

Durham County Council

At a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 23 March 2018** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor P Brookes in the Chair

Panel Members:

Councillors B Bainbridge, H Bennett, J Charlton, J Considine, P Crathorne, G Darkes, J Grant, I Jewell, M McKeon, J Makepeace, O Milburn, C Potts, A Reed, H Smith and C Wilson

Co-opted Members:

R Edwards and W Taylor

Other Members:

Councillor O Gunn (Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services)

Also in attendance:

Florence Coulter (Fostering Team Manager)
Helen Fergusson (Head of Looked After Children and Care Leavers)
Andrea Fletcher (Solicitor for Children and Adult Services)
Selwyn Morgans (Manager, Aycliffe Secure Centre)
Karen Robb (Strategic Manager, Looked After and Permanence)
Ellie Seed (Children in Care Council)
Christine Stonehouse (Head of Virtual School)
Jayne Watson (Senior Partnership Officer)
Dawn Wilson (Senior Commissioning Officer)

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Panel Members, Councillors Richardson, Savory, Scott, Simmons, Marie Baister and Jak Wilson, and, from officer Kelsey Clayton, Legal Manager for Children and Adult Services.

2. Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Friday 23 February 2018 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Senior Partnership Officer reported the following matters arising:

- Item 3 - An update has been circulated to Members from Linda Bailey, Strategic Lead for Progression and Learning, following the presentation on DurhamWorks at the January meeting.

- Item 3 – With reference to concerns raised at the January meeting in relation to mental health issues, a list of questions is being compiled for the meeting with Donna Sweet of Tees Esk and Wear Valley NHS Trust.
- Item 6 – Feedback has been passed to Tom Gorman, Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager, from the discussion on the performance framework at the February meeting.
- Item 6 – Further to a request from the Panel at the February meeting, the ‘Strengths and Difficulties’ questionnaire has been circulated to Members.
- Dates for the next Care Leavers’ Challenge are in the diary.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5. Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Looked After Children and Care Leavers reported that the current number of looked after children was 802. During the month, two large sibling groups have entered the looked after system and this partly accounted for the increase.

In response to a request from Members at a previous meeting, a more detailed breakdown of the profile of looked after children was circulated. It was agreed that the type of information shown in the first two graphs would be shared with the Panel, in the form of a monthly summary.

6. Fostering Service Report

The Chair informed the Panel that the meeting would examine foster caring and how well foster carers are supported.

Karen Robb, Strategic Manager for Looked After Children and Permanence, presented the Fostering Service report which provided an overview of the recent changes within the service and provided assurance to Members in relation to the key lines of enquiry within the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Parenting Resource Packs (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the recommendations contained in the report be approved.

The Chair then introduced Florence Coulter, Fostering Team Manager and three foster carers who had been invited to the meeting to speak to the Panel about their experiences of foster caring. The foster carers provided some background information on themselves, their families, the length of time they have been foster caring and the ages and profiles of the children they care for.

In response to a question about the support they receive, the foster carers emphasised how important the support is that they receive from their allocated social workers. One of the foster carers explained that she has benefited from the stability of having the same allocated social worker for seven years, and, as a result, she felt very well supported. The foster carers said that, at times when allocated social workers are unavailable, there is always a member of staff available to provide advice and support.

The foster carers also reported having good relationships with the children's social workers, however there are frustrations at times around the social worker caseloads etc. which impacts on the service they are able to provide. Keeping foster carers up to date on the children they are looking after, as necessary could help alleviate some of these frustrations.

In respect of training, the foster carers agreed that there is plenty of training available for carers and their families. One of the less experienced foster carers informed the Panel that she had participated in a 'launch-pad' for new foster carers which had enabled her to share her experiences. The foster carers explained that groups and events which include the participation of their families and friends are very important as foster caring affects all family members.

The foster carers were asked to identify areas for improvement. In response, they reported that on occasions there is a lack of communication with the children's social workers, for example, in respect of appointments, court dates and care plans. Asked if they found that support is available across the Council's services as a whole, the foster carers agreed that, in their experience, support is available. One of the foster carers gave an example of how the education service had been flexible with nursery hours to enable her to manage her time with a pre-school age child in her care more effectively, and, another foster carer commented on how valuable the support is that she receives from the Virtual School.

When asked if they could give examples of any particular problems they experience, one of the foster carers commented that in the past, changes in team structures had an impact. Referring to short term placements, they explained that these can be quite hectic in terms of the amount of appointments involved and there can be a lack of communication. On occasions, foster carers have had to remind social workers about appointments and undertaking statutory visits.

Councillor Gunn asked whether there is an awareness amongst foster carers of the steps the Council is taking to address the problems caused by the high demand on Children's Services. The foster carers responded that they do not receive a great deal of information about these matters and they added that the relationship between foster carers and social workers is very much a two-way process. The foster carers commented that they feel they only have a limited understanding of the pressures social workers are under with regard to their workloads, report writing, court hearings and training.

In response to a question from Cllr Jewell on the different levels of foster carers, the Fostering Team Manager, explained that foster carers are assessed and their experience determines their level which is directly aligned to pay rates. Councillor Jewell referred to attachment issues and asked if the foster carers could explain how they cope with these issues. The foster carers explained that the fostering process involves administration including daily recordings and life-story work. Bonds inevitably are formed, however, their aim is to do the best for the children in their care and when it is time for the child to move on, having benefitted from the care they have received, it is a very positive and rewarding experience.

Asked what advice they would give to a person thinking of becoming a foster carer, the foster carers said it is life-changing and challenging, but very rewarding.

The Fostering Team Manager informed the Panel that when enquiries about fostering are received, the Service offers enquirers the opportunity to speak directly to foster carers so that interested parties can be clear on the challenges.

Councillor Grant commented that it would be interesting to have information from foster carers who care for teenagers as this would undoubtedly require a different set of skills to those required to care for younger children.

Cllr Darkes asked the foster carers whether they felt the financial remuneration was adequate. In their opinion, the foster carers felt it was adequate adding that the money is used to provide the children with opportunities that otherwise they may never have.

Cllr Crathorne asked the foster carers whether their experiences have encouraged their families and friends to consider becoming foster carers. They said that their experiences have encouraged others to consider foster caring and one of the foster carers said she had been encouraged to become a foster carer through the positive experiences of a family member who was a foster carer. Cllr Reed spoke very highly of her experiences with the Durham fostering agency. The Fostering Team Manager said that word-of-mouth is a very powerful tool in the recruitment of foster carers.

Members of the Panel expressed their overwhelming admiration for the work the foster carers undertake in order to support our looked after young people.

7. Development / Discussion Item

In groups, the Panel considered whether elected Members know sufficient information about how the service supports its carers to provide reassurance, and, how to further develop the involvement and raise the profile of foster carers and their roles across the wider council. A note was taken of the discussion.

Florence Coulter, Fostering Team Manager, then advised the Panel that there is a vacancy on the Fostering Panel and any Member interested in filling this vacancy was asked to contact Florence Coulter for further information.

Cllr Charlton requested information on independent fostering agencies, the Fostering Team Manager responded that there are currently approximately 27 independent fostering agencies. The Strategic Manager for Looked after Children and Permanence added that 62 children are in short term placements and 77 children are permanently placed. Independent fostering agencies must be registered. The Head of Looked after Children and Young People reassured the Panel that children placed with independent fostering agencies receive the same level of support from the Children and Young People's Service, including services such as Full Circle and the Virtual School.

Panel Members commented that the presentation from the foster carers had been very informative saying it would be useful to undertake a similar exercise in respect of Children's Homes and Aycliffe Secure Centre. Members suggested a meeting at Aycliffe Centre would be useful. The Chair agreed that these suggestions should be considered for future meetings.

The Chair and Panel thanked the foster carers for delivering such an informative and constructive presentation. It was appreciated that the foster carers had taken time out of their busy schedules to attend the meeting to share their experiences and their comments will be taken into consideration.

8. Children in Care Council

Ellie Seed of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) provided the following update:

- Work is ongoing on the Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report
- Meetings are being held to create stronger links with Fostering
- The CiCC has applied for funding for some upcoming events
- Feedback has been provided in respect of the Overview and Scrutiny Working Groups looking into the role of the Social Worker and the Edge of Care Service
- Regular meetings are being held with the Regional Children in Care Council
- The next joint meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Children in Care Council will be held on 17 April 2018 at the new CiCC premises at the Sjovoll Centre, Durham
- Looked After Children are reporting shorter waiting times for appointments with the CAMHS team
- Work is being done to raise awareness of health assessments and free school meals

9. Any other business

It was reported that a second Member representative is required to join Cllr Grant on the Care Leavers' Steering Group. Members interested were asked to inform Karen Robb, Strategic Manager for Looked After and Permanence.

10. 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 items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

11. Regulation 44 visits: summary report (including responsive repairs)

The Panel noted the report of the Head of Looked After Children and Care Leavers which provided a summary of the Regulation 44 visit action plans and responsive repairs for February 2018 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the Regulation 44 action plans and responsive repairs for February 2018 be noted.

12. Regulation 44 Contract

The Panel received a presentation from Dawn Wilson, Senior Commissioning Officer, on Regulation 44 of the Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 (for copy of presentation see file of minutes). The Senior Commissioning Officer informed the Panel that from April 2018, independent visits will be undertaken by Commissioning Officers. The names of the Commissioning Officers will be circulated to Members with a schedule of visits. Members will be consulted on convenient dates. No Member visits will take place in April. Existing pairings with homes will be maintained for the next six months to maintain continuity. Members agreed to provide profiles to share with the homes and the Senior Partnership Officer will source member photos for inclusion. The Senior Commissioning Officer assured the Panel that the Commissioning Officers have received full training on the regulations and they have a vast experience of monitoring and inspection of Children's Homes. A consistent approach to Regulation 44 reports will be undertaken with the new template providing guidance throughout.

Going forward, Members requested clarification on their role in the Regulation 44 visits.