

**COUNCIL**  
**18 JULY 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.

**Placement Sufficiency Update**

2. Since the Placement Sufficiency Strategy was launched, awareness raising of the new offer for foster carers has been publicised, with additional focus during the Foster Care Fortnight Campaign which will be outlined later in the report.
3. Since the launch of the new foster carer offer our numbers of foster carers has increased from 49 to 51. We have received eight enquiries since the new offer was launched and currently have 12 sets of foster carers actively progressing through the assessment process.
4. In terms of our childrens Homes, in the next stage of our expansion our home at Gilling Crescent is due to move to a new build property at Butterfield Drive. A site visit was undertaken on 3 June 2024. Ofsted stage one registration has been submitted and handover of the site was planned for later in July for our young people to move in. At this stage Gilling Crescent will be repurposed creating additional local placements for our children in care.

**Children's Front Door**

5. The Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) continues to perform well. The main focus of improvement during 2023/24 was to ensure the right service was provided to families, and this focus stemmed from a rise in referrals to social care during 2022/23. Analysis of this led to refresher training of the use of the model applied by social workers in CIAT being delivered. This was successful and there has been a decrease in the conversion rate of contacts to referrals to social care from 17.4% to 12.1%. There is now a focus on ensuring that social workers always consider partnership working when exploring what the right service for families might be. Universal services, as well as internal and external Early Help options are to become a focus once immediate protection or historic and complex matters of abuse have been ruled out. The refresher training has now been added to the Workforce Development Training Directory and will be embedded into learning for social workers.
6. Re-referrals to Social Care increased during 2023/24 with 24.1% of referrals to Social Care being re-referrals within 12 months. Work is underway across CIAT and Assessment and Safeguarding, along with the Quality Team to ensure that themes and actions are addressed and the loop is closed for learning in order to see improvements in this area.

7. The 4 Kids project continues to be a pivotal role with our children and families that have experienced domestic violence and the feedback that they receive is very positive. The two workers attend daily triage in respect of police safeguarding forms and are able to provide the social workers with Body Worn Camera Footage, this assists with their decision making in the contact enquiry stage.

*"Absolutely brilliant work...were very good with me from the moment they made contact. They provided me with lots of useful information and ongoing support."*

*"Think it is a great service."*

*"Very helpful and understanding."*

8. During recent months we have given several external partners the opportunity to shadow within CIAT and partners who have taken up this offer have fed back how helpful this was in terms of developing a deeper insight into the work that takes place at the Front Door.
9. The survey monkey evidenced excellent feedback for the Children's Initial Advice Team year end 23/24.

*"It was very helpful and I feel the young person will be given the support she needs".*

*"Social worker was very supportive, listened to my concerns and explained the process in detail around next steps. She had excellent communication skills was kind and friendly. She expressed empathy towards the family but placed the child's needs at the centre of the support".*

*"took the time to gather information".*

10. There has been a reduction in children who go missing during 2023/24 and within this cohort there is a significant reduction of children in our care going missing. This is the result of excellent work carried out with children's homes and with Children's Homes Managers and staff, there has also been an improvement with regard to Return Home Interviews offered and completed within 72 hours.
11. Child exploitation continues to be monitored and disrupted with the assistance of the Missing and Exploited Group (MEG), this multi-agency meeting is held fortnightly. There is continual improvement being made to this complex area of safeguarding and one improvement is that the Child Exploitation Matrix is now populated onto the Department's Liquid Logic electronic system and this means that all information where exploitation is a feature is held on the child's case file and is easily accessible.

### **Building Stronger Families Service**

12. Targeted groups continue to be successful. Evaluation is underway as with all groups to identify areas for improvement but also give an indication as to what families are asking for in terms of support.
13. 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, this is part of a larger piece of work being carried out across the whole service. 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. In addition, we are driving forward and supporting staff and partners in the consideration of step down to universal services. This is an ongoing piece of work which we hope will have a positive impact on the families in order to prevent escalation back into statutory services.

14. The Early Help Assessment is currently under review. 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. It is likely to be launched later in the year with the intention that there will be a pilot of the new assessment undertaken by management.

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

15. The service recently undertook an in-depth audit of those young people who had come into the system as First Time Entrants and in particular those entering with a history of sexual offending. The findings were scrutinised at the YPEJS Strategic Management Board and actions were borne out of this to ensure oversight remains. However, in year, performance would indicate that the FTE's have reduced back to a rate that does not cause concern.
16. Confirmation has been received that an additional 0.5 Victim Liaison Officer will join the service following a successful application for further funding via the Immediate Justice grant. This will enhance our current provision when working with all victims of crime.
17. On 1 April, all Youth Justice Services now have to complete a new assessment tool when working with those Young People under the prevention and diversion route. Staff training was completed and the team welcome this new focus which is aimed to be more relational.
18. The management team are currently writing the Annual Strategic Plan which is a requirement of the Youth Justice Board in order that we continue to receive grant funding. This is due for completion by the end of June and we are on track to do this.

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

19. We now have the end of year performance data available which shows that in 2023/2024, 1,554 children had a Children & Families assessment completed of which 904 were outcome as 'no further action', 20.3% resulted in a child in need plan, 1.9% led to a strategy discussion, 19.1% led to other actions including a step down to BSF or continuing with current plan and 0.5% were outcome as coming in to care.
20. 324 children were open to a Child in Need plan at the end of March 2024. Since towards the end of 2023 we have seen a steady increase in the number of CiN plans open which has coincided with the increase of CP plans and the decrease in Children in Care.
21. 196 children became subject to a Child Protection Plan in 2023/2024, this is an increase from 131 in 2022/2023 however this coincides with the focused work on ensuring children enter into care only when necessary and following the right support.

22. There are currently 570 children open to the Assessment and Safeguarding teams. Workloads have reduced across the teams to a manageable level with only two social workers currently having over 25 children allocated.
23. Quality audits completed have consistently seen better outcomes with 84% across the year being Good and 8% outstanding.
24. There are currently 86 children open to the children with disabilities team. This includes children active for an assessment and those open for a review of their care packages. Currently social care advice sits within the team and a wider discussion has taken place for this to sit within the children's front door to ensure that full advice, not just focused on disabilities, is offered as part of the EHCP. There is currently one child who has an unregulated placement in place subject to a Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLs) due to significant concerns arising from her emotional health presentation following her discharge from a mental health hospital. This is reviewed weekly by the Service Manager and regularly with the Head of Service and Assistant Director of Children's Services.

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

25. 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.
26. Work has progressed to secure a further taster flat through DBC Housing Services. The approved target growth of seven spaces of additional taster flat capacity approved by Council has been achieved.
27. A young person has been identified to move into the additional taster flat later this month, this young person is currently in an external residential placement at a weekly cost of £4,093. The four young people to date who have moved/due to move into the expanded taster flat capacity had a combined weekly external residential placement cost in the region of £17,000.
28. As of 31 March 2024, the number of looked after children was 300, this figure is lower than 29 February 2024, when we had 310 looked after children and 321 looked after children at the end of January 2024. 18 of these children are unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children. The reduction in looked after children is a result of 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 plans are progressed.
29. There are 134 care leavers currently being supported by the team aged 18-25. The service supports 186 care experienced aged 16-25. 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. Other examples are cookery and budgeting classes and clothes swap shops.
30. 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 are now in post and supporting 24 children with one young person waiting to be allocated. The team is 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. The service feels like it has now gathered momentum and is growing in its numbers.

31. The mentoring programme offers the opportunity for care experienced adults to become mentors for younger children in care. We have successfully recruited and trained 13 care experienced young people to date. 36 young people are attached to the programme with additional referrals under consideration. The matching process has been incredible positive for all concerned and rewarding emotionally for all parties. It was really good to hear from some of the brilliant mentors at an event in Duke Street recently, when children in care and their mentors enjoyed pizza and chat at Hideaway Bar. Our mentors are often holding down jobs, bringing up their own families whilst also helping younger children in care. It is a fantastic initiative and promises to go from strength to strength.
32. Safe space is a youth provision ran by the team for children in our care. It is a mix of social and focused activities aimed at reducing loneliness, anti-social behaviour and supporting children's emotional health. The service is held every Monday evening. We would like to take this out into the community with events involving Police, Fire, and health services/education over the summer holidays as well as tree planting and litter picks with an environmental friendly and sustainable BBQ date to be confirmed.
33. Staying Close remains a significant strength. We are currently supporting 21 young people as part of this pilot, funded by the DfE. This has reduced by one young person who no longer needs the support. Further consideration around referrals is being reviewed. 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". It is a great that one young person has progressed to a level where he feels he no longer needs this intense support.
34. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) – We are currently supporting 18 unaccompanied children, we are mandated to support a maximum of 22 children and young people. One young person turns 18 in June 2024 and another two in July 2024, we can therefore expect additional and new referrals in the coming months.
35. Within the last year, we supported 11 new and additional unaccompanied children. Ten transferred from the Home Office, one on foot.
36. Of the ten home office mandated referrals, two young people travelled from Afghanistan, two travelled from Eritrea, two travelled from Turkey and one each from the following countries, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, and Egypt.
37. In addition to the children, we offer support to 14 over-18 year olds through leaving care support.

### **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

38. Foster Care Fortnight campaign took place from 13-26 May 2024. This year's theme was Fostering Moments, celebrating the moments that define fostering journeys, big and

small. I joined the team delivering face to face recruitment drop-in sessions across the town and attendance at events including the food festival, dolphin centre, Park Run, tractors and diggers day and a foster carer recognition event at Bannatyne's hotel. Throughout the events we shared special fostering moments through social media reaching 34,000 views. The highest viewing figures was a video viewed of Dawn (one of our in house foster carers) describing her passion for fostering and support children in our care.

39. Marketing data shows the social media campaign achieved good reach although the link clicks were lower than had been hoped for.
40. In May we received four new fostering enquiries (eight since the new offer was introduced). Three new applications were received in May (5 since offer introduced) and supported two new sets of carers to approval at fostering panel.
41. Foster with Northeast is a regional pilot whereby carers contact a central hub to make their initial enquiry. Between October 2023 – May 2024, the service received 28 new enquiries. Work is ongoing to understand and track how applicants became interested in fostering. This data will support the service in understanding the success and impact of online marketing driven by the hub and our fostering service face to face events.
42. Together with Cllr. Allen, I attended the launch of 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. Within constellation one, we are supporting seven sets of carers with 15 children and within constellation two, we are supporting six sets of carers with 10 children.
43. 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**

44. Cedars, Dunrobin Close, Lancaster Close, Harewood Hill Lodge and Gilling Crescent children homes all received our annual Ofsted inspection. I am thrilled all homes were graded as 'Good'. This time last year, we had one home (Harewood) graded as "Good", with other homes graded as "Requires Improvement". This is a huge achievement for the team with Cedars as a brand-new provision and Lancaster opening as a new build home.
45. Cedars offers emergency care and short breaks for children on the edge of becoming looked after. Cedars initially operated Friday to Monday. Following investment, Cedars has expanded operating hours over seven days in line with mainstream children's homes. Recruitment activity is underway to secure additional staffing to facilitate the increase in service offer. Once positions are appointed to, a revised Statement of Purpose will be submitted to Ofsted.
46. We now have the end of year performance data available which shows that in 2023/2024 Cedars supported 38 children, utilising 116 nights at a placement cost saving of £235,305.

19 Children were supported through outreach work, some of which progressed to short breaks. This is an impressive figure given the service operated Friday – Monday, we relied heavily on staff agreeing to work overtime and outside of their agreed hours.

47. Gilling Crescent is our next home to move to a new build property at Butterfield Drive. A site visit was undertaken on 3 June 2025. Ofsted stage one registration has been submitted and handover of the site is planned for later this month for our young people to move in.
48. When our children and staff move, work will commence on re purposing Gilling Crescent children’s home as a therapeutic home focusing on supporting young people out of residential care and into foster placements.
49. Dunrobin Close will be our third home to move to a new build property. We experienced a delay in site build due to environmental regulations around waste neutrality, this has now been resolved and the site is planned to re-open July 2024 to re commence the build.
50. Our three mainstream children’s homes (Dunrobin, Gilling and Lancaster) remain at full occupancy, each home supports three young people in our care.
51. Harewood Lodge continues to offer short breaks to children with a disability. Occupancy is 80% with 12% utilised by children from other Local Authorities (Durham, Stockton, Redcar and Leeds). This equates to 149 beds commissioned each year at a cost of £670 per night generating £99,830.00 a year.
52. With support from commissioning colleagues, we have contacted regional authorities to advise of capacity. Delivery costs for Harewood have been reprofiled for 2024- 2025 and uplift notifications made to placing councils. Further work will take place with social work colleagues to discuss referrals and increase internal capacity.

### **Youth Unemployment**

53. The Darlington 18–24-year-old claimant count has fallen from 545 young people in March 2024 to 515 young people in May 2024. Darlington’s claimant count at 6.9% is higher than the North-East average of 5.9% and the national average of 5.1%.

54. The May 2024 figures for the Tees Valley are as follows:

a) Hartlepool	8.7%
b) Redcar and Cleveland	7.7%
c) Middlesbrough	7.8%
d) Stockton -on-Tees	7.7%
e) Darlington	6.9%

### **Education**

55. West Park Academy was recently inspected by Ofsted and judged to be a “Good” school. Inspectors recognised leaders have high expectations, pupils achieve well and pupils are happy in this vibrant school.

56. Bishopton Redmarshall has also recently been inspected and judged by Ofsted to be a “Good” school. Inspectors recognised that Bishopton Redmarshall is an inclusive and welcoming place to learn. Leaders have high expectations for all pupils, including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and parents and carers are appreciative of the care and support provided for pupils.
57. George Dent Nursery School has retained its “Outstanding” rating following its recent Ofsted inspection. Inspectors recognised that children thrive at George Dent and parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school. Leaders have high ambition for all children and those with special educational needs and disabilities benefit from highly effective care, support and guidance. Children receive exceptional support through their learning and play; highly skilled practitioners bring the curriculum to life and children are offered rich experiences as part of that curriculum.

### **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

58. The Safeguarding Partnership is undertaking a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR) following the death of a 22-month old child who collapsed at home and died the following day due to a fatal head injury consistent with non-accidental injury. Mother’s partner has subsequently been charged with murder and mother charged with child neglect. The purpose of the review is to understand how agencies worked together and identify what could have been done differently. The review will identify key themes and learning points to promote across the partnership to improve practice going forward. An Independent Author has been appointed to lead the review and the preliminary analysis will be presented to the Statutory Partners on 25 June. A report will be published in due course following the conclusion of the criminal investigation.
59. 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.

### **Children’s Commissioning and Contracts**

60. Darlington commissioners have been working with colleagues across the Tees Valley to expand the range of contracted Alternative Education provision. This type of provision is arranged by councils for pupils who due to a range of reasons (e.g. illness or exclusion) are not able to attend mainstream education. The sub regional framework contract has been re-opened to new providers, and tender evaluations are currently underway. The aim is to increase the number of Alternative Education providers and support as many children as possible to return to mainstream education. New providers to the contract will be in place ahead of the new academic year.
61. Work has been undertaken to refresh and update the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy for 2024/5. The refreshed strategy includes an update on a number of priorities. This includes mobilisation of the first new build children’s home and Ofsted registration requirements for the new supported accommodation regulations for all in borough services for 16- and 17-year- old Looked After Children and Care Leavers. The strategy also outlines future priorities for this forthcoming year such as the expansion to the existing range of supported accommodation



and the mobilisation of the second new build children's home. The strategy is available to view on the Council's website.

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