

COUNCIL
21 MARCH 2024

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO

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

Children's Front Door

2. The Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) form part of the Children's Front Door and are the social care element of help and protection at the first point of contact.
3. During November contacts received into the Front Door remained high, there was also an increase in contacts received where children are already open to social care. Of these contacts, 88.3% were completed within 24 hours with only 0.9% are completed in over three working days. Of note all immediate safeguarding contacts are referred to social care without delay and all within two hours. Of the contacts received 13.9% had an outcome of 'referrals to social care'.
4. Development work around partnership working is a focus for the Front Door in 2024/25. Ensuring that every possible option is explored in relation to what help a family might need is something that will be fully considered alongside the options of a referral to Building Stronger Families or social care. Through this development work the options of help and support from Universal services, and also help via an external lead professional will become a natural outcome for more families.
5. We continue to work closely with our Police colleagues and recently their representation has relocated into the Durham Mash building. This has been a move that Police have worked with us on and in these early stages there has been no interruption to operational matters.
6. The survey monkey has provided excellent feedback for the Children's Initial Advice Team during November 2023:
 - (a) 92.8% of callers said they felt that their wishes and views were listened to during the call.
 - (b) 100% of callers felt that their expectations with regard to the call being respectful and polite were met.
 - (c) 92.8% of callers felt that the call would have a positive impact on the child, young person or family.
7. In terms of children who go missing and might be/or are at risk of exploitation, during November there was a reduction in missing episodes. 100% of Return Home Interviews were offered to our young people, not all young people choose to engage but 76.2% of interviews offered were completed within 48 hours.

Building Stronger Families Service

8. The drop-in sessions at Daisy Chain which is a service that supports autistic and neurodivergent children, young people and adults are going well. Building Stronger Families staff attend these sessions and have been able to offer help via Building Stronger Families and some families have agreed to an Early Help Assessment to try to understand the behaviour and explore the root cause before the children are placed on the neurodevelopmental pathway. The staff are also able to give advice and guidance about de-escalation of extreme behaviours, which families report to be finding helpful.
9. Targeted groups continue to develop from the Children's Centres, and across the whole town, with good attendance from children and families at the Families Together group based at McNay Street. This particular group focuses on positive parenting, led by parents to identify what their greatest needs are. Themes around parenting practice have been focused on the impact of trauma on children's behaviour, as well as positive reward and quality time to promote behaviour, and parents accepting they play a part in shaping how children do behave. Alongside this parent led group, groups of children and young people are working with practitioners skilled in therapeutic interventions, regulating emotions, and also helping them build positive self confidence and self-esteem.
10. Plans are underway for a baby group to be delivered from Mount Pleasant School; this will be alongside health colleagues who will be delivering a well-baby clinic. The aim of the baby group will be to support parents to promote speech and language in children, with our First Words Together programme, which is accredited, this serves to help parents build confidence with sharing books, stories and songs with their babies. Speech and language is something that the Headteacher has identified as an issue for some of the children entering the school nursery at age 2. The hope is to develop something similar from Skerne Park the following year, to ensure that programmes reach across the whole town, and are inclusive for all.
11. The Building Stronger Families Team continue to lead on high numbers of early help assessments supporting families across Darlington, working closely with partners to ensure best outcomes for children, with a whole family approach in line with the Supporting Families Program.

Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)

12. In 2022/23 the YPEJS saw an increase in First Time Entrants into the youth justice system, rising from 19 in 2021/22 to 34 in 2022/23. Year to date this is levelling out, however via the YPEJS Management Board exploration of this is taking place with some key lines of enquiry around police referral types and impact of unmet need being considered.
13. With support from the Police & Crime Commissioner the service has employed an additional 0.5 Victim Liaison Officer (VLO) and from April this year the VLO has worked with 68 victims of youth crime and has engaged in 98 activity sessions, 30 assessment meetings, two interactions from the victim at Referral Order Panels and three Restorative face to face meetings. The service has delivered 520 hours of reparation.

14. On 15 February 2024 the service will commence their seventh year of the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award. The cohorts this year include a group of young people who have been a victim of youth crime, a group of young people from Rise Carr College and a group of young people who have been referred as a result of being involved in ASB/low level crime.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

15. As of 7 February, the five assessment and safeguarding teams have 680 children open to them. Caseloads across the teams are becoming more equitable due to alterations to the locality boundaries and continued efforts to ensure that families are stepped down or closed in a timely manner.
16. As of 7 February, the A&S teams have 162 children open for assessment, 271 children supported under Child in Need, 150 children on Child Protection plans and 64 children in our care.
17. The number of care proceedings where we are concluding on a supervision order is increasing (currently 35 children). A review process has been agreed with our IRO team and all of these children are now being reviewed in line with the new legal framework. This is contributing to reductions in numbers of Children in Care.
18. In the three months to the end of January the assessment and safeguarding teams brought 17 children into our care. In the same three-month period 36 children open to the assessment and safeguarding teams, and two children open to Children with Disabilities, ceased to be children in our care. Three of these children were adopted.
19. Significant efforts to reduce overdue assessments in locality teams continues. Service Managers oversight continues to be in place around caseloads, workflows and timeliness of work being completed to ensure that positive progress is maintained.
20. The Locality model of working for the Assessment and Safeguarding teams is now in place and functioning well. The team managers have begun to develop links with their local Secondary schools. The demands on the teams are constantly reviewed and boundaries adjusted accordingly.
21. Our Children with Disabilities team are supporting 85 children and young people; 24 of these children are supported under Child in Need, and a further 49 under Child in Need review (to maintain and review existing packages of care). The team have one child open for assessment and eight children who are in our care.
22. Arrangements for transferring young people from our Children with Disabilities team to Adult Social care are increasingly well embedded through the Transfer to Adult Social Care panel process and young people are starting their preparation for adulthood at an earlier stage. Ongoing scoping exercise to broaden the scope to be a preparation for adult pathway for the wider SEND population.

Looked After and Care Leaver information

23. As of 30 January 2024, there are 321 children who are looked after. This is a reduction from 346 in October 2023 when last reported. This is due to focused work across all services to ensure when children become looked after, all other support has been considered. Monthly tracking meetings are held to reduce delay for children and ensure these are progressed.
24. There are 136 care leavers currently being supported by the team aged 18-25. We keep in touch with all our care leavers and there are regular opportunities for them to come together for activities and support.
25. We have been successful in obtaining funding for three new projects; Family Finding, Mentoring and a Safe Space youth provision. Family finding will be supported by three additional Lifelong Links workers who support children and young people to establish a network of support as well as support from a dedicated life story social worker and a therapeutic worker.
26. The mentoring programme offers the opportunity for care experienced adults to become mentors for younger children in care. We had a launch coffee morning for this and the advert is now live for care leavers to apply. We have a care leaver and foster carer as part of the project group for both of these projects.
27. Safe space is a youth provision ran by the team for children in our care. It is a mix of social activities and focused activities aimed at reducing loneliness, anti-social behaviour and supporting children's emotional health.
28. Staying Close remains a significant strength. We have been able to support 22 young people as part of this pilot, funded by the DfE. This month we saw one young person become a new parent and due to the support offered to him through Staying Close he has been able to keep the baby in his care with support.

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

29. We currently have 49 fostering households and at the end of November we had eight foster carers at stage 1 of the recruitment process which includes initial checks and references and five carers in stage 2 which is the full fostering assessment with a view to progressing to panel. As part of this we have two sets of carers who are transferring from an IFA and one carer from another Local Authority. The carers are progressing through the assessment subject to our new offer being agreed in February 2024.
30. Fostering with Northeast is a regional pilot whereby carers contact a central hub to make their initial enquiry. We have received seven enquiries via the hub, five have been generated through internal recruitment and two via the hub.
31. We are in the process of establishing a second mockingbird constellation which is where several fostering families are supported by a hub carer who has a spare bedroom. This enables a wider fostering family network where they can have support from each other informally and via sleepovers.

32. We have a plan for recruitment and marketing activity across the summer. This includes being part of the marquee in Darlington town centre, sponsoring a 'feelings bear' to have a bear for fostering which will enable fostering to be promoted across Darlington and marketing of our new offer if approved.
33. Our supported accommodation applications are in process with Ofsted to ensure we abide by the new regulations which came into effect in October 2023.

Homes for our Children

34. Cedars Children's Home were inspected by Ofsted and graded 'Good'. This is a huge achievement for the team as a brand-new provision. Cedars offers emergency care and short breaks for children on the edge of becoming looked after. The team are providing outreach support alongside this to support all children active to a social worker.
35. Our other three mainstream children's homes are at full occupancy. One of our young people has raised funds for charity at Christmas to buy presents for children who otherwise may not receive one. She raised funds from the local community and purchased and wrapped these presents herself. She then did the Boxing Day dip for charity.
36. We continue to expand out taster flat provision and currently we have nine flats. This is supporting young people to transition to independence with support. They are utilised by our Staying Close project.
37. Harewood Lodge continues to offer short breaks to children with a disability. Occupancy internally is between 50% and 60% and we are utilising beds for other Local Authorities to generate income.

Childcare Entitlement

38. The first phase of the expansion begins in April 2024 with the introduction of a 15-hour entitlement for working parents of 2-year-olds. Providers across the sector (schools, private and voluntary providers, and childminders) were surveyed and a provider event held in the Dolphin Centre in November to assess the appetite of providers to be involved in the new entitlement and their capacity.
39. The Council portal used by parents to apply for eligibility codes has been updated by the systems team to reflect the new entitlement. The hourly rates to be paid to providers in 2024-25 were agreed at Schools Forum on 16 January. Providers will now be in a position to consider what places they can offer going forward. An assessment of capacity for the September extension, when a 15-hour entitlement for working parents of children from 9 months will be introduced, will be conducted shortly.
40. Darlington is ahead of many local authorities in updating software for eligibility codes and issuing hourly rates to providers. This will help both parents and providers in the weeks ahead.

Youth Unemployment

41. The Darlington 18–24-year-old claimant count has fallen from 7.3% (550 young people) in October 2023 to 7.0% (525 young people) in December 2023. In comparison the North-East average has fallen by 0.1% to 5.9%, and the national average risen by 0.1% to 5.0%.
42. The December 2023 figures (October 2023 in brackets) for the Tees Valley are as follows:
- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| (a) Hartlepool | 9.0% (9.5%) |
| (b) Redcar and Cleveland | 8.3% (8.5%) |
| (c) Middlesbrough | 7.7% (8.2%) |
| (d) Stockton -on-Tees | 7.4% (7.7%) |
| (e) Darlington | 7.0% (7.3%) |

Children’s Commissioning and Contracts

43. A procurement exercise has been undertaken to secure a provider for the delivery of the joint health and social care commissioned Young Carers support service effective from 1 April 2024. The successful contractor was Family Action. Family Action have been working closely with service commissioners to ensure the existing service mobilises seamlessly. Family Action are a charitable provider and are well established in the delivery of a number of positively impactful young carers support services across the country. As part of the Service Specification requirements, Family Action will be progressing the service delivery in Darlington in line with the priorities of Darlington Young Carers and their families and will be a proactive member of the Carer’s Strategy Steering Group.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

44. Working Together to Safeguarding Children Statutory Guidance has been revised and was published in December 2023. The guidance sets out substantive changes to strengthen multi-agency safeguarding partnership arrangements to work together to safeguard and protect children locally. The Partnership will be focussing on how it intends to implement the changes over the coming months.
45. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group have not met in this period and therefore, there are no further child safeguarding updates to provide at this time.

Councillor Nick Wallis
Children and Young People Portfolio