a Social Worker.
- c) That the Virtual School Head should ensure that the identified priorities are actioned to further improve the educational achievement of children in our care, and these children are placed in schools and settings which are appropriate to their needs.

## **11 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.

## **12 Aycliffe Centre and Maple House Regulation 44 Visit Update**

The Panel received an update on Regulation 44 visits relating to Aycliffe Secure Centre and Maple House, presented by Anne Haigh, Centre Manager (for copy of report, see file of minutes). Following the update, the Centre Manager answered questions from the Panel. The Centre Manager also spoke of recent proud moments at Aycliffe Secure Centre which included that seven young people had passed the theory element of the construction skills certification scheme. In addition, at the end of term, an event was held to showcase the achievements of all the young people.

**Resolved:**

That the recommendations in the report be agreed.