

**COUNCIL**  
**15 MAY 2025**

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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.

**Early Intervention and Front Door**

2. The Children's Initial Advice Team continues to be a stable and effective team. It is clear from performance data, audit work, feedback and outcomes, that in the main the Children's Initial Advice Team is ensuring the right service to our families, without delay. The conversion rate of contacts to referrals to social care has decreased over the past 12 months and this is testament to the work that has been carried out to make sure decision making is proportionate, families do not experience unnecessary social care assessment and that first and foremost children are safe and that the service provided meets the needs of children and families.
3. The Family Time Service remains a stable and effective service for our children and their families as they continue to focus on maintaining relationships between children and their families when children are cared for by the Local Authority. The team work closely with social care teams and offer a wide range of support alongside facilitating and supervising family time sessions. More recently the team have supported with completing aspects of life story work, providing transport for young people and they are assisting with visits to families where there can be a focus on parenting work to inform assessment. The team also continue to link closely with partners, for example, the Housing team and there have been instances when there are white goods, furniture and household items that might have ordinarily been disposed of now being recycled for use by our families in need.

**Building Stronger Families Service**

4. Work is ongoing to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the refreshed Early Help Assessment. Initial indications are positive and feedback from families is encouraging. In addition, partners are starting to engage in a more proactive way and the number of external Early Help Assessments being initiated is increasing.
5. The Building Stronger Families management team have begun work to move the offer to one that is locality based, in line with the way social care teams deliver their service. Development of locality working for universal and targeted early help is in its early stages but is timely given the Family Help and Child Protection reform work that will increase in pace over 2025 and into 2026. 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)**

6. 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 what is expected of them, and the oversight and governance that they provide to the Service.
7. The YPEJS have moved to new premises, the team is now situated at the Town Hall. This has been a positive transition and there does not appear to have been any impact on the young people we serve.

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

8. Within the Assessment and Safeguarding teams workloads have remained relatively stable with an average of 16 children per social worker and the highest being 26.
9. As a service we continue to focus on assessment and visiting timeliness. Where assessments are overdue a rationale for this is recorded on the child's record and a new timescale set. We have requested a new weekly performance report to support with improving visiting timeliness. This report is sent to senior managers and team managers on a Friday afternoon to show data for the following week. The data reports both overdue visits and visits due within seven days. This will assist the team manager to have a better grip of performance in this area.
10. Within the children with disabilities team a new role has been developed within existing resources to improve the quality of social care advice for children with an EHCP. This is in response to concerns about the quality and ensuring families are directed to the right support for their needs. This role is in development and will be working in partnership with the SEND team.
11. A new legal review meeting has been introduced to monitor children who are subject to a letter before proceedings or care proceedings. This is to ensure parallel planning is being completed and enable applications to court to be planned and following completion of all assessments. Data from CAFCASS shows that Darlington have reduced their applications to Court by almost half between the years 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 which shows that there is robust support for families to prevent them reaching the point of crisis.

## **Children in our Care and Care leavers**

12. We have 12 taster flats currently occupied, five of our young people are over 18 and bidding on properties ready for move on, four young people have secured their own tenancy and are awaiting a move-in date, two Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children share a two-bed property, 1 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.



13. Data from 29 March 2025 evidenced we have 266 children in our care with 22 of 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 been a number of children returned to families under Placement with Parents, and plans are in place to review these placements within 6 months to prepare for discharge.
14. We have 143 care leavers supported by the team aged 18-25. This is the same as last month, we also support 55 care experienced young people under the age of 18 years. We keep in touch with our care leavers and there are regular opportunities for them to come together for activities and support. Recent activities have involved shows at the Hippodrome, matches at Middlesbrough Football Club and well-being walks.
15. 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. 89 young people are now attached to the programme, six waiting to be matched to mentor, eight planned ends from the project, an increase of 20 young people since January 2025. 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 in employment, raising their own families whilst also helping younger children in our care, we look to appoint more mentors in the future.
16. We received confirmation of government grant funding at the same funding amount as last year, this allows us to continue with our Peer Mentoring project for a further 12 months.
17. 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 received 12 months funding for this project which ended October 2024. 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. We are attending a full Rotary meeting to present project.
18. Staying Close continues to enhance the support provided to our young people who are preparing to leave care; we are currently supporting 23 young people. This number remains consistent as young people come to the end of their support journey and have achieved their goals. The project has supported 39 young people since April 2023 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 "she makes sure I'm getting the help I need", "she always listens to me, gives amazing advice, she never lets me down", "the targeted support offered to this young person by the staying close PA has been crucial to their success", "The support I have got is the best".



## **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

19. As at the end of March 2025, we have 55 approved foster carer households, 31 of which are supporting 54 children, 30.1% of which are long term matched. We have 49 approved connected carers, with 40 households supporting 53 children, accounting for 31.7% of the children that are in foster care.
20. The Fostering & Supported Lodgings team continues to support the service in completing viabilities. In the last quarter January 2025 to March 2025 the team was requested to complete 20 viability assessments. In the same period the team has started 12 Connected Carers assessments and three Special Guardianship assessments. In January 2025 Coram Baaf who develop and licence the Form C form for Connected Carers have launched a new Form K that combines the Form C and the SGO assessment into one document. The team is currently in the initial stages of training and implementing the Form K and hope that it should streamline the assessment of Kinship carers and reduce duplication of work.
21. The Team have received 4 Expressions of Interest through Fostering with Northeast in the period January 2025 to end of March 2025. Unfortunately, three of the applicants withdrew their expression of interest for personal reasons and one expression of interest we continue to follow up the enquiry. One of the applicants has since come back for further information and we are hopeful that this could lead to an application being made. In the last quarter we have had one new Foster Carer approved, looking ahead we have three Foster Carers at a Panel on 8th April 2025 and potentially a further Foster Carer at a panel at the end of April or start of May 2025. The team is currently operating two panels per month to deal with the increase in connected carers needing to be approved. As previous discussed we have recruited an additional panel chair and inducted four new independent panel members providing greater capacity.
22. With regards to panel outcomes over quarter 4, we have had seven Connected Carers approved, one Foster Carer approved and one Foster Carer resignation. This carer has fostered for over 25 years and a celebration event was organised to recognise her retirement and achievement.
23. Fostering Recruitment is led by Fostering with Northeast who have had radio and TV campaigns as well as targeted social media campaigns for teenage and separated children that have featured on the Darlington Borough Council social media pages. The Team is targeting Fostering Fortnight in May 2025 to both celebrate and recognise our own foster carers, but also to create promotional material to recruit more foster carers. We are planning events and a campaign to create videos again of carers on this year's theme of the "power of relationships".
24. As part of the 2025/2026 Fostering Recruitment strategy we recognise that we have a gap in in house foster care provision for teenagers generally. We also recognise strategically that teenagers are often the most difficult children to find a home for and also the costliest. We have developed a teenage pathway for foster carers to both encourage existing carers to find a home for a teenager and to attract new, experienced carers from other areas and agencies to join Darlington. The package of support recognises the challenges carers face in supporting teenagers whilst also ensuring we meet the support



needs of a teenager in our care. Support will include input from virtual school, Family Group Conference service, CEDARS as well as peer fostering support. The planning and development is in its infancy, however foster carers have been identified and consulted as well as a consultation meeting with key stakeholders. It is envisaged that by the end of the next quarter we will have this in the pilot phase and will be able to identify a carer and teenage child.

### **Foster Carer Recruitment**

25. Our 2025 recruitment strategy alongside Fostering with North East's recruitment is to target certain key dates this year, these include:
  - (a) Fostering Fortnight – May 2025
  - (b) World Refugee Day – June 2025
  - (c) Supported Lodgings Week – July 2025
  - (d) Kinship Carers Week – October 2025
26. 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.
27. 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**

28. The registered manager for CEDARS resigned and left her post on 31 March 2025.
29. We recruited to this post with the new manager commencing in post on 24 March 2025. They have commenced registration with Ofsted, as the registered manager of CEDARS.
30. The new registered manager for Gilling has commenced the re-registration of Gilling children's home and her registration as the registered manager of the home. The recruitment for staff for the home is ongoing.
31. Harewood Hill Lodge had its annual Ofsted inspection in March and maintained its GOOD grading.

### **Education**

32. Heighington C of E Primary School was recently inspected by Ofsted. The previous inspection outcome was "Good." Inspectors found the school has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at the previous inspection. Inspectors recognised that pupils flourish and the school goes the extra mile to make sure all pupils are safe and take part in all aspects of school life. The school has exceptionally high expectations of pupils' academic and personal success.



33. Heathfield Primary School has also maintained the standards identified in the previous report in the school's recent inspection. Inspectors recognised that pupils thrive at the school. Staff have high expectations of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and parents appreciate the nurture and education their children receive.
34. In Borough Road Nursey School's recent inspection the schools was found to have maintained the standards of the previous inspection when the school was judged to be "Good." Inspectors recognised that Borough Road Nursery School has high expectations for all children. The report detailed the inclusive ethos of the school and the highly skilled leaders and staff who support children with special educational needs and / or disabilities, ensuring that all children have the key knowledge and skills ready for their next steps in education.
35. Red Hall Primary School was judged to have maintained the standards of the previous inspection where it was judged "Good" during the school's recent inspection by Ofsted. inspectors recognised that pupils are prepared well for life beyond school. Pupils are well cared for by nurturing staff and they enjoy warm relationships with the adults in school. Expectations of pupils' achievement are high and appropriate support is put in place to help pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve well.

### Youth Unemployment

36. The 18-24 claimant count has risen slightly from 6.6% (495 young people) in December 2024 to 6.9% (515 young people) in February 2025. Darlington at 6.9% is still higher than North-East average (6.1%) and National average (5.6%). In the same period the North-East average rose by 0.2%, and the England average rose by 0.3%. This rise could be as a result of seasonal employment ceasing after the Christmas period.
37. February 2025 figures for the Tees Valley shows a similar increase across all five local authorities. Darlington continues to have the lowest claimant count in the Tees Valley (December 2024 figures in brackets):

(a) 8.7% (8.4%)	Stockton
(b) 8.8% (8.2%)	Hartlepool
(c) 8.1% (7.7%)	Middlesbrough
(d) 7.7% (7.3%)	Redcar & Cleveland
(e) 6.9% (6.6%)	Darlington
38. 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 has just been extended to 31 March 2026.
39. By the end of February 2025, the team had engaged 162 participants (against an overall contract target of 104) with 77 (48%) moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 24). Of those above 79 of the 162 participants were aged 16-24 (49%) with 38 of those moving into work (48%).



40. 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**

41. A formal launch of the Darlington Young Carers Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was held on 12 March to coincide with the national Young Carers Action Day. The launch reflected upon a number of strengths in Darlington, including the designated young carers support service and the positive work in schools to progress the Young Carers Charter. The launch also included a debut video developed by Darlington Young Carers for other young carers outlining what being a young carer means to them. A further follow on event is taking place on 29 April to progress the mobilisation and implementation of the MOU, which will include a further video from Darlington Young Carers tailored to professional audiences.
42. The joint work with the 12 North East Councils to review placement costs and activity for children in care has continued to progress with focused provider engagement forming the next part of the workstream. This joint analytical work has been undertaken concurrently with joint fee negotiations with providers where the majority of the placing councils are from the North East which has had positive early results. The review will be concluded in early Summer 2025.

### **Tackling Child Poverty**

43. Child poverty is a growing national and regional issue. The latest DWP data on children living in poverty published late March 2025 for the year 2023/24 is currently being reviewed. This data shows rising numbers of children in poverty across North East England. We continue to support the work of the North East Child Poverty Commission and are currently undertaking a review to understand the work currently undertaken across services that has a positive impact on those living in poverty. National government is also due to publish a national strategy to tackle child poverty later this year.

### **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

44. The first meeting of the Lead Safeguarding Partners took place on 17 March 2025. Partners discussed the agreed changes which will become effective from 1 April 2025, The Executive Director of People will step in as Partnership Chair for the year. The main change is the introduction of a Management Group represented by the Delegated Safeguarding Partners, which will become the decision-making group reporting into the Lead Safeguarding Partners. This group met for the first time on 10 March and the Assistant Director Children's Services will Chair this group for the year. The requirements require Education to be involved in safeguarding arrangements and its decision making and there will be four representatives covering Primary, Secondary, Tertiary and SEND provision. The Terms of Reference and governance will need to be reviewed in light of



these changes to ensure they are explicit about the role and responsibility of each group at each level of the partnership and membership is to be reflected accordingly.

45. Other changes include a revision to the current Independent Chair/Scrutineer role held by Ann Baxter which will become an Independent Scrutineer role only to focus on quality assurance, audits and organisational scrutiny, the recruitment process will take place over the next few weeks. Ann has made the decision to step down and Partners thanked her for her valuable contribution to safeguarding over the past 10 years.
46. The Partnership published its Child J Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review on 21 February. Child J died from a head trauma consistent with a non-accidental injury whilst in the care of his mother's partner. This review explored what happened leading up to the significant incident and reflected on key themes that helped the Partnership understand what happened and what that meant for Child J and other children in the family home, to help improve multi-agency responses in the future.
47. The review identified important learning for the multi-agency safeguarding partnership to consider and reflect upon regards current systems and practice. The following themes were identified:
  - (a) The child's lived experience and what it was like to be an infant and child in this family
  - (b) Neglect and its impact on child development and wellbeing
  - (c) Parental mental health - impact on parenting and family functioning
  - (d) Unseen or unconsidered adults and caregivers within the household and their role with regards the children
  - (e) Effectiveness of multi-agency working in identifying and meeting the children's needs
27. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 2 April, the agenda covered the new multi-agency Safeguarding Partnership arrangements, the findings of the Child J report and a focus on Suicide Prevention.

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