

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 February 2025** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Walton in the Chair

Members of the Panel:

Councillors R Adcock-Forster, S Deinali, J Griffiths, B Kellett, L Mavin, D Oliver, S Quinn, A Reed, K Robson, K Rooney and C Varty.

Co-opted Members:

Cory, J Bell, Luke, J McCarthy and Mason

Also Present:

Laura Armstrong – Professional Practice Manager
Rachel Farnham – Head of Children’s Social Care
Rachel Harris – Service Improvement Manager
Paula Jemson – Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence
Rob Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Helen McAloon – Strategy Officer
Lee Peacock – Participation and Engagement Officer
Paul Rudd – Strategic Manager for Children’s Homes
Martyn Stenton – Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Jayne Watson – Senior Policy and Partnerships Officer

Prior to the formal business, the Chair announced that Councillor Hunt had stepped down from the Panel and she placed on record the Committee’s thanks to Councillor Hunt for her valuable contribution to the Panel.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Clark, A Savory, M Simmons and M Wilson; from Co-opted Members Michael Johnson and Wendy Taylor and from officer Bernadette Toomey.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Minutes

With an amendment to minute number 9 to clarify that the comment made by Mason related to his concerns for care leavers who find themselves stuck in the benefit trap, when they would prefer to be in education, employment or training and the impact that can have on their health and wellbeing, the minutes of the meeting held on Friday 17 January 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Chair recalled that, at the previous meeting, the Strategic Manager for Progression and Learning asked members to consider what more could be done to increase the number of ringfenced apprenticeships for care leavers. Members were reminded to provide suggestions to the Senior Policy and Partnerships Officer.

The Chair referred to the question posed by Mason at the previous meeting regarding the number of care leavers receiving benefits. Martyn Stenton, Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children explained that the most up to date information from the Department for Work and Pensions was from 2023 when approximately 40% of care leavers aged 19-21 were claiming Universal Credit and this figure did not include other young people who may have been claiming other types of benefit. This highlighted that a significant number of young people transitioning from care accessed financial support. Statistics relating to care leavers over the age of 21 claiming Universal Credit were not readily available.

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 1,192, which included 34 young people awaiting adoption and 55 young people in the care population who were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. 89 unaccompanied asylum seeking young people were care leavers and the total number of care leavers was 435.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Head of Children's Social Care updated the Panel that recent Ofsted Inspections rated Elderhirst Children's Home as 'good' and Hudson House Children's Home as 'outstanding'. The Head of Children's Social Care and the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children thanked the Strategic Manager for Children's Homes, the Registered Managers of the homes and all the staff, who had worked hard to achieve these good outcomes.

Inspections had taken place at Park House, Hickstead Rise and Aycliffe Secure Centre and the outcomes would be reported in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Professional Practice Manager, Laura Armstrong, shared her proud moment at the Celebrating Practice Week event which was held on 10 February 2025. Young people helped to host various stalls including the care leavers' hub cake stall. One of the young people concluded the day with their inspiring closing remarks. Over £900 was raised in total for care leavers which Care Leaders offered to match.

8 Supply Packs

The Panel received an update and presentation on the Supply Packs project presented by Luke (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Delivering the presentation, Luke explained that the packs, which were originally named 'Coming into Care Packs', were born from an idea suggested by the young people of the Children in Care Council (CiCC). The young people subsequently decided to change the name to 'Supply Packs'. The purpose of the packs was to provide personal items to comfort children and young people who were placed into care, in emergency circumstances.

The CiCC was granted initial funding to create the packs in August 2024 when 60 packs were put together by young people, with help from practitioners. The packs were given to the Families First and Emergency Duty teams to be distributed to young people entering care. Feedback from the young people who had received the packs included that the packs had helped them to settle into their new homes and the fact that young people with care experience were responsible for the project, made the gesture even more meaningful.

Luke informed the Panel that further meetings were held in January and February with the CiCC, to share ideas for items to be included in future packs.

An event was being held on 28 February 2025 at 12 noon at the Sjovell Centre in Framwellgate Moor and members were invited to join the young people to assemble the next batch of packs.

Rob Johnson, Project Manager for Investing in Children thanked staff from the Administration team for their support with the project.

The Chair remarked that it was pleasing to see that the young people were suggesting items to take to school, to be included in the packs.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

9 Experts Through Experience

The Panel viewed a presentation and video which provided details as to how young people scrutinise various parts of the service and make recommendations for improvements (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

Cory explained how the young people discuss subjects that they would like to investigate, with managers and critical friends and the coproduction aspect of the investigations relied on gaining a consensus. The Panel heard that the next enquiry would investigate hearing the voices of young people living in our children's homes, in order to learn more about their lived experiences.

Luke recited a poem entitled 'Celebrating Every Journey' which reflected the importance of recognising that all young people have different perceptions of their experiences. He explained the work of the Experts group sought to gather as much of that lived experience as possible, to inform services of the future. Luke spoke of the value in young people discussing their feelings, informally, with other young people who have had similar experiences.

Cory referred to the mutual respect that was shown during the discussions, with questions being asked sensitively to ensure that the young people felt comfortable sharing their views. Rachel Harris, Service Improvement Manager, commented that she was one of the supporting officers present at the discussions and she observed how well the young people understood each other, having shared similar experiences. She added that even experienced practitioners could benefit from observing the discussions between the young people.

The Chair asked how the Experts dealt with situations when there were differences of opinion.

Cory responded that the young people had learnt to empathise and respect each other. He highlighted that they consider alternative viewpoints to be opportunities to look deeper into why a person feels a particular way and they work to develop solutions, to reach agreement on the way forward.

Laura Armstrong, Professional Practice Manager, commended the young people and she spoke of how the practitioners ensure the investigations are coproduced safely. She also thanked the Lee Peacock, Participation and Engagement Officer and Darryl Samuels, Workforce Development Lead, who helped to train the young people. Cory, on behalf of the Experts, paid tribute to the practitioners and critical friends who had empowered the young people and provided the platform to enable the young people to share their voices.

Mason commented that he would like to see an investigation into how to better support young people's emotional and physical health and more opportunities for young people to explore as many activities as possible to help them identify what makes them happy. He added that he would be interested in joining the Experts Through Experience group, to investigate the support systems currently in place.

The Service Improvement Manager referred to work carried out by Children's Social Care and a Community Interest Company on research into the benefits gained from creative arts for care experienced young people and the service had linked with Cultural Services, with a view to developing a creative arts project in the future.

10 Protected Characteristics Update

The Head of Children's Social Care provided a verbal update on the Council meeting held on 22 January 2025 at which the Council considered a report of the Corporate Parenting Panel which sought agreement for care experience to be adopted as a local protected characteristic in County Durham.

The Head of Children's Social Care spoke of how proud she was of all the young people who had progressed this piece of work and she thanked the Vice-Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel for presenting the report, which received support from across the Council.

The next steps included young people attending the Chief Executive's Extended Management Team (EMT) meeting on 5 March 2025 to discuss with the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors and Heads of Service, the development of an Implementation Board and a subsequent implementation plan.

The Panel agreed to receive regular progress updates on the work.

11 North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board Overview of Children in Care and Care Experience Week

The Panel received a presentation from Jo McCarthy, Deputy Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and Children in Care and Care Experience and Coopted Member of the Corporate Parenting Panel, which provided feedback from the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB) 'Lunch and Learn' sessions, which took place between 21-25 October, as part of Care Week (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

The Deputy Designated Nurse explained that Durham's Clinical Commissioning Group had integrated into the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and an agreement was made that children in care and care experienced, will be a priority for the Integrated Care Board.

This was an opportunity to ensure that all Durham's young people, including those living outside the county, will have access to the same health offer. A Children in Care and Care Experience workstream was set up comprising 14 local authorities and, as part of Care Week in October, the NENC ICB hosted the 'Lunch and Learn' sessions. Over 500 people attended the sessions which reached wider than the north east and north Cumbria footprint. The sessions included the participation of young people, including Durham young people, who shared their experiences and their thoughts with regard to the future development of services. The Deputy Designated Nurse thanked the young people for giving up their time to attend the sessions adding that their contributions were of great value to the health perspective, particularly in relation to health assessments and the changes that occur at the age of 18. Some of the young people allowed their videos and poetry to be shared during the sessions which made a real impact.

During the sessions, information was provided on practice areas in Durham including the Peer Mentoring Programme, the support for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and the Durham Works programme.

The Deputy Designated Nurse provided an overview of the next steps which included the introduction of a GP Pathway for Care Leavers across the ICB region and the development of a digital health information app, to link with the NHS app. The work will also focus on improving the engagement of young people, with lived experience, in coproduction. There will also be involvement in the work relating to Durham County Council's implementation of care experience as a local protected characteristic. Luke commented that he would like to see links being strengthened between health practitioners and the CiCC and the Deputy Designated Nurse agreed to discuss with Luke, opportunities to attend future CiCC meetings and she was aware that Karen Watson, Designated Nurse, had requested to attend a future regional CiCC meeting.

The Head of Children's Social Care suggested that it would be beneficial to have health representation on the implementation board for care experience as a local protected characteristic. She added that many young people, on reaching the age of 18, struggle with the transition to adult services and she would like to have more information on the ICB's plans in relation to support for trauma as she was aware that some areas provided specialist trauma services for children with care experience, as they transition. The Deputy Designated Nurse responded that she was aware that this was a focus area within the workstream and she would make enquiries to gain more details, for a future update to the Panel.

12 Performance Update

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

Summarising key areas of performance, the Strategy Officer highlighted that the north east continued to have the highest number of children in care. The number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in care had reduced from 74 in December with 19 of those young people reaching the age of 18 and becoming care leavers. The number of children coming into and exiting care continued to align more closely than in previous months. During 2024, there had been a slight increase in children under the age of 9 coming into care and numbers in the 10-17 age cohort had reduced.

The number of young people in foster placement had reduced however the figure remained in line with benchmarks and the number of children in a family setting had increased.

With regard to missing from home, there was a slight increase in missing episodes for December however the number of children going missing had not changed which indicated an increase in the number of missing incidents per child. The percentage of return home interviews completed within 72 hours had increased to approximately 96%.

Referring to care leavers, the Strategy Officer explained that an increasing proportion of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people required care leaver support. 95% of young people aged 17-21 were in suitable accommodation. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training aged 17-18 was at 65% which was in line with the north east average, however, this was below the England average. For those aged 19 to 21, the percentage was 49% which was below benchmarks. The number of initial and review health assessments completed within timescales stood at 69% and 85% respectively.

Cory asked for clarification on the definition of unsuitable accommodation. Officers explained that custody and temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast accommodation were classed as unsuitable accommodation. Secure accommodation was also classed as 'unsuitable' and whilst secure accommodation was of a very high standard, it was not the Council's preferred choice of accommodation for children in our care.

Cory observed that the percentage of 19-21 year olds in education, employment or training continued to fall and he asked what action was being taken to support young people. The Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children informed Cory that a detailed presentation was given by the Head of Progression and Learning at the previous meeting and he offered to link Cory with the Head of Progression and Learning, for further information.

Councillor Deinali asked whether there was a set criterion for the standard of suitable accommodation. Officers clarified that suitability was based on a range of factors and the Staying Close team worked with young people who had tenancy agreements. Young people were offered wrap-around support when moving into supported accommodation and care leavers were entitled to a Setting Up Home allowance. Young People's Advisors also provided assistance to young people when setting-up their homes.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

13 Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report

The Panel received the Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2023-24 report, for information (for copy see file of minutes).

14 Such other business

The Chair announced that a request had been received from young people to reconsider the timings of Corporate Parenting Panel meetings as the current timings conflicted with educational commitments. Members were asked to inform the Senior Partnerships and Policy Officer of any suggestions that they may have and the suggestions would then be included in the corporate process for meeting dates for the forthcoming municipal year. Councillor Quinn requested that it would be helpful if meeting times could avoid school drop-off and pick-up times. Councillor Reed referred to the possibility of holding hybrid meetings and the Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children pointed out that the government had recently carried out a consultation on enabling hybrid attendance at local authority meetings and the outcome of the consultation was awaited.

15 Exclusion of the Public

Resolved:

Under Section 100(a)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public were 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.

16 Regulation 44 Visits – Internal Children’s Homes

Paul Rudd, Strategic Manager for Children’s Homes presented an update report and answered questions from the Panel on Regulation 44 visits relating to internal Children’s Homes (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

The Senior Policy and Partnerships Officer presented the Regulation 44 Alignment showing current vacancies. The Panel agreed that it would be appropriate for the memberships to be refreshed following the forthcoming elections.