

COUNCIL
26 SEPTEMBER 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) continues to perform consistently well. Contacts received into the service remain high and this is expected and in-line with the model adopted at the Front Door, encouraging partners and the public to discuss any concerns for children and seek advice in relation to appropriate services for families. The workforce is stable and experienced and outcomes are proportionate with lower referrals into social care and more contacts being referred to single agencies, universal services and Building Stronger Families.
3. Re-referrals to social care increased during 23/24 and work has now commenced to explore this within a weekly re-referral meeting. During this meeting any issues or themes will be identified and a plan agreed where deemed necessary.
4. Joined up working between CIAT and the Children with Disabilities team is underway to focus on improving contact enquiries carried out at the Front Door when a child is thought to/or has a disability.
5. 4 Kids, the Police and social care project that sits within the Front Door Service continues to play a pivotal role when working with families that have experienced domestic abuse; feedback continues to be very positive. 4 Kids form part of the multi-agency daily triage meeting and assist with decision making, providing crucial insight such as footage from Body Worn Cameras, this is innovative and a service that is unique to Darlington.
6. With regard to Missing and Exploited year-end data we have seen a reduction in missing episodes, however the number of children going missing remains consistent. We continue to work closely with Police colleagues and staff within the Children's Homes. We know that children who go missing are often at a higher risk of exploitation and so the two areas of safeguarding are closely linked. Child exploitation continues to be monitored and disrupted via the Missing and Exploited Group, this is a multi-agency meeting that is held fortnightly.

Building Stronger Families Service

7. The Service continues to offer a wide, diverse range of groups which are specifically focused on those families who have been identified as requiring targeted intervention. In addition a similar offer is given to those families in the community who are not known to other services (universal support).

8. Staff continue to work efficiently to ensure that families receive the right support at the right time. 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 continue to work with partners and colleagues to remind them and support them in the identification of a universal offer where appropriate. 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.
9. The refreshed Early Help Assessment is currently being trialled. Two of the managers are in the process of completing assessments to ensure it is appropriate and fits with the ethos of being a more succinct and family friendly assessment. It remains the intention to launch this new assessment later in the year.

Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)

10. The support given by the newly appointed Victim Liaison Officer has provided an enhanced provision and afforded the opportunity to now work with all victims of crime, regardless of criteria or need.
11. The annual Strategic Plan was completed within the identified timescale and initial feedback has been positive via the Youth Justice Board. A focused response is imminent and will be shared with the YPEJS Strategic Management Board at the earliest opportunity.
12. The Service is still awaiting confirmation of the Youth Justice Grant allocation. There remains a level of anxiety given the delay in this and indeed what the amount may be and whether there is to be a decrease in allocation based on previous years.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

13. 259 children & family (C&F) assessments have been completed in the year to date and timeliness of C&Fs has significantly improved with June 2024 data showing that 98.8% of C&Fs were completed within statutory timescales. This has been due to focused management oversight to ensure any delayed C&F assessments do not impact on children and improved performance is linked to more management workloads within the Assessment and Safeguarding teams.
14. We support 300 children under child in need plans and 115 children are subject to child protection plans. After an increase in Q4 of children subject to child protection plans which was directly linked to a reduction in our children in care numbers, this has now reduced and is more stable.
15. Focused work is ongoing in relation to our re-referral numbers, this is children where a re-referral is made within 12 months of a previous referral to social care. Year to date, 22.4% of referrals to social care are re-referrals. To understand and learn from this further a weekly re-referral meeting is taking place with representatives from the children's front door, Assessment & Safeguarding and members of the senior leadership team. This enables us to review re-referrals 'live' and embed learning within the service. In addition to this a deep dive of no further action C&F assessments has been undertaken with learning being shared within the service. The deep dive shows that at times we continue

to close children to social care on 'safety plans' which is against current guidance and that we are not always well communicating our concerns to families.

16. Ongoing development work with the Assessment & Safeguarding teams is taking place to focus on further enhancing the quality of our work with families and learning from best practice. Alongside this we are developing our electronic system by reviewing changes to our C&F structure, reviewing our pre-birth process and embedding our legal discussions within LCS to enable better reporting.

Looked After and Care Leaver information

17. 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.
18. Work has progressed to secure a further taster flat through DBC Housing Services.
19. 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.
20. As of the end of June we had 298 children looked after which has reduced again from 31 March 2024, when the number of looked after children was 300, this figure is lower than 29 February 2024, when we had 310 looked after children and 358 looked after children at the end in September 2023. 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. We are currently working hard to reunify several families back home and discharge the care orders of the children.
21. There are currently 141 care leavers currently being supported by the team aged 18-25. An increase from 134 in March 2024 we also support 42 care experienced young people under the age of 18 years. The service supports 186 care experienced young people 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.
22. 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.

23. 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. 58 young people are now attached to the programme an increase of 22 since March 2024 with two 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.
24. 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. There has been a trip to the Knife Angel when it visited Sunderland. Since March 2024 we have achieved more events in the Community as planned. More events took place in the Summer such as tree planting and litter picks with an environmentally friendly and sustainable BBQ held in August.
25. Staying Close remains a significant strength. We are currently supporting 23 young people as part of this pilot, funded by the DfE. This number has increased from 21 in March. A further two young people are due to close to the service so further two Young people will be joining this service when this happens. Further consideration around referrals is always 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. "Thank you for what I have learned and your help"
26. 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. We had one young person turn 18 in June 2024 and another two turned 18 in July 2024, we can expect additional and new referrals in the coming months.
27. Within the last year, we supported 11 new and additional unaccompanied children. Ten transferred from the Home Office, one on foot.
28. 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.
29. In addition to the children, we offer support to 16 over-18-year-olds through leaving care support.
30. We have Eleven unaccompanied young people placed in Darlington and seven outside of Darlington with four of these placed at a distance

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

31. **Recruitment** - Our fostering friendly policy has been agreed and signed off by Chief Officers. We have worked with HR colleagues to secure a policy for additional time off for

employees who wish to become foster carers or are existing foster carers to support them in meeting their fostering commitments. We have worked with and met with the Fostering Network to gain accreditation as a Fostering Friendly Employer. This, alongside a stronger fostering offer and continuing to develop our support to carers will position us to compete favourably in what is a limited pool of potential carers. Our next steps are to consider internal and external communications and arrange meetings with external businesses.

32. The team arranged and delivered recruitment events in the Collaboration space on two occasions, we have attended a Tractor and Digger Day in the Town Centre, Hullabaloo day at South Park, have recruitment tents booked for Legends and Fairies Day during the school holidays and Dinosaur Day both in the town centre.
33. We continue to promote recruitment through the DBC face book page and make links between our recruitment activities and the DBC face book page. We will be reviewing our recruitment activities throughout the first 6 months of the year to plan our next 12 months, with events being planned for Halloween and Christmas.
34. We have approved 6 new carers and 1 supported lodgings provider since April 2024.
35. We currently have nine assessments for Foster Carers ongoing with panel dates from August through to November 2024. Two Supported Lodgings Assessments are underway and Four applicants that have expressed an interest following home visits, we are waiting for applications.
36. Data from Foster With North East Hub evidences we have the highest conversion in the region of enquiry to application through to assessment.
37. **Retention & Support of Carers** - The Fostering and Supported Lodgings Team continues to run monthly coffee mornings and support meetings for carers to meet each other and to listen and interact with different speakers.
38. Foster Carers are accessing Life Story work sessions with Professor Richard Rose through the Summer and carers who are part of the Mockingbird one constellation benefited from trauma informed therapeutic training led by our own therapeutic team with plans for this to be delivered to other carers due to its success.
39. The Fostering and Supported Lodgings Team held a summer event for carers on 15th August 2024 at Willow Rd Community Centre where there was a bouncy castle (for the children) and light refreshments to bring carers and children together.
40. A new initiative that we are in the early stages of consulting with carers is looking to develop a Baby Group as carers who predominantly care for babies and infants felt that they would like more opportunities to come together and to access specialist training and support and we are exploring what this might look like and whether we could follow a Mockingbird style model.
41. Darlington Foster Carer Association held their general meeting last month and appointed several new board members with plans to expand the support and activities that they can offer to carers and in being a more active voice for carers within Darlington.

42. **Panels** – We are advertising for an additional Panel Chair and Panel members to support the increase and diversity of our Fostering panels. This is an exciting opportunity to recruit a more diverse selection of panel members from across our community to come together as a panel to make decisions about the suitability and appropriateness of our carers. Panel members will now be paid a fee as we seek to further develop our panels and we will be encouraging care experienced people to be applying to become a panel member so that we can benefit from their experiences and views.
43. **Supported Lodgings** – Fostering & Supported Lodgings Team Manager has now made his application to Ofsted and is going through the application process. Once completed there is a waiting list for interviews for Registered Manager. The manager and team are working hard to develop the Supported Lodgings service and ensure that it will be ready and compliant with standards and regulations for when Ofsted visits to inspect the service.

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 are in our next phase of children's homes expansion with Gilling Crescent young people and staff due to move to a new build property at Butterfield Drive.
47. Ofsted stage one registration has been submitted and handover of the site is planned for week commencing 19th August. We have experienced delays in hand over delays due to snagging and health and safety checks.
48. Gilling Crescent will be repurposed creating additional local placements for our children in care.
49. Our three mainstream children's homes (Dunrobin, Gilling and Lancaster) remain at full occupancy, each home supports three young people in our care.
50. All staff in the children's homes are completing DDP therapy training.

Education

51. **Transition**- Officers working with school leaders in the Education Strategy Group (ESG) have developed a Darlington Transition Programme. Well managed transitions between education settings that put children and young people at the heart of the process have

been identified as a priority for the Education Strategy Group (ESG). Transition from primary to secondary school is an important milestone in the lives of children and families. Research indicates that ensuring the smoothest possible start to secondary education requires focus on both the pastoral and academic needs of pupils.

52. The programme aims to:

- (a) Ensure continuity and progression in learning to enable all children and young people to achieve
- (b) Develop the resilience of children and young people when managing change, allowing them to progress and thrive
- (c) Strengthen mutual understanding, partnership working and professional development between phases of education
- (d) Encourage good practice in the transfer of information between partners and provide opportunities for mutual support
- (e) Support retention in education and training into post-16 education and beyond

Youth Unemployment

53. The Darlington 18–24-year-old claimant count has risen slightly from 510 young people in May 2024 to 515 young people in July 2024. Darlington’s claimant count at 6.9% (6.9%) is higher than the North-East average of 5.9% (5.9%) and the national average of 5.2% (5.1%). Overall, all averages have remained relatively static over the last three months.

54. The July 2024 figures (May 2024 in brackets) for the Tees Valley are as follows:

(a) Hartlepool	8.3% (8.7%)
(b) Redcar and Cleveland	7.5% (7.7%)
(c) Middlesbrough	8.1% (7.8%)
(d) Stockton -on-Tees	7.9% (7.7%)
(e) Darlington	6.9% (6.9%)

55. Since its start in March 2024, to the end of July 2024, the Darlington Employment Initiative (DEI) has worked with 76 participants, of which 32 have moved into employment. 46 (60%) of the participants were aged 16-24, and of those 15 have moved into employment.

56. DEI offers employability support to economically inactive people of all ages, with a focus on; those looking after the family/home, those early retirees over 50, and those who are short term sick (under 12 months). The programme runs until 1 March 2025 and is funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).

Children’s Commissioning and Contracts

57. The priorities within the refreshed Children’s Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy have been further progressed through work between the children’s commissioners and local providers to expand the range of regulated supported accommodation for Looked After Children and Care Leavers aged 16 and 17. It is expected that through this partnership

approach there will be a further 15 units of supported accommodation developed with the first units of accommodation coming online by November 2024.

58. A tender exercise has been undertaken to seek to increase the number of contracted providers of regulated community care for Darlington children. This is care for children with assessed eligible social care needs and will be tailored to the individual support needs of the child. The care can range from care provided directly into the family home, to support to access social and community based opportunities. Some children will also have a specific need for support with personal care. Tender evaluations are underway with new contracting arrangements commencing in February 2025.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

59. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners met on 25 June. Suzy Kitching Independent Author provided an update on progress of the Child J Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, following the death of a 22 month old child. Suzy is preparing a draft report for consultation and key themes include child's lived experiences, impact of parental mental health and unseen men/care givers. A report will be published in due course following the conclusion of the criminal investigation.
60. Partners discussed Right Care, Right Person (RCRP) which is a national model changing the way emergency services respond to welfare and medical calls and Partners discussed the responsibility they have to monitor and ensure partner agencies carry out their roles in the RCRP process relating to children.
61. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 9 July and Chairs of sub groups provided an overview of ongoing activity which highlighted how busy the groups have been. The group received presentations which provided an: overview of 'eyes on the baby', SUDI (Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy) prevention training is being rolled out across Darlington applicable to a wide workforce to educate on safe sleeping and an overview of preventing homelessness and rough sleeping agenda for Darlington

Councillor Nick Wallis
Children and Young People Portfolio