

COUNCIL
30 JANUARY 2025

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.

Early Intervention and Front Door

Children's Front Door

2. Following the identification of an increase in work and the need to ensure this does not impact on quality and decision making, the Children's Front Door management team have been focusing on the social work led Children's Initial Advice Team. Work is ongoing around the quality assurance of contacts and telephone calls to ensure that we are appropriately and proportionately managing risk and this has been successful thus far.
3. The Missing and Exploited service is currently being reviewed; this review includes an in-depth piece of work led by Barnardo's. Findings and recommendations from this review will help shape this area of the service as we move into 2025 and will ensure there is a sharp focus on this vital area of safeguarding.
4. The 4 Kids Project continue to assist with good outcomes for children and families where domestic abuse is a feature. The team have expanded the age range for children they work with as it has been identified how when there are larger sibling groups and there are older children these older children often lose out on being offered vital services. Any impact on capacity will be continually reviewed and there is work underway around how data can assist with reporting on outcomes and impact.
5. The Child and Family Time Service continues to be busy providing services for children and their families where they are cared for by the Local authority. The team are proud of the success they had providing a Santa's grotto for the children with their parents during family time. Capacity for family time sessions is currently stable.

Building Stronger Families Service

6. The refreshed Early Help Assessment is now live on the Early Help Module system and staff and families have embraced the tool and the improvements. It is much more relational and families are completing the tool alongside their worker, allowing for a much more family led process. There is a sharper focus on bringing in family networks and external partners to the plan and communication events have taken place this month with schools in the first instance, this will be broadened out to other partners, for example, Health in 2025. The Early Help Assessment has been launched at these partnership events to ensure that there is a consistent approach across the Borough for our families regardless of who is

delivering intervention. The Early Help Strategic Board is also helping to promote the use of this new assessment across other agencies and this will assist with partnership buy-in.

7. In line with the new Department for Education and government focus on building Multi Agency Teams, planning is in place to begin the process at a Senior Leadership Level in the first instance whilst we await further guidance. Given the impact this will have across both Internal and External partner agencies, it will require a collaborative approach, mapping out the localities and how the new process will work in practice, ensuring that families continue to receive a seamless and proportionate service.

Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)

8. At a recent Strategic Board Development Session, members determined the Key Priorities for the 25/26 agenda. Partners were engaged throughout and provided meaningful discussions. The Youth Justice Board gave positive feedback in the way in which the board engages with Partners and at a Strategic Level, we are assured that our focus is in line with expectations.
9. HMIP have determined their new Inspection Regime which will commence in March 2025. The focus is less on process and more engaging in a Child First Approach. Victim Standards will now be inspected in its own right and members should be assured that our offer for victims has been highlighted as best practice by the Youth Justice Board. Board Members have been fully engaged in the process and have a good understanding of the expectations on them and the oversight and governance that they provide to the Service.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

10. At the end of October 2024 there were 278 children on a child in need plan and 105 children subject to child protection plans with 54 assessments completed by month end taking us to a total of 477 this year. Assessment timeliness has remained consistently at around 91.8% with out of date assessment's being linked to practitioners leaving or being unexpectedly on leave. We have seen some improvement over the year and continue to prioritise this as a service area.
11. We have continued our focus on the quality of strategy discussions and ensuring our decision making is appropriate. A review of 11 families who had had a strategy discussion was completed in December 2024 and this highlighted that in only one instance a strategy discussion wasn't appropriate/could have been voided with all others being appropriate. It has highlighted an increase in children progressing to an Initial Child Protection Conference but not being made subject to a Child Protection Plan. This requires further curiosity to ensure decision making is correct.
12. Focused practice sessions with the workforce have continued and the legal pathway and assessment and planning sessions have been completed. These are well attended by all care planning teams and are leading to improved practice. These will continue in the new year but with two sessions focused on managers, a session on reflective supervision and a session on strategy discussions. The teams have identified having a focused session on harm away from home would further help the team.

13. Earlier in 2024 the Keeping Families Together and Family Group Conferencing service moved to sit under care planning. This has led to an increase in the use of Family Group Conferences, and they are embedded from a much earlier stage in the life of a child's involvement with social care. Keeping Families Together have experienced some staffing changes with new workers recruited and a move from the Assessment and Safeguarding team family workers, moving to sit with KFT. This means we can offer the intensive edge of care support as well as lower-level targeted support for families with a lower need.
14. Workloads across the care planning teams continue to be appropriate with two social workers having 25 children and all other social workers having less than 25. We are supporting a number of social work students across the workforce and have only one agency social worker across the service, meaning our children are offered increased stability.

Looked After and Care Leaver information

15. We continue to expand out taster flat offer using support from our Personal Advisors withing the service provision with one flat has now refurbishment and completed. We continue to hold 13 flats. The provision is supporting young people to transition to independence with a high level of support. We are currently fitting Video Doorbells to the properties to improve levels of security and oversight for the flats and our young people. The flats are utilised alongside our Staying Close project to support and prepare our young people live independently. We have a planned move from an external residential provision into a Flat mid-January 2025 once a property becomes available.
16. From the 12 taster flats currently occupied, only three of the young people in these are under 18 years of age. We have nine care leavers who are over 18 years of age and are currently bidding on properties to move on. Two of those nine have received tenancy offers and are in the process of moving to their own North Star properties. 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 legal requirement to financially support.
17. We currently have 278 children in care, we are seeing a steady decrease in numbers of children looked after. In August 2024 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. 22 of the 278 children accommodated 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 have been introduced to reduce delay for children and ensure discharge of care order plans are progressing. We are currently working hard to reunify several families back home and discharge the care order of these children. We look forward to offering an update on the progress of these plans.
18. There are currently 143 care leavers being supported by the team aged 18-25. An increase from 140 in August 2024, we also support 50 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.

19. 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 a stable 27 children and young people in our care, this remains constant. The team are 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.
20. The mentoring programme offers the opportunity for care experienced adults to become mentors for younger children in care and our care experienced young people. We have successfully recruited and trained 11 care experienced young people to date. 86 young people are now attached to the programme an increase from 58 In August 2024 and 22 since March 2024, we are considering an additional three 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.
21. 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 has been extended with further sessions continuing next year, we have submitted a funding application to the rotary club to support with operational costs to continue this valuable support to children in our care.
22. 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. A further two young people are due to close to the service and replaced with two new young people. The project has supported 33 young people move on from Residential and Foster placements into their own accommodation since April 2024. 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".
23. As detailed earlier, we are currently supporting 22 unaccompanied children and have received an additional transfer referral and are in process of sourcing a placement. We are mandated to support a maximum of 22 children and young people. Our next unaccompanied young person will turn 18 on 27/04/2025. We can expect additional referrals from that point onwards. Within the last year, we have supported nine new unaccompanied children. Eight were transferred from the Home Office, one arrived in Darlington on foot.
24. In addition to unaccompanied children support, we are supporting 21 young adults through leaving care support.

25. Our nine unaccompanied young people have travelled to the UK from a range of countries, these include two young people travelled from Afghanistan, one from Eritrea, two from Iran, two from Sudan, one from Albania, one from Vietnam and one from Guinea.
26. In terms of placement of children, we have 12 unaccompanied young people placed in Darlington and nine outside of Darlington with six of these placed at a distance.

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

27. We have 65 approved foster carers, with 30 households supporting 55 children, 23.9 % of which are long term matched. We have 68 approved connected carers, with 39 households supporting 46 children, accounting for 30.9% of the children in foster care.

Foster Carer Recruitment

28. The Team organised a drop-in session in October advertised via social media and despite some interest this was not successful. Patterns in recruitment in previous years is that recruitment reduces in lead up to Christmas, but then increases following Christmas and so we have plans to put out messages about Fostering in the New Year to capitalise on the post-Christmas interest we have seen in previous years. In 2025 the recruitment strategy alongside Fostering with North East's recruitment is to target certain key dates in the year such as:

- (a) Social Work Week – March 2025
- (b) Fostering Fortnight – May 2025
- (c) World Refugee Day – June 2025
- (d) Supported Lodgings Week – July 2025
- (e) Kinship Carers Week – October 2025

We will adopt a co-ordinated approach within the council using our social media, PR, and marketing to really sell and support our fostering offer. Events such as bowling, attending Hope Town etc and events at local amenities during the above weeks can create some good content and awareness.

29. We have approved ten new foster carers since April 2024 and have four assessments with a fostering panel dates of January 2025 and April 2025. We have two applicants at Initial Visit stage. We have 2 Supported Lodgings assessments underway and one Foster Carer who has resigned and is being assessed as a Supported Lodgings Provider. We have one mother & baby carer approved and we are finalising guidance/policy around this foster placement with additional carers expressing an interest in being assessed additionally as a mother & baby carer.
30. We continue to promote recruitment through the DBC Facebook page. We have established monthly meetings between the team and colleagues in Communications. This will ensure that Fostering is covered regularly in the One Darlington Magazine, and we will twin-track this by pushing live news and information through social media.

Retention & Support of Carers

31. 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. We have recently had the child exploitation team at events, Barnardo's, a Health Visitor and our online safety team. We have developed a Buddy system in house and have five carers identified as Buddy's, they have met with carers during the application and assessment process as well as supporting new and existing carers. For 2025 we are introducing a New Carers group to support new carers with training, development, and key messages during their first year.
32. 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. We are developing a multi-agency teenager in Fostering strategy and have a working group arranged for 16 January 2025.

Homes for our Children

33. Cedars continues to offer emergency and short break placements. We have successfully recruited to staffing posts following the home moving to a full-time service.
34. Gilling Crescent staff and young people all move to Butterfield Drive on 7 December 2024 following receiving Ofsted registration on 2nd December 2024.
35. Gilling Crescent children's will be repurposed, 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.
36. The Registered Managers and Senior posts for Gilling were advertised and recruited to. Six FTE posts were advertised for the home, five full-time positions were recruited to with a mixture of current staff moving to Gilling and new external recruitment. We are going back out to advert for 2 x part time staff to cover the vacant one FTE post. Staff are remaining in their current roles or in recruitment process.
37. 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. The majority of our homes staff have attended with Leon Crook who is an advanced practitioner in the therapeutic service a session to gain an overview of DDP to put into practice within the homes.

Education

38. Longfield Academy was recently inspected by Ofsted. The academy was judged "Good" across all four key judgement areas. Inspectors recognised that significant improvements have been made since the academy was judged "Inadequate" at the last inspection.

Inspectors commented that the academy has ensured that pupils study an ambitious curriculum that is well suited to their needs. There is a broad range of subjects that pupils benefit from, and pupils are happy, kind and friendly. Following this inspection Darlington has no schools that are judged to be inadequate.

39. Ofsted has also recently inspected Carmel College. Inspectors judged the college “Outstanding” across all five key judgement areas, including the sixth form provision. The inspection report details the outstanding support that the college gives to pupils. Inspectors recognised the college values pupils for who they are, going beyond the expected to help every pupil succeed and live life to the full. Carmel College has high aspirations for all pupils, including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and the personal development programme is exceptional. In short, pupils flourish.

Youth Unemployment

40. The 18-24 claimant count has remained static at 7.1% with 530 young people in July 2024 rising to 535 in October 2024. Darlington at 7.1% is still higher than North-East average (6.2%) and National average (5.4%). The North-East average has also risen by 0.3%, and the England average by 0.2%, in the same period.
41. October 2024 figures for the Tees Valley shows mainly an increase across other authorities, with the exception of Redcar & Cleveland, and are as follows (July 2024 figures in brackets):
- (a) 8.6% (7.8%) Stockton
 - (b) 8.4% (8.1%) Hartlepool
 - (c) 8.2% (7.9%) Middlesbrough
 - (d) 7.4% (7.5%) Redcar & Cleveland
 - (e) 7.1% (7.1%) Darlington
42. The Council run Darlington Employment Initiative (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 31 March 2025 and is funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). The government has just announced there will be a one year extension of UKSPF funding but it has not been confirmed yet whether this will include DEI.
43. The two staff started the programme mid-February 2024 and the target is for 104 starts with 24 participants in employment by programme end. By the end of November 2024, the team had engaged 137 participants (against an overall contract target of 104) with 65 moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 24). Of those above 72 of the 137 participants were aged 16-24 (53%) with 33 of those moving into work (46%).

Children’s Commissioning and Contracts

44. In line with the priorities in Darlington’s children’s sufficiency and commissioning strategy, a further expansion to Ofsted regulated Supported Accommodation for young people aged 16-17 will take place in Darlington from January 2025. The expansion will include a new 11

bed service operated by Reach Out Care and a further increase in capacity at the existing Ofsted regulated YMCA accommodation by five beds.

45. Throughout December and January officers across commissioning, placements, performance, children's operational services and finance are undertaking a regional piece of work with the 12 NE councils to profile and analysis placements costs with a particular focus on the cost of external residential care. This regional workstream will provide insightful regional benchmarks and cost profiling to be used as part of fee increase request review process and support collaborative fee negotiations.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

46. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners met on 11 November and were presented with the final report of the Child J Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review for approval. There were a number of learning points identified with four key themes for learning which included the children's lived experience, parental mental health and the impact on the family, multi-agency working and unseen/unconsidered men/caregivers. Plans are to publish the final report in the new year when both the criminal investigation and care proceedings for child J's sibling are concluded. In the interim, the partnership will take forward the learning.
47. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 19 November and it received the annual report from the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board which outlined their statutory safeguarding responsibilities and how they are discharged across the north and south of the region. Adult Social Care provided an overview of the transformation practice changes that have taken place within Adult Social Care over the past year which were well received by partners.
48. An update was provided by Durham Constabulary on Right Care, Right Person which highlighted there is good engagement with partner agencies. All incidents are dealt with by call handlers who have been trained to ask appropriate questions to understand why police attendance is required. If a police response is not required, it may be signposted to another agency. An escalation policy has been implemented for those practitioners who feel a police response is the best.
49. The group received a presentation on the proposed revised Safeguarding Partnership Arrangements following a revision of Working Together to Safeguard Children Statutory Guidance in 2023. There will be changes made to strengthen the current arrangements which include clarifying roles and responsibilities of Lead and Delegated Safeguarding Partners, introduction of partnership chair role, emphasising the role of education in safeguarding arrangements and strengthening accountability. There are no changes proposed to the Integrated Adults and Children's Partnership structure as it is recognised this is effective and having joint arrangements has strengthened partnership working, details will be published later this month.

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Children and Young People Portfolio