

**COUNCIL**  
**28 NOVEMBER 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. Following the use of some agency staff during 2023 and 2024 the Children's Initial Advice Team is now fully staffed with permanent DBC staff. The team remain stable and performance is consistently good.
3. Referrals to social care have been consistently lower than this time last year following the refresher training rolled out to the Children's Initial Advice Team. Conversion rates have been low, as expected, during the school summer holidays period but it is envisaged that this will gradually increase in the next quarter.
4. The 4 Kids project continues to offer support to our children and families that have experienced domestic abuse and the feedback that they receive is consistently positive. We are currently working with performance around data on caseloads and exploring how we can report effectively on outcomes. The two workers continue to attend daily multi-agency triage.
5. The Child and Family Time Service continues to be very busy providing services for families where children and young people are cared for by the Local authority. There has been an increase in babies being cared for and a reduction in school age children therefore after school family time pressures have eased over recent weeks.

**Building Stronger Families Service**

6. The Early Help Assessment has been refreshed and will launch during quarter 3. Staff have participated in a number of training and development sessions over the last month in preparation for this and a working group for partners has helped shape the assessment for use with external led Early Help. There are a number of school communication events planned in December where the new paperwork will be launched in relation to schools, the Early Help Strategic Board is also helping to promote the use of this new assessment across other agencies.
7. Our Groups relaunched week commencing 9 September following the summer break. New additions to the offer include Young Carer Youth club which is monthly, Voices which is an activity session to promote social engagement with vulnerable young people and commences fortnightly and Playful Minds, a therapeutic group for parent and child, replacing our previous Theraplay group. Targeted groups are currently run from Reid Street, Polam and Carmel.

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

8. Annual Strategic plan is complete and signed off by the Youth Justice Board and feedback is that the plan is of good quality, gives a good sense of Darlington and its challenges and has a clear sense of direction.
9. This year's Duke of Edinburgh Award cohort have successfully completed their bronze award and have attended a celebration ceremony in September. The event brought together the 10 young people, their family and friends as well as partner agencies to join in the celebration of the fantastic progress and development these young people have achieved over the last 6 months.
10. The service, jointly with Durham Fire and Rescue service have supported a group of young people through the developing resilience programme. Seven young people attended 10 consecutive days and have achieved a level 1 award with The Princes Trust. The programme allows young people to connect what they already know about their resilience and link it, through practical, tangible experiences to how they can be more resilient in the future as well as reflecting on their experiences and develop helpful habits which will support the adoption of safer behaviours.

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

11. Assessment and Safeguarding and the Children with Disabilities teams are working with 98 children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan, 231 children who are subject to a Child in Need plan and 81 children who remain within the assessment period. 54 children are held 'in review' by the Children with Disabilities team, whereby they have a commissioned package of support which is reviewed.
12. Workloads for social workers remain within safe realms with only one Social Worker having a workload of over 25 children and there is a plan to reduce this. This is leading to a decrease in children becoming looked after or entering legal processes. Use of an updated legal pathway procedure is evidencing significant impact on ensuring children remain with their families if possible. We continue to see a month on month decrease to our overall number of children in our care due to a joint approach by Assessment and Safeguarding and the Looked After Through Care team to ensure children only remain looked after for as long as is required.
13. There is a current pilot taking place where pre-birth assessments are progressed to a social worker earlier into the pregnancy. This is being used to inform an updated pre-birth procedure and will be evaluated to consider impact for the family. Unborn babies are identified by the children's front door as suitable for early assessment which means we can assess and support parents much earlier into the pregnancy.
14. A programme of practice sessions for social workers continues to take place to strive for ongoing improvement and development of the service. A focused session on direct work was completed in October 2024 and attended by 50 practitioners. There are further sessions arranged to focus on legal planning, assessment and children's plans. Evidence from our relational practice sessions held earlier in 2024 have led to material changes in how write about children on their records and have shaped an updated model for legal meetings.

15. Within our Children with Disabilities team, senior managers have had specialist training on Continuing Healthcare for children. This will be used to review current commissioned packages with health and review children without a health contribution to ensure their needs are assessed and met appropriately. Training for frontline practitioners is scheduled to take place to share this learning.

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

16. We continue to expand out taster flat provision with one additional flat allocation. This increases our total allocation to 13 flats. The provision is supporting young people to transition to independence with a high level of support. The flats are utilised alongside our Staying Close project to support and prepare our young people live independently within our community.
17. Three of the flats are temporarily out of commission for the next four weeks due to redecoration, refurbishment and renewal of carpets and white goods
18. From the 10 taster flats currently occupied, only two of the young people in these are under the age of 18 years. The eight who are over 18 years of age are currently bidding on properties to move on. We have two over 18's who were previously Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who continue to wait for a decision on their right to remain status. They have both moved into a two-bed taster flat due to Darlington's requirement to financially support.
19. Due to a lack of available properties for our young adults to move on to, we are experiencing a bottle neck for those aged over 18 years of age, this is resulting in the service not having flats available for others to move on from expensive placement. From July to October 2024 we have had three young people living in a flat turn 18 with one further young person turning 18 in November 2024. Ongoing discussions are taking place between the service and housing colleagues.
20. As of the end of August we had 286 children in Care, a drop from June's figure of 298 and a further reduction from January 2024 when the number of looked after children was 321. 20 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 order of these children.
21. There are currently 140 care leavers 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. 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 were successful in obtaining funding for three new projects: Family Finding, Mentoring and a Safe Space youth provision. Family finding provides support from three Lifelong Links workers who are working with 27 children and young people in our care, this is an increase of 4 young people since our last report with 2 young people waiting to be allocated. The team is assisting children and young people to establish a network of support alongside contribution from a dedicated life story worker and a therapeutic worker. The service took time to gather momentum and receive buy in from colleagues and young people, we now feel we have gathered momentum, and our numbers are slowly increasing.
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 11 care experienced young people to date. 73 young people are now attached to the programme an increase of 58 since July and 22 since March 2024, we are considering an additional two referrals. The matching process has been incredibly positive for all concerned and rewarding emotionally for all parties. Our mentors are often holding down jobs, raising their own families whilst also helping younger children in our care.
24. Safe space is a youth provision operated 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. Sessions are delivered every Monday evening. The funding for this project is near complete and we will be celebrating the achievements of the group, we plan to seek further support from the local community and agencies with a celebration event planned for 22/10/2024.
25. Staying Close remains a significant strength, we are currently supporting 22 young people. This number remains constant as young people come to the end of their support journey and have achieved their goals. This number has increased from 21 in March and 22 in July. A further two young people are due to close to the service and replaced with two new young people. The project has developed to offer seven days per week service for young people most in need. Some comments from workers feedback about the young people are "he is 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. As detailed earlier, we are currently supporting 20 unaccompanied children with one young person awaiting a placement offer taking us up to 21. We are mandated to support a maximum of 22 children and young people. We have one young person who turns 18 in October 2024. We have had three children turn 18 since July 2024. We can expect additional and new referrals in the coming months. Within the last year, we supported 14 new and additional unaccompanied children. 13 transferred from the Home Office, one on foot.
27. In addition to unaccompanied children support, we are supporting 19 young adults through leaving care support.
28. From the 13-home office mandated referrals, two young people travelled from Afghanistan, two travelled from Eritrea, two travelled from Turkey and the following countries, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, and Egypt and Vietnam

29. In terms of placement of children, we have 11 unaccompanied young people placed in Darlington and nine outside of Darlington with 6 of these placed at a distance.

### **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

30. We have 57 approved foster carers, with 34 households supporting 58 children, 26.5% of which are long term matched. We have 64 approved connected carers, with 32 households supporting 40 children, accounting for 26.0% of the children in foster care.

### **Recruitment**

31. The team arranged and delivered recruitment events over the summer and included the dinosaur's event, the Legends and Fairies event and two stalls in the Collaboration space in the Town Hall. In addition to these events, we manned a Foster with Northeast table in Darlington Library as part of Darlington Pride. More recently, we held a Foster Carer Recruitment drop in on 14 October 2024 – 4pm - 6pm.
32. We have approved nine new foster carers since April 2024 and have four assessments awaiting a fostering panel date. 16 fostering applications are live between Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the fostering process.
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 have established monthly meetings between the team and colleague's in Communications. This will support a regular presence in ensuring Fostering is covered in One Darlington Magazine and twin track this by pushing live news and information through social media.

### **Retention & Support of Carers**

34. 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.
35. We are seeing a shift in demand in children requiring care, we have older children with more complex needs and less demand with babies. We are finding that we have several baby carers who have capacity, but unwilling / lacking confidence to offer a home to older children.
36. We have experienced a number of fostering breakdowns; the service will conduct a deep dive to greater understand themes to breakdowns. We will look at what support was offered to the carer and child, the matching process and whether we need to explore different strategies and pathways for some of these children. We have recently experienced two four year old children whose needs were too profound for foster carers and required Residential care.
37. Viability Assessments have transitioned over to the Fostering & Supported Lodgings Team through September – the theory supports a relational approach whereby Fostering Team can work with carers and progress through to Connected Care and/or SGO where appropriate ensuring better and more timely outcomes for children

## **Panels**

38. We advertised for an additional Panel Chair and Panel members to support the increase and diversity of our Fostering panels. This was a successful recruitment; shortlisting is diarised to look at applicants and support a greater range of diversity within our panel's.

## **Homes for our Children**

39. Dunrobin Children's home was inspected in September 2024 and maintained an overall grading of Good. This means that all of our Children's Homes continue to maintain a rating of Good.
40. Cedars continues to offer emergency and short break placements. We have successfully recruited to all the posts following the home moving to a full-time service.
41. Butterfield Drive received an initial inspection from Ofsted to register as a new home, unfortunately there are a few things that need to be completed before it can be fully registered. Gilling Crescent staff and young people will all move to Butterfield once registration is complete.
42. Gilling Crescent children's will be repurposed once the current young people move to Butterfield creating additional placements for children in our care. Given the ages of children as young as four placed in external residential homes, we are looking at options to repurpose the home to support children aged 4 – 12 with a planned move to support them on from the home into foster care.
43. The Registered Managers post for Gilling has gone out to advert, we previously advertised this post and sadly, we did not receive any applications.
44. Our Mainstream Children's homes continue to be at full occupancy, supporting three young people in each home.
45. Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) is a form of psychotherapy that can help form and repair connections and attachments between children, young people and their parent/carers. This type of therapy can help children/young people who find it hard to feel safe and secure with parents/carers due to difficult or traumatic early life experiences. These early experiences can result in the young person experiencing high levels of anxiety that result in them wanting to control their relationships and struggle with their emotions. Children's Residential Service is going to use DDP to support our young people. Four dates in November have been organised for all staff to attend with Leon Crook who is an advanced practitioner in the therapeutic service to gain an overview of DDP to put into practice within the homes.

## **Education**

46. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) supports schools and settings to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence. It is dedicated to breaking the link between disadvantage and educational achievement. The EEF is working with the

Research School Network to develop and facilitate Evidence Exploration Partnerships in a number of localities.

47. Darlington has submitted a successful proposal to set up an Evidence Exploration Partnership. This Partnership will be facilitated by the EEF, Research School based in the North East and the LA. Senior school leaders will be involved via the Darlington Education Strategy Group. The aim of a Partnership is to work together to identify a challenge that can be effectively addressed and co-construct an evidence-based solution to address it. It offers a structured and collaborative approach to data gathering and analysis, identifying potential priorities and solutions.
48. The Education Strategy Group, in consultation with the Educational Psychology Service, has developed an Inclusion Charter. The Charter exemplifies key characteristics of inclusive practice that all schools in Darlington can sign up to. This was informed by shared challenges relating to attendance, suspensions and more complex SEND. The Education Strategy Group has carefully considered the potential of an Evidence Exploration Partnership to support its work over the coming year. It is anticipated that the Inclusion Charter will provide a helpful starting point for the Evidence Exploration Partnership which will support the council and schools to develop evidence-informed practices and strategies to embed this commitment to inclusion.

### **Youth Unemployment**

49. The Darlington 18–24-year-old claimant count has risen slightly from 530 young people in July 2024 to 540 young people in September 2024. Darlington's claimant count at 7.2% (7.1%) is higher than the North-East average of 6.1% (5.9%) and the national average of 5.3% (5.2%). Overall, all averages have risen slightly over the last three months.
50. The September 2024 figures (July 2024 in brackets) for the Tees Valley are as follows:

(a) Hartlepool	8.4% (8.1%)
(b) Redcar and Cleveland	7.6% (7.5%)
(c) Middlesbrough	8.1% (7.9%)
(d) Stockton -on-Tees	8.4% (7.8%)
(e) Darlington	7.2% (7.1%)
51. Youth Unemployment in all Tees Valley authorities has risen over the last three months, ranging from a 0.1% increase for Darlington and Redcar to 0.6% in Stockton.
52. Since its start in March 2024, to the end of September 2024, the Darlington Employment Initiative (DEI) has worked with 101 participants, of which 48 have moved into employment. 59 (58%) of the DEI participants were aged 16-24, and of those 25 have moved into employment.
53. 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**

54. In line with the Darlington Commitment to Carer's strategic objective, a refreshed Darlington Young Carers Memorandum of Understanding has been developed to:
  - (a) Develop better ways of identifying Young Carers.
  - (b) Clearly convey how Children's and Adult Services and Health will work together to support Young Carers and their families.
  - (c) Support earlier identification and assessment.
  - (d) Actively champion and mobilise the school's charter.
55. The positive impact of the MOU for Darlington Young Carers will be monitored by the Carer's Strategy Steering Group.

### **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

56. Work is progressing on the Child J Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review with the final version of the report being prepared by the Independent Author in advance of being shared with SSP for final sign off in November. Discussions will take place regards publication of the report.
57. The Partnership is supporting the 'eyes on the baby' Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy awareness programme to educate and promote safer infant sleep and prevent sudden infant deaths in Darlington. The project is a collaborative piece of work conducted by Public Health and Durham University's Infancy and Sleep Centre. The training is accessible through the Partnership's ME Learning platform.
58. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group have not met in this period and therefore, there are no further adult safeguarding updates to provide at this time.

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