

**COUNCIL**  
**16 MAY 2024**

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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.

**Children's Front Door**

2. The Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) remains stable in terms of staffing, it is performing consistently well. Refresher work has been carried out with CIAT and this has focused on the using of the Professor Thorpe Model when contacts from professionals are received into the service. The work that has been carried out in this refresher training has contributed to a reduction in referrals to social care and the outcome to contacts are more appropriate and a more proportionate level. The team are ensuring that they consider all potential outcomes of universal, external early help and help from our Building Stronger Families Team in order for the most appropriate level of service for the individual needs of the family to be provided.
3. Following a change in Police staffing which led to a restructure for the Police in terms of their work as partners in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), the Children's Front Door management team visited Newton Aycliffe MASH to develop new working relationships. The visit provided an opportunity to feedback on deep dive work that has been completed around the high level of police contacts that receive 'no further action', findings are that whilst there are some Police contacts that were unnecessary to share with the Children's Front Door, these were minimal and the main issue is that the outcome recorded being 'no further action' doesn't always reflect the work carried out. The Performance Team are working with CIAT to ensure that outcomes that would have been deemed as 'no further action' but where work with the family has been carried out or there has been signposting to other services will be captured in the performance reporting.
4. There is a sharp focus on building stronger relationships with partners and partnership meetings have offered for partners to spend time with the team at the Children's Front Door. This offer has been taken up by some in Education and the visits have been successful and helped partners in Education understand the nature of the Children's Front Door and the way in which it works.
5. During January 2024 there has been a reduction in missing episodes. There was only one Return Home Interview not carried out, this was due to the young person's mental health being poor at that time and it was not appropriate to pursue this.
6. Child exploitation continues to be a priority for the service. Abuse and crime in relation to this area of safeguarding work is discussed via the Missing and Exploited Multi Agency Meeting held fortnightly (known as the MEG). This meeting enables plans to be built and action taken to increase the safety of children and young people, as well as disrupt crime.

The Child Exploitation Matrix is now populated onto the Liquid Logic electronic system, this will assist practitioners in building into their work the need to continually assess risk to a child or young person when exploitation is suspected or known.

### **Building Stronger Families Service**

7. Targeted groups continue to be successful. Staff from the Building Stronger Families Team have recently delivered a pre-birth programme for a cohort of school age teenagers who are going to be parents. The group was very well attended, and the evaluation of the group is underway but already it's known that parents have learnt a lot about caring for a baby, the impact of lifestyle choices, risk, and prioritising baby's needs, so that they have the best basis to build their parenting skills on. From this group they can continue to be supported through the family hubs and have been invited to attend future baby groups once their babies have arrived. Both parents attended the group, with a significantly high number of fathers being able to confidently access this group.
8. The number of Early Help Assessments initiated remains high and this is placing pressure on the service, staff are working efficiently to ensure that families get the support they need, and there is a focus on trying to reduce the number of re-referrals in the future by ensuring there is appropriate step-down at the conclusion of any work with families. When work with Building Stronger Families ends the family are able to access a number of groups giving longer term support through the family hub model.
9. The Early Help Assessment is currently under review, to ensure that it is more concise and family friendly. The aim is to produce a more succinct and family friendly assessment, it will be less intimidating for the family to read, and they will work through a programme with the team around the family that reflects everyone's voices, and a final plan that supports the family to sustain the progress that they have made.
10. Families Together is a parenting programme aimed to support the learning of parents and their children. The model is that whilst parents work together in a group to learn about parenting strategies, and why children might behave in a way to communicate their needs to their parents and carers, the children are also working in group with a focus on therapeutic activities, and emotional regulation support. This is another group that is very well attended by fathers, and the evaluations are showing positive results for the whole family.
11. I am attending meetings of the HEY network, where Early Years professionals (including nurseries, Health Visitors, social work and education practitioners) share best practice across Darlington. We are considering how to pool resources; share visions and goals; feed into the healthy weight plans for Darlington; provide networking opportunities for collaborative working; and how we can together best reach our target population in terms of messaging and resources.

### **Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)**

12. An application has been made for further grant funding via Immediate Justice monies, this is to build the current 0.5 post of Victim Liaison Office to a full-time post.

13. There is a new mandatory assessment launched from 1 April 2024, this is for use with Pre-Caution disposals, Youth Cautions and Youth Conditional Cautions, this assessment is designed to be more relational and is underpinned by the YJS's child first principles.
14. The reparation team are working towards the development of new reparation projects including work with veterans and sheltered over 50's accommodation and a gardening project at a local cemetery promoting pro-social identity, community connection as well as restorative justice.
15. I attend the Darlington Young People's Engagement and Justice Service Management Board. At our meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> April, we considered the Government's termination of the Turnaround Programme in March 2025. Turnaround has been a youth early intervention programme, enabling Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) to intervene earlier and improve outcomes for children on the cusp of entering the youth justice system. Here in Darlington, through Turnaround, we have contacted 139 families; without this provision we could have only contacted 10. No research or justification has been given for the ending of this programme, and the decision is deeply disappointing.
16. At time of going to print, there is a plan in place to maintain the funding of 2 of the 3 members of staff that are currently funded via Turnaround. This means that for 24/25 Turnaround is funding 3 x FT Workers and the plan for 25/26 is that 2 of these members of staff will remain in their posts to continue to carry out this vital work that has brought about good outcomes for our young people and their families. I will provide Council with further information when I have it.

### **Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities**

17. As of 27 March 2024, the five assessment and safeguarding teams have 631 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. Since February 2024 outcome meetings are now held with partner agencies and the family to agree the closure or step down to ensure all parties are clear about the outcome and any further targeted work with the family. These have to date been received positively by all involved. Outcome letters are also sent to the family and copied to partner agencies.
18. As of 27 March 2024, the A&S teams have 164 children open for assessment, 330 children supported under Child in Need, 147 children on Child Protection plans and 60 children in our care.
19. The number of care proceedings where we are concluding on a supervision order is increasing (currently 31 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.
20. In the three months to the end of January the Assessment and Safeguarding teams brought 21 children into our care, four of which were UASC. In the same three-month period 46 children open to the Assessment and Safeguarding teams/CWD and Looked After Through Care team, ceased to be children in our care. Three of these children were

adopted, 19 children were rehabilitated home, 18 children remained living with extended family via either a Child Arrangements Order or Special Guardianship Order.

21. Significant effort to reduce overdue assessments in locality teams continues and this is now a targeted piece of work with one locality team. Service Manager oversight continues to be in place around caseloads, workflows and timeliness of work being completed to ensure that positive progress is maintained.
22. The Locality model of working within the Assessment and Safeguarding teams has been in place since December 2022 and continues to function well. The Team Managers have developed links with their local Secondary schools. The demands on the teams are constantly reviewed and boundaries adjusted accordingly. This has led to equity of referral numbers and a workload balance across the teams.
23. Our Children with Disabilities team are supporting 92 children and young people; 28 of these children are supported under Child in Need, and a further 51 under Child in Need review (to maintain and review existing packages of care). The team have six children open for assessment and seven children who are in our care. There are no children subject to child protection plans in CWD.
24. 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. Four children have been supported to successfully transition to Adult Social Care from between November 2023 and January 2024.
25. An ongoing scoping exercise is in place to broaden the scope for preparation for an adult pathway for the wider SEND population and the Team Manager for Children with Disabilities is now supporting and attending SEN transition meetings for children who are not open to Children's Social Care.
26. Fifty-three pieces of Social Care advice have been completed for children going through the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process who do not have a Social Worker. The Team Manager or Advanced Practitioner attend fortnightly Multi Agency Provision Panel (MAPP) as the Social Care representative within the EHCP process.

### **Looked After and Care Leaver information**

27. As of 29 February 2024, there are 310 children who are looked after. This is a reduction from 321 in January 2024 and 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.
28. There are 128 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. These events are organised daily during Holiday periods such as walks, and other free activities are organised.
29. We have been successful in obtaining funding for three new projects; Family Finding, Mentoring and a Safe Space youth provision. Family finding is supported by three

additional Lifelong Links workers two of which are now in post who are supporting 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.

30. The mentoring programme offers the opportunity for care experienced adults to become mentors for younger children in care. We have successfully recruited 15 care experienced young people to become Mentors and their training is currently underway.
31. 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. This continues to be held every Monday evening.
32. 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 initiative continues to grow month on month. Some comments from workers feedback about the young people are "growing into himself and is happy" "House Proud and in work "Rings for help when needs it".
33. Together with my Cabinet colleague Cllr. Matthew Roche, I am undertaking a piece of work to consider the welfare of asylum-seeking children, including Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, in the Borough. I have met with representatives of Darlington schools and a local educational charity, and further meetings are planned.

### **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

34. Up to the end of February 2024, we have 51 fostering households with five active enquiries which the service is awaiting an application. We had four foster carers at stage one of the recruitment process which includes initial checks and references and one carer in stage two which is the full fostering assessment with a view to progressing to panel. Two carers were awaiting fostering panel for approval.
35. Fostering with Northeast is a regional pilot whereby carers contact a central hub to make their initial enquiry. Up until the end of February 2024, we have received eight enquiries via the hub, six have been generated through internal recruitment and two via the hub. I am working with fellow Children's Services Portfolio leads across the Northeast to determine how the hub can best deliver for looked after children here in Darlington. I have also attended a listening session with foster carers since the last meeting of Council, and it was good to hear how well received our new package of financial and other support for foster carers is being received.
36. We launched our second Mockingbird constellation on 15th March 2024, which is where several fostering families are supported by a hub carer who has a spare bedroom. Both Cllr. Hilary Allen and I attended, and it was great to chat with our dedicated foster carers and some of the young people they look after. Mockingbird enables a wider fostering family network where they can have support from each other informally and via sleepovers. Within constellation one we are supporting seven sets of carers with 15 children and second constellation we will support six sets of carers with 10 children.
37. 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.

38. Fostering Care Fortnight is The Fostering Network's annual campaign to raise the profile of fostering and show how Foster Care transforms lives. I have recorded a video message in support of the initiative and met with some of our brilliant foster carers and the children they look after in Gladstone Street.
39. The campaign will take place from 13-26 May 2024. This year's theme is Fostering Moments, celebrating the moments that define fostering journeys, big and small. We have several events planned to include podcasts and pictures of staff and carers which will be released via social media. We will hold a celebration event for our carers, promotion via "One Darlington", social media channels and local press all highlighting the angle of increased investment in our carer offer and promoting fostering with Darlington.
40. Our supported accommodation applications are in process with Ofsted to ensure we abide by the new regulations which came into effect in October 2023. There has been a slight delay to registration due to the resignation received from our previous Fostering and Supported Lodging team manager as well as recruitment to a new team manager who is in the process of registering with Ofsted.

### **Homes for our Children**

41. Cedars, Lancaster Close and Harewood Hill Lodge children's Home were all inspected by Ofsted and graded 'Good'. This is a huge achievement for the team with Cedars as a brand-new provision and Lancaster opening as a new build home. Cedars offers emergency care and short breaks for children on the edge of becoming looked after. Lancaster staff and young people moved from Eldon Street which was previously graded requires improvement.
42. My visits to our children's homes, where I meet with young people and the staff that care for them, continue to underline for me the dedication and professionalism that characterise our residential provision.
43. Our three mainstream children's homes are at full occupancy. Cedars offers short break and emergency provision to young people Monday to Friday with outreach work provided outside of these operation hours.
44. We continue to expand out taster flat provision and currently we have 12 flats. This is supporting young people to transition to independence with support. They are utilised by our Staying Close project.
45. Harewood Lodge continues to offer short breaks to children with a disability. Occupancy internally is 72% supporting 23 children/young people. Nine nights are utilised by children from other Local Authorities. With support from commissioning colleagues, we have contacted regional authorities to advise of capacity.

## Youth Unemployment

46. The Darlington 18–24-year-old claimant count has risen from 7.1% (535 young people) in December 2023 to 7.2% (540 young people) in February 2024. In comparison the North-East average has increased by 0.1% to 6.0%, and the national average risen by 0.2% to 5.2%.
47. The February 2024 figures (December 2023 in brackets) for the Tees Valley are as follows:
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|-------------------------|-------------|
| a) Hartlepool           | 8.9% (9.0%) |
| b) Redcar and Cleveland | 8.7% (8.3%) |
| c) Middlesbrough        | 7.8% (7.6%) |
| d) Stockton -on-Tees    | 7.7% (7.5%) |
| e) Darlington           | 7.2% (7.0%) |

## Education

48. Marchbank Special School was recently inspected by Ofsted and was judged to be “Good.” Inspectors recognised that children thrive at Marchbank; the nurturing environment helps pupils to feel safe and ready to learn and there is a relentless ambition for all pupils to achieve success. The school’s approach to developing pupils’ personal development is impressive and pupils are exceptionally well prepared for their next steps.
49. The percentage of Darlington children offered one of their top three school choices has climbed to the highest level for three years. Friday 1 March was secondary offer day when year 6 children and up and down the country learned which secondary school they will attend for the 2024/2025 academic year.
50. This year, there were 1,143 Darlington families who applied for a secondary place for their child by the application deadline of 31 October, an increase of 4% since 2022. Of those, 96% have been offered a place at their first-choice school. A further 3.3% have been offered a place at another of their school choices, meaning over 99% have been offered a place at one of their top three preferred schools.

## Children’s Commissioning and Contracts

51. A programme of onsite quality monitoring visits is underway across in borough externally commissioned children’s residential care, supported accommodation and foster care placements. The quality monitoring visits incorporate a review of; core policies, operating procedures, staff recruitment practice and training, a review of the child’s individual support plan with a specific focus on evidencing how individualised positive outcomes are being achieved. Several children have given direct feedback on their care arrangements as part of the monitoring visits which has formed an integral part of the quality assessment. To date services have evidenced a high quality of care resulting in positive outcomes and progression for the young people.
52. Darlington Borough Council have led on a collaborative commissioning and procurement exercise with Middlesbrough Borough Council and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council in relation to SEND Mediation Services. Mediation arrangements are specifically linked to decisions made about education, health and social care needs assessments and plans of a

young person with an Education Health and Care Plan. The Council must appoint in impartial and independent provider to ensure an impartial process is adhered to in respect of process. The new provider is Mediate Legal and are a firm based in Liverpool. The contract commenced on 8 January 2024 and to date, service implementation and engagement has been positive.

### **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

53. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners met on 13 March and discussed the key provisions outlined in the new Working Together to Safeguard Children Statutory Guidance. Partners highlighted having a joint child and adult partnership has been a real strength and recognise it needs to consider the aspirations of the children's guidance and agreed whatever changes are made need to reflect what is needed for Darlington.
54. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 27 February. The group was provided with an overview of safeguarding roles within the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and their multi-agency approach to safeguarding, the group welcomed the connectivity and is positive that representatives will join Partnership Groups.
55. The group was provided with an overview of the findings from the Family H Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review undertaken by the Partnership. Work is ongoing to take forward the actions identified to respond to the recommendations. A number of resources have been developed to share the learning from the review and have been published on the Partnership website.
56. The Director of Public Health provided an overview on their plan to strengthen partnership working on the domestic abuse agenda to help prevent, support and tackle those who cause harm. It will begin by strengthening representation on the Durham and Darlington Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Executive Group (DASVEG) to enable local intelligence to be fed in.

### **Darlington Commitment to Carers**

57. On 17<sup>th</sup> April, together with the Leader and Cllr. Anne-Marie Curry, I attended the launch of Darlington Commitment to Carers. I am really pleased that it contains a detailed section relating to young carers, and I will be liaising closely with the recently-commissioned Family Action's Young Carers Darlington team. They are working with young carers (5-25), and their families, to provide support where needed. The service ensures that children and young people are protected from inappropriate caring and have the support they need to thrive and enjoy positive childhoods, to achieve their full potential.
58. Family Action support young carers through a wide-range of activities, from initial assessments to one-to-one sessions, from fun activities to Carer Breaks, and through ensuring that they keep the Young Carer at the heart of all we do. I will keep Council and Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee updated on progress with the new service, and delivery against the Commitment to Carers Plan.



### **New Youth MP for Darlington**

59. Together with the Mayor, the Leader, and Cllr. Curry, I was delighted to attend the declaration for Darlington's Member of Youth Parliament (MYP) on 25<sup>th</sup> March. Stephen Adenuga was elected as MYP for 2024 - 26, with Jack James as Deputy MYP. I had previously attended hustings at Longfield Secondary School, and was really impressed with the manifestos of all four candidates. I will be meeting with Stephen, Jack and their team regularly to ensure that the Council is listening and responding to the voices of the Borough's children and young people.

**Councillor Nick Wallis**  
**Children and Young People Portfolio**