

**COUNCIL  
24 SEPTEMBER 2020**

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**OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO**

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1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Children and Young People Portfolio.

**Health and Well Being Board**

2. The Health and Wellbeing Board met on the 3 September 2020. The main discussion item was the Darlington response to the COVID-19 pandemic with contributions from each Board member reflecting on how it has impacted on service users. The Board received a presentation from the COVID-19 Health Protection Board providing an update on the delivery of the Local Outbreak Control Plan.
3. Representatives of local NHS provider services and Tees Valley Clinical Commissioning Group provided updates to the Board on their preparations for Winter demand, seasonal flu vaccination programme and the local response to the directive from Sir Simon Stevens. "Implementing phase 3 of the NHS response to the COVID-19 pandemic". (August 2020)

**Ofsted Annual Engagement Meeting**

4. On 29 July, the Director of Children and Adults Services and representatives from Children and Education Services met with Ofsted for the Annual Engagement Meeting. The meeting considered the self-assessment submitted to HMI and they acknowledged our continued progress.

**Front Door**

5. The Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) has continues to encourage telephone contacts from partner agencies to ensure relationship-based approaches to dealing with concerns about children.
6. Following the national trend of a decrease in contacts and referrals during initial phase of lockdown, in June and July they started to increase back up to near normal levels, again in line with national trends. There were 671 and 810 contacts received in those two months respectively, an increase from April and May where there were 540 and 652 respectively.

**Early Help**

7. Early Help Services have continued to respond to contacts from professionals and members of the public, maintaining a focus of regular contact with families. Staff have offered advice and guidance on how to manage stress, reduce conflict between parents and children, and using restorative practices to help families build relationships, to help sustain positive changes they have made.

8. Services usually delivered through the children's centres are being delivered online, with advice about children's development, school readiness and regular video sessions around play and positive interaction, proving very popular with families. Some families have needed more than virtual contact, and visits to families in crisis have been undertaken.
9. Where communication with some children has proved challenging, we increased use of the Mind of My Own (MOMO) to better support this. Video calls with young people on the autistic spectrum has brought a different range of challenges, and staff have been creative in engaging children in rapport and conversations.
10. The Early Help Service continue to develop integrating services and approaches to reduce parental conflict, into local services for families under the programme, Reducing Parental Conflict with funding allocated from the Dept of Work and Pensions (DWP). Practitioners have received awareness training on how to support families and identifying need, and a working group are developing digital resources, toolbox for families, and promotional websites to support children's emotional well-being.

### **Corporate Parenting Panel**

11. The Panel met on the 20 July 2020 virtually, with three young people involved alongside Members and Officers. The focus of the Panel on this occasion was to enable Panel members to speak directly with young people to understand how the lockdown had been for them personally, and how supported they had been by their Social Worker or Personal Advisor.

### **Child Protection, Looked After and Care Leaver statistics**

12. At the end of June 2020 there were:
  - 334 children in need (CiN) – the number of children being supported with a CiN plan has slightly reduced from 366 in Q1
  - 95 children subject to child protection plans – This is a 25.2 per cent reduction when compared with June 2019 (127).
  - 291 children in care – Our increase in numbers is significantly affected by the public health emergency. Family Courts buildings had to close which impacted on the hearing of attended contested cases and work going into the Court [save for urgent hearings] was reduced whilst revised plans and arrangements were being put into place. As a result, a number of cases were unable to conclude or be issued which has resulted in the LAC figures continuing to increase. Had the matters progressed in the usual way pre-COVID then it is likely there would have been a reduction of children in care to potentially pre-COVID levels. Court recovery groups comprising Local Authority Officers, Legal Services and CAFCASS have been set up to manage and prioritise children's cases and a pilot is underway to consider this national issue. Throughout the public health emergency the Family Court has continued to operate and deal with matters in alternative ways such as telephone and video hearings. Attended hearings are now taking place and measures are in place to ensure the safety of those attending the Court buildings. The hard work of those in the family justice system continues during these difficult times and the work done to date has been

exceptional in light of those difficulties. Permanence planning continues to be a priority and matters are progressing through the usual processes to ensure that children can leave care where appropriate to do so.

### **Children with Disabilities**

13. To minimise and reduce the risk of Covid-19, interim changes were made to the number of children accessing Harewood Hill Lodge short break centre. Risk assessments identified the most vulnerable children and they have been provided with a service that was/is targeted for a group of vulnerable children/young people with a disability. From 27 July, Harewood Hill Lodge has provided an extended service to the full-service user group. Children and staff have been “grouped” as far as possible to minimise the risk of cross infection.
14. As a result of the medical vulnerabilities of some of these children, parents and carers have been “shielding” so have accepted virtual visits as being beneficial by keeping everyone safe, whilst providing a good level of support. More recently an increased number of doorstep and actual visits have taken place, although virtual visits have continued, and have worked very well for many children and families.

### **Fostering**

15. Our foster carers have been flexible to help us to provide placements to meet the needs of children. Most children have remained in placement with only a small number of moves taking place in accordance with care planning requirements.
16. Where foster carers have had capacity, we have agreed a small number of exemptions to the fostering limit, or variations to the foster carers terms of approval to enable them to care for siblings or to provide emergency placements.
17. Supervising social workers have continued to progress prospective foster carer assessments and the ‘Skills to Foster’ training programme has been delivered virtually.

### **Adoption**

18. Adoption Tees Valley has remained operational using remote means to engage adopters and liaise with assessing social workers in the local authority. For children who have an approved plan for Adoption, Family Finding is continuing, and children are being matched. Virtual matching panels are taking place with matches being recommended to the Agency Decision Maker for approval.
19. The Courts not hearing adoption applications at this time will ultimately generate delays in the making of Adoption Orders. The cohort of children are being tracked by the local authority and the data is being used to inform the Teesside Court Recovery Group as to the scheduling once the Courts commence hearing of cases.
20. Adoption Tees Valley have been awarded a grant from the DfE to enable our special guardians to have membership of Grandparents Plus for support and advice over the next 12 months.

## **Education**

21. The Education Service has continued to support schools in their preparations for pupils returning in September. The Education Strategy Group has met during the Summer holidays to inform plans for a full return of pupils.
22. The Education Psychology Service has developed a recovery curriculum that schools can use to help with the emotional support of pupils returning after the period of school closure.
23. The Virtual School for Looked After and Previously Looked After Children operated normally through the partial school closure period albeit in a fully “virtual” model in order to support schools, social workers, carers and pupils. The PEP process continued as “normal” for children in care, so each had their termly education plan and review, the only difference was that the meeting took place virtually.
24. Children in care were supported by a creative arts project, a reading scheme and a variety of online resources available from the new Virtual School website. Some children were also supported with outdoor activities and sports equipment.

## **Special Educational Needs**

25. Following cabinet approval for the SEND resource bases work has started on site at Red Hall Primary School, with the foundations going in for the new unit and some adaptations in the existing school well underway.
26. The site is being prepared at Rise Carr College and work is due to start there shortly.

## **School Forum**

27. There has been no School Forum meeting since the last Council update.

## **Learning and Skills Service**

28. Courses at Learning and Skills will restart early September albeit largely online in the first instance. Apprenticeship recruitment has been taking place online and training with learners is planned to restart in September on a one to one basis. Risk Assessments and Safe Schemes of Work are in place for all locations.

## **Employment Support**

29. Routes to Work staff continue to support clients with significant pastoral support during the pandemic to supplement employability skills support. Youth Employment Initiative tutors continue to offer employability skills support online and are seeing a definite upturn in number of clients being referred.

## **Commissioning and Contracts**

30. The Tees Valley Children’s residential care contract which commenced in April 2020 has now reopened for new providers to join. Officers in Darlington are proactively engaging with providers of children’s residential care in their locality to encourage participation in this contract arrangement.

## **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

31. Statutory Partners invited me to attend as Cabinet Members with portfolio for children and provided me with an overview of current arrangements and how they have been adapted due to C-19 to enable the key statutory partners to have oversight on vulnerable children. Partners reiterated the benefit of having a joint approach to safeguarding and obtaining a whole family approach. I was also assured of the transparent and open approach and opportunity to further scrutinise partnership activity.
32. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners (SSP) continue to meet every three weeks and engage with wider partners on a rotational basis by inviting key leads to provide an overview of current issues and provide assurance for their service areas.
33. Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Trust and Education sector attended in July. Partners were assured of the measures in place and how services have adapted to cope with the crisis and continued to engage and support families. It was positive to hear agencies are working together to support each other which demonstrates there are robust partnership arrangements in place even during these unprecedented times.
34. Partners were provided with an overview of the findings of a six-week review of the front door telephone contact arrangements, which is part of the Strengthening Families Programme, and were assured by the examples of positive feedback from partners who welcomed the opportunity of having a telephone conversation rather than emailing, to help them consider what it is they are worried about, which is in line with relational practices and is allowing further opportunity to continue to develop better relationships operationally.
35. The Chair of the Quality Assurance and Performance Management sub-group provided a presentation on work to date. Partners were assured by the amount of activity that has taken place between this group and the Learning and Development sub-group. Partners were encouraged at the activity undertaken and agreed the presentation provided a good view across collective systems and it was clear to see what is working well and what needs to be driven forward.

**Councillor Jon Clarke**  
**Children and Young People Portfolio**