

COUNCIL
27 MARCH 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. At the request of our Youth Cabinet, I am also including a report from them as an addendum, so Members can see the work that they are undertaking. This will be a regular feature, which I am sure will prove enlightening.

Early Intervention and Front Door

2. From January 2025 the Children's Initial Advice Team are further increasing their time working from the office. The safety and welfare of children is the priority, together with ensuring family help is offered by the right service without delay. In order to achieve this the management team provide a consistent and high level of quality assurance of contacts and telephone calls and a focused piece of work considers the outcome of every contact ensuring that decision making is appropriate and that all four potential outcomes are considered, for example, Universal services, external Early Help – single agency, Building Stronger Families or Social Care.
3. The 4 Kids project continues to provide a service to a wider age range of children and continues to receive excellent feedback from parents and children. Work in relation to gathering and analysing performance data will help report more effectively on outcomes and impact. There have been no re-referrals to social care following work with 4 kids.
4. The Child and Family Time Service continues to provide a consistent service for our children and their families to maintain their relationships where they are cared for by the Local Authority. The team have recently had some capacity to support other social care teams, and they are completing aspects of life story work, providing transport for young people that are cared for and they are assisting with visits to families where there can be a focus on parenting work. The team have also linked in with partners from the Housing team and when there are white goods, furniture and household items that might have ordinarily been disposed of these are being recycled for use by our families in need.

Building Stronger Families Service

5. The Early Help Assessment is now embedded by staff and is supported by The Families Journey Booklet which is a relational tool to empower families to lead on their goals, with the support of the Early Help Practitioner. The booklet will be for the family to keep as part of any exit strategy as an aide for their use in the future. There is a sharper focus on bringing in family networks and external partners to the plan as part of a multi-agency approach to ensure a wraparound provision for those we work with. The Early Help Assessment has been launched at partnership events which took place during December to ensure that there is a consistent approach across the Borough for our families regardless of who is delivering intervention.

6. In line with the new Department for Education and government focus on building Multi Agency Teams, planning is underway at a Senior Leadership Level in the first instance, work will continue and staff will be fully engaged in the process. 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)

7. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (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.
8. The YPEJS is due to move from Gladstone Street to the Town Hall in the next couple of weeks. A great deal of planning has taken place to ensure a swift transition for not only the staff, but also the young people that we work with so they will not be unduly impacted on by the process.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

9. At the end of December 2024 there were 248 children open on a Child in Need plan and 111 children subject to a Child Protection Plan. Social Worker caseloads are below 25 children each across the Assessment and Safeguarding Service and Children with Disabilities team. The service continues to have a low reliance on agency workers which enables stability for children and families.
10. The Keeping Families Together service has been expanded to include Family Support Workers who are able to offer intensive family support over a 12-week period including weekends and a targeted support service which can provide targeted support to families. This is progressing well and currently 12 families are supported by the intensive support aspect.
11. The service continue to work on writing relationally to children and this is now incorporated within all children and families management oversight of assessments. This ensures that everything written on children's records is written in a style personally to them, as opposed to being written in the third person. Research shows that writing in such a way promotes the voice of the child being heard and captured and ensures that records are written respectfully and sensitively and recognising potential trauma. This continues to be reviewed on a weekly basis in our Weekly Review Meeting.
12. Ongoing focus on re-referrals to children's services within a 12-month period has seen positive improvement in practice for families and this has reduced to 13.8% of referrals being re-referrals in comparison to 24.2% in 2023/2024. A weekly re-referral meeting ensures we focus on learning as a service to improve outcomes for children.

13. Deep-dive audits have taken place on all children subject to care proceedings and children subject to strategy discussions. Findings in relation to care proceedings show that decision making is appropriate and applications are only made when all other options are explored. However, it did identify that assessment of wider family members within pre-proceedings procedures requires focus and a new legal panel is to be held monthly chaired by the Head of Service/Service Managers to monitor progress both during pre-proceedings and following the issuing of care proceedings.

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

14. We continue to expand our taster flat offer using support from Personal Adviser and Staying close personal advisers offering a wrap-around level of support to the individuals moving to the taster flats to develop their independent living skills prior to securing their own tenancies. We continue to hold 13 flats, overseen by the registered manager, working alongside housing ensuring the young people are placed in a suitable and safe environment. They are offered a unique individual care plan developed with their staying close personal adviser using the outcome stars tool to measure the level of support required. Young people have moved on to independence in their own tenancy and some have been given the opportunity to recognise that they don't feel ready for independence so have been supported to transition to supported accommodation, without the long term implications of having to give up tenancies or accruing any potential outstanding rent arrears, etc.
15. From the 12 taster flats currently occupied we have five over 18's bidding on properties ready for move on, four young people have secured their own tenancy and are awaiting a move-in date, two UASC young people are sharing a two bed property, one is awaiting right to remain decision, the other is bidding for properties. Two under 18's continuing to receive the support from staying close, with referrals for more under 18's to move into the properties becoming vacant in the coming weeks.
16. Data from 14 January 2025 shows there are 275 children in our care. Comparatively the same week in 2024 we had 324 children in our care. 22 of the 275 children accommodated are Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. The reduction in children subject to a Care Order is a result of focused work across all services to ensure the threshold for the Care Order is consistently reviewed and consideration is given to all other possible routes out of care for our children. Monthly tracking meetings have been introduced to reduce delay for children and ensure discharge of care order plans are progressing. We have had a great deal of success in respect of reunifying children home to their families in a planned and assessed way. This has led to an increase in discharge of Care Order's where it is felt the threshold for the Care Order is no longer met. There has also been a number of children where Care Orders have been discharged in favour of Special Guardianship Orders.
17. There are currently 143 care leavers being supported by the team aged 18-25. An increase from 140 in August 2024, we also support 53 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. Recent activities have involved paddleboarding and the theatre during care leavers week and the panto and a celebratory lunch at Christmas.

18. 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. 97 young people are now attached to the programme an increase from 58 in August 2024 and 22 since March 2024, the service is offered to all teams, supporting children and young people. 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, we look to appoint more mentors in the future.
19. Safe space was 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. We gained the funding for 12 months until October 2024, throughout the project we delivered sessions every other Tuesday evening and numerous days in the school holidays. We are hoping to gain additional funding for this project enabling us to continue and deliver sessions, offer provision during holidays and in time form the group into a 11-16 year old children in care council. We have submitted a funding application to the Rotary Club to support with some of the costs to continue this valuable support to children in our care.
20. Staying Close remains a significant strength; we are currently supporting 24 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 37 young people since April 2024 and 14 young people have successfully moved onto their own accommodation. The project offers a six-days-per-week service for young people most in need. Some feedback from the young people and their workers "couldn't have done it without her", "she always listens to me, gives amazing advice, she never lets me down", "it is a great that one young person has progressed to a level where he feels he no longer needs this intense support. "The support I have got is the best".
21. As detailed earlier, we are currently supporting 22 unaccompanied children. 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 12 months, we have supported eight new unaccompanied children.
22. In terms of placement of children, we have 13 unaccompanied young people placed in Darlington and nine outside of Darlington with six of these placed at a distance.

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

23. 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.
24. The Fostering & Supported Lodgings Team has now embedded the completion of viability assessments into the team's roles and responsibilities and the team are completing most viability assessments across all of children's services teams, where positive viabilities are leading to Connected Care and Special Guardianship assessments. We have seen positive

outcomes for children remaining within their families and alongside their siblings as well as supporting the services strategy to “Think Family” and to not be accommodating any child before first exploring and assessing their family. This has resulted in an increase of work for the team assessing and supervising Kinship carers.

25. Since 1.4.2024 to date, the team have completed 44 viability assessments, 21 Connected Carers Assessments and 10 Special Guardianship Assessments. Currently the Team has 15 Connected Carer assessment ongoing and three Special Guardianship assessments.
26. Expressions of Interest from Fostering with Northeast have slowed from September 2024 until January 2025. This is in line with previous years, we have received one Expression of Interest in December and three expressions of Interest in January, with two expressions not going any further, due to their own personal reasons. Fostering with Northeast have a programme of advertisement on TV, Radio and Cinema for 2025. Fostering with Northeast have started to conduct initial visits alongside other Local Authorities Fostering Teams and whilst Darlington has not yet started it has committed to be part of this initiative. Initial feedback is that there is the scope for duplication and mis messaging between agencies, but with a co-ordinated approach and good collaboration this is getting better. It is the plan for Fostering with Northeast that in time they could take over the application and then assessment of Foster Carers regionally. The Head of Service is a member of the board and leading for Darlington.
27. The Fostering & Supported Lodgings Team has recruited a second Panel Chair and additional panel members to build capacity in our Fostering Panels. Due to an increase in Connected Carer and Fostering Assessments, we need more capacity to have them considered and hopefully approved. Whilst assessments have been prioritised, other panel work such as reviews and long-term matches have been deprioritised and there is a small back log of such panel work that we also now need to work through. The Fostering Panels are now planned to run twice monthly for the next three months to begin with. Work is also planned with Care Leavers and Peer Mentors to review how we ensure that applicants are assessed and questioned appropriately on matters that are important to our young people.
28. DfE funding for our current two Mockingbird constellation ends on 31.3.2025. We have funding to continue Mockingbird support in its current form for 12 more months; work has begun with carers to evaluate Mockingbird to inform decisions for 2026/2027.

Foster Carer Recruitment

29. We currently have two active fostering applications and five applicants in assessment with one family attending panel on 25 February 2025 following deferment in November panel for more information. Two families are due to attend panel on 8 April 2025 and a further two families are attending panel at the end of April 2025.
30. Our 2025 recruitment strategy alongside Fostering with North East’s recruitment is to target certain key dates this year, these include:
 - (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

31. 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 Hopetown, etc and events at local amenities during the above weeks can create some good content and awareness.
32. 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.

Homes for our Children

33. The registered manager for CEDARS, has resigned and wishes to move to a part time residential care worker. We interviewed on 12 February 2025 and successfully recruited a Senior Residential Worker with nine years' experience of working within residential homes. Recruitment checks are underway.
34. Gilling Crescent has been relocated to Butterfield, and we are in the process of repurposing the home to accommodate children aged 4 to 10. Registered managers and senior staff have been appointed, and recruitment for additional team members is still ongoing.
35. The candidate was successful in the interview to be the registered manager for the new home. They are currently a senior residential worker at Butterfield Children's Residential Home.
36. CEDARS had an inspection and received an inadequate grading in all areas. The home has received a further inspection eight weeks later and some of the requirements had been responded to and removed from the report. The inspector on revisiting the home shared lots of positives and changes had been implemented since the initial visit.

Education

37. The Darlington local area was inspected by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in November 2024 to evaluate how services in the area support Children and Young People with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).
38. Darlington has seen improvements to services for children with SEND since its previous inspections in 2022. The report, said children and young people with SEND have a voice in Darlington. They are valued, visible and included in their communities. Children, young people and their families are included in decision-making about the individual support plans and types of support that they receive. There are many positives about the partnership's SEND arrangements and the experiences and outcomes for children for young people with SEND.
39. Inspectors state the local area partnership is committed to improving the education, health and social care services across Darlington which benefit children and young people

with SEND. However, inspectors found the partnership's arrangements for some children and young people can lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes. Some of the areas of strength the report highlighted include:

- (a) The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND. Leaders work closely together to improve local provision.
- (b) Children and young people are involved effectively in co-producing the Darlington SEND strategy.
- (c) The timeliness and quality of children and young people's education, health and care plans are improving.
- (d) Children, young people and their families receive a comprehensive range of effective support while they are waiting for access to services.
- (e) The partnership has implemented well-thought-out strategies to support the mental health and emotional well-being needs of children and young people across Darlington.
- (f) Children and young people who are in care, and have SEND, are successfully prepared for adulthood.
- (g) Disabled children receiving support from children's social care experience smooth transitions to adult social care.

40. However, the report also highlighted areas where the partnership must improve, including:

- (a) Leaders need to continue to develop how they use data to inform strategic planning.
- (b) Children and young people wait too long for some therapy services and a diagnosis for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- (c) There is a lack of a defined process to assess and support children and young people with a learning disability.
- (d) Some children and young people experience delays in the delivery of some health services, for example when navigating access to home equipment.
- (e) Improve the quality of information sharing with schools and services.

41. The partnership already recognises and is responding to these challenges. The partnership had developed a new SEND Strategy to be adopted this year and completed a full public consultation on the strategy in December 2024. The partnership will use the findings of the report to align with and inform the SEND Strategy implementation plan.

Youth Unemployment

42. The 18-24 claimant count has fallen slightly from 6.9% (520 young people) in October 2024 to 6.8% (510 young people) in December 2024. Darlington at 6.8% is still higher than

North-East average (6.0%) and National average (5.4%). In the same period the North-East average fell by 0.1%, and the England average rose by 0.1%.

43. December 2024 figures for the Tees Valley shows an increase for Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton, Hartlepool remained static and only Darlington and Middlesbrough fell. Darlington figures remain the lowest in the Tees Valley (October 2024 figures in brackets):
 - (a) 8.5% (8.4%) Stockton
 - (b) 8.2% (8.2%) Hartlepool
 - (c) 7.8% (8.1%) Middlesbrough
 - (d) 7.5% (7.4%) Redcar & Cleveland
 - (e) 6.8% (6.9%) Darlington
44. 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 was due to end by 31 March 2025 and is funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). TVCA have recently extended the programme for 5 months utilised a 2024/25 underspend of UKSPF and it is hoped that TVCA Cabinet will extend this programme to 31 March 2026 at their March meeting. The government is currently reviewing a replacement for the UKSPF programme beyond 2025/26.
45. By the end of January 2025, the team had engaged 150 participants (against an overall contract target of 104) with 72 (48%) moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 24). Of those above 75 of the 150 participants were aged 16-24 (50%) with 37 of those moving into work (49%).
46. The government has launched a Youth Guarantee scheme to move 18-21 year olds into Education, Employment or Training (EET). The combined authority has submitted a bid to DWP and DfE to be one of the trailblazer areas, there is up to £5m available for Tees Valley. Trailblazers are expected to develop programmes that identify and engage the cohort as well as coordinating and managing pathways into EET. Officers from the five local authorities have been involved in shaping the bid. The programme is expected to start as soon as possible after 1 April 2025 for one year, and the outcomes of the eight trailblazer programmes will inform the national roll-out in 2026.

Children's Commissioning and Contracts

47. A refreshed and updated Darlington Young Carers Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been published on the council's website. The MOU is an agreement between organisations to work together to support young carers and their families and is being formally launched at the young carers action day on 12 March. Darlington young carers have created a short video to ensure their voices are at the fore of this launch.
48. Darlington are part of a new subregional children's complex health and social care joint commissioning pilot service with the Integrated Care Board. This service will test a new approach to co-ordinating support and interventions for specific vulnerable children who may have experienced trauma and adversity. Work is currently underway to progress the multi-disciplinary working arrangements with a view to these new working arrangements being operational in Spring 2025.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

49. The Partnership is planning publication of a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review which was undertaken following the death of a child with a non-accidental injury and criminal proceedings have now concluded. There were a number of learning points identified with four key themes; the children's lived experience, parental mental health impact on the family, unseen/unconsidered adults/caregivers and multi-agency working. The final Report and Executive Summary will be available on the Partnership website.
50. The Partnership has published its revised Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements following a revision of Working Together to Safeguard Children Statutory Guidance in 2023. The arrangements will strengthen multi-agency safeguarding arrangements including clarifying roles and responsibilities of safeguarding partners, emphasising the role of education and strengthening accountability expectations. Further details are published on the Partnership Website.
51. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group have not met in this period and therefore no further safeguarding updates to provide.

HAF - Holiday Activity and Food Programme

52. Following the announcement that the Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF) will be extended, the Move More Team have been busy planning an exciting programme for Easter which I attended. The HAF Programme is funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and offers free activities and nutritious meals for all eligible young people aged 5 – 16 years in Darlington. Activities will take place at various locations across the town and will include sports, arts and crafts, bouldering, cooking and much more. A range of activity sessions will be available for children and families with additional needs (SEND). All children who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals can access the sessions every day of the Easter Holidays (bank holidays excluded). All eligible families will receive a letter from their school directly.

Youth Cabinet Report

53. Since March 2024, we have had a new Member of Youth Parliament for Darlington alongside a Deputy and a Youth Cabinet. Over the past year, the group have been working on various projects to ensure the voices of young people in Darlington are being heard.
54. **Make Your Mark 2024**
The first role for the Cabinet was to gain votes on the Make Your Mark consultation for 11-18 year olds. The group collected 3,440 votes across 12 schools and the highest area of concern for young people in Darlington and nationwide was 'Health & Wellbeing'.
55. **Health and Wellbeing Survey**
These results then sparked the Health and Wellbeing Survey being shared with schools and young people to get a better understanding of what support young people wanted in relation to Health & Wellbeing. The group collected 569 responses and found out what areas were of main concern to our local young people. They then used this information to create an awareness poster to help young people understand the support that is already

out there and how it can help them. This topic is also a main priority for the group when meeting with key decision makers.

56. Meetings

The group regularly meet with key decision makers in different areas within the Council. They have already met with Housing, Education, Transport and Social Care amongst other areas. The group are always keen to meet with anyone who will be willing to listen to them so please contact Evie if you would like to be involved (evie.burford@darlington.gov.uk).

57. Parliament

The MYP recently attended a House of Commons sitting with all other MYP's from the Youth Parliament programme. Our MYP Stephen Adenuga was able to speak in Parliament about Period Poverty and why is it important to Darlington young people and why it should be a priority nationwide. This was then voted as the main focus area for Youth Parliament for the next year alongside changing the vote age to 16. The full session can be found on Parliament TV.

58. MYP Manifesto topics

Our MYP for Darlington, Stephen Adenuga is constantly being proactive in his approach to developing his manifesto topics. These include improving public transport, mental health and wellness and Schools of Sanctuary. Stephen is more than willing to be involved in any events or work that would be appropriate for him. Please again email Evie or contact Stephen directly to discuss.

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