



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE **6 JUNE 2019**

Review of the corporate parenting strategy and work plan

Report of the Executive Director of Adult Social Care & Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Wayne Daley

Purpose of Report

To provide the family and children overview and scrutiny committee with a progress and impact update in relation to the action plan from the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2017-2020, which informs the development of the revised strategy.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1) Members note the progress that has been made in relation to the Corporate Parenting Strategy and the work plan
- 2) Members identify any areas for additional scrutiny, challenge or development for the revised strategy.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the corporate priorities of:

- **Living:** *We want you to feel safe, healthy and cared for,*
- **Learning:** *We want you to achieve and reach your potential*
- **Enjoying:** *We want you to love where you live*

and takes into account the corporate values with a particular and continuing focus on listening and considering the views of children and young people.

Key Issues

1. The Multi Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP) has continued to review the action plan of the Corporate Parenting Strategy to ensure that progress is being made in the appropriate areas.
2. The annual self assessment of children's social care which has been subject to external challenge and scrutiny by regional colleagues and by Ofsted has significantly contributed to understanding the progress and impact of the corporate parenting strategy and work plan and to identify future areas for improvement.
3. During the review period, the Children and Social Work act 2017 has been implemented and, for the first time details the principles of corporate parenting. as well as strengthening the offer for care leavers and increasing the requirements for the virtual school. These developments will be taken into account in the revised strategy and work plan
4. The plan is having a positive impact in relation to:
 - Reducing the numbers of children who are becoming looked after
 - The numbers and percentage of children leaving care to return home, be adopted and becoming subject to SGO is better than regional and national comparators.
 - Improving the quality and impact of services to care leavers in the key areas of staying in touch, suitable accommodation and those who are in employment education and training (EET)
 - Increasing the numbers of young people in Staying Put arrangements
 - Increasing the percentage of children who are placed within 20 miles of their home address and increasing the percentage of foster children who are placed with in-house carers.
 - Consistent educational achievement in early years and key stages 2 and 4, school placement stability and no permanent exclusions.
 - The range and scrutiny of performance and quality assurance information that is available, regularly presented and scrutinised
5. Areas for ongoing focus and improvement include
 - Ensuring improvements in all areas are maintained and embedded.
 - Continue to strengthen the corporate parenting board function, scrutiny and challenge in line with the statutory corporate parenting principles, in

particular taking into account the views of our looked after children and care leavers.

- Increase the numbers and percentage of children who are placed in foster care and further improve the timely formal matching of children who require long term foster care.
 - Further develop the timely availability of placements for teenagers with complex needs.
 - Improve the flexible use and commissioning of residential care to support children to return to a family setting wherever possible.
 - Improve the joint commissioning processes with health colleagues
 - Develop our support services for family and friends carers
 - Ensure the timely accessibility of services for our children looked after
 - Ensure the Virtual School meets the educational statutory requirements detailed in Children and Social Work Act 2017 and improves achievement in identified areas.
 - Maintain and further develop the service improvements for our care leavers including the C and SW Act 2017 requirements.
6. Building on this, the strategic priorities for the corporate parenting strategy going forward, incorporating the above areas for practice improvement and aligning with the CSC improvement plan
- Sufficiency and commissioning of placements
 - Planning for permanence
 - Development and timely provision of services
 - Strengthen the function of the CPAG
 - Further improve services to care leavers
 - Further improve effectiveness and impact of Virtual School
 - Ensuring the voice and views of children looked after and care leavers is evident and influential in service and strategy development and individual case planning

BACKGROUND

1. Overall, the numbers of children being looked after in Northumberland has reduced over the last year. A key strategic focus on this, with a range of measures being utilised, will be detailed within the report but Northumberland now have the lowest rate of children looked after in the region and the trend of reducing numbers goes against both regional and national trends.
2. In the last year, we have introduced a legal gateway panel which has provided scrutiny, challenge and increased consistency in decision making for children to become looked after. This ensures that the responsibility for the decision rests at an appropriately senior level and that all safe alternatives have been appropriately considered.
3. These developments should be seen in the context of the drive for continuous improvement on the effectiveness of overall social care practice, including the implementation of the Signs of Safety practice framework and a focus on increasing the front-line social work and management capacity. Social work caseloads have reduced although there is variability across the county. Investment in the IRO service has ensured that IRO caseloads are in line with regulatory guidance and this ensures that the vast majority of statutory reviews are timely. The detail of the service has been reported separately to CPAG.
4. A key message that children and young people tell us is that they have had too many changes of social worker. There has been positive progress in improving workforce stability as part of the wider improvement work in social care, but this remains a priority focus within the wider social care continuous improvement plan
5. As part of our quality assurance work, a key finding is that social workers and independent reviewing officers do know the children and young people that they work with well and work hard to ensure that their views and experiences are clear and taken into account in their work.
6. The implementation of the children and social work act 2017 has detailed the key principles for corporate parents and has strengthened the requirements of services to care leavers and education support which has been considered as part of our ongoing improvement work.

Strategic Priority 1: Maximise the effectiveness of early help to prevent the need for children to be looked after where there are appropriate alternatives

1. A range of services which are targeted at supporting children who are at the edge of care have been successfully developed to work alongside social workers to support children at home where it is safe to do so. The majority of children and families who have engaged and worked with these services have been successfully supported to remain in the care of their families and where

this has not been successful, then it has contributed to the decision that becoming looked after is appropriate for the child.

2. The services include Northumberland Families First, created in April 2018, offering more intensive working with families. Safe Families provides support to families where there is one child under the age of ten years through host families who will provide short break care or befrienders who will support families in their own communities and homes and Family Group Conferencing, which is commissioned from Barnardos.
3. As indicated above, there are indicators of the effectiveness of these services, but the NFF and FGC services in particular, need to be further embedded and evaluated over a longer period of time. We need to ensure that the services are consistently accessed at the point at which they are most likely to be successful and there is further work to do to develop flexibility, including the use of the services to consistently support children to exit care.

Going forward

- Further develop the flexibility and use of the range of edge of care services to support children to remain and/or to return to the care of their family.

Strategic priority 2 : Develop a reunification policy to promote the timely return of children home where it is in children's best interests

1. The policy to underpin this practice is now in place as part of the Trix childrens policies and procedures. Clearer planning for children from the point at which they become looked after is supported by the legal gateway panel and there is increased use of edge of care services above as part of the support packages but needs further development and utilisation. We have seen an increase in the number and percentage of children who return home over the last year.
2. The number and percentage of children leaving care to return home has increased from 33% (63 out of 192) in Feb 2018 to 40% (71 out of 176) at the end of January 2019. This latest performance figure in line with regional (40%) and above national averages (31%).
3. Further to this, the time in care that children have experienced who have returned home is spread evenly between those who have had short periods in care (for example 23% (16 children) in care for 3 months and 23% (16 children) similarly for those in care for 2 or more years).
4. Overall, the numbers and percentage of children who are entering care for a second or subsequent time have decreased over the last year from 20% (37 children) in February 2018 to 16% (26 children) which indicates that more effective planning and support is being put in place for the majority of children leaving care, but work to continue to improve this will remain a strategic focus. As part of this we will also work to improve the planning for the discharge of

care orders for children who are returned to their parents' care while remaining subject to a care order.

Going forward

- Ensure that there are clear assessments and support plans in place for all children where there is a plan to return home
- Improve the planning and timely discharge for children who return home on care orders.

Strategic priority 3: Ensure the provision of high quality placements with an increased reliance on in house provision

1. We have increased the number and percentage of our fostered looked after children who are placed in in-house foster care from 76% in December 2016 to 81% as at December 2018 having reduced external placement from 60 at the end of 2017/18 to 44 currently. While the most important factor is ensuring the placements meet the needs of children whether in house or external, the majority of foster placements that have unplanned endings has been in external/independent foster placements and this has strengthened our drive to increase our in-house placements.
2. All our in-house residential homes continue to be rated as good or outstanding and there is rigorous senior management scrutiny and oversight of decisions to place children in external fostering or residential placements.
3. Further to this, the use of in-house placements allied to the scrutiny and commissioning of external placements has meant that the percentage of children who are placed within 20 miles of home is well above the national average. In the last 12 months, 67% of our looked after children were placed within 20 miles, with the stat neighbour and national average standing at 52% and 59% respectively. This means that children are more likely to maintain important contact with family and friends networks and other services.
4. A major challenge is the timely availability of appropriate placements for a small number of teenagers with complex needs. This is a regional and a national challenge.
5. Further to this, we have been working with colleagues in the CCG to improve the effectiveness of our joint commissioning arrangements and this will continue to be a focus going forward.
6. We have undertaken specific work and management oversight focused on our use of Regulation 24 placements (assessments of placements of children with family or friends within the fostering regulations). We have improved our identification and responses, ensuring that our responses are in line with case law and guidance. This has meant that we have reduced the number of Reg 24 placements from 50 in December 2016 to 28 as at December 2018.

7. One key indicator is the stability of placements. Our performance in relation to children who have been in the same placement for two or more years is in line with national and comparator averages, but our short term stability indicator (children with 3 or more placements in last 12 months) remains volatile moving from 13% in March 2018 to 9% in September 2018 and is currently at 14%. The national average is 10% and so this remains an area of strategic focus.
8. We have participated in the development of the regional adoption agency RAA which is now known as Adopt North East (ANE). The agency is hosted by North Tyneside and went live in December 2018. There will be a detailed update report to CPAG in June 2019.
9. Overall however, the percentage of Northumberland children who are in residential care and in particular external placements is higher than comparator averages and a strategic priority going forward will be to increase the overall percentage of children in foster care and to develop a more flexible and time limited use of residential care where this meets the child's needs, wherever possible supporting them to return to be cared for in a family setting. As part of this we will continue to work to develop our in-house residential provision, both to increase flexibility and also to provide placements for those children with complex needs.

Going forward

- Aim to increase the number and percentage of children who are placed in a family setting.
- Develop more flexible use and commissioning of residential care to support children to return to a family setting wherever possible.
- Develop and embed joint commissioning with health colleagues.
- To increase the availability and timely accessibility of placements for teenagers with complex needs.
- Monitor the effectiveness of ANE to continue to support the timely achievement of permanence for children being adopted.

Strategic priority 4: Improve the quality and timeliness of permanence planning

1. The timely completion of care proceedings is one key element of ensuring that children achieve permanence as timely as possible. While there has been a slight improvement in Northumberland's completion of care proceedings to 31 weeks, this remains above the national target of 26 weeks. This is impacted by factors wider than local authority practice as evidenced in an analysis by

the regional circuit judge, and we need to implement and embed the areas for practice improvement identified by this work.

2. Early permanence planning for children who may be adopted has been effective in Northumberland. The timeliness with which children are matched and placed with adopters is better than national averages and the percentage of children who leave care to be adopted (17%) is also better than the national average (14%). Northumberland has also been persistent and effective in placing children who may be hard to place for adoption. (Older children, sibling groups, children with complex needs). The challenge going forward will be to ensure that ANE (see above) maintains and improves this performance for children.
3. The percentage of children leaving care and achieving permanence through special guardianship orders(SGO) over the last year is 19% which is better than both national (11%) and regional (15%) averages.
4. There are currently 67 children who have been formally matched in long term foster care and we are currently working to improve the practice and processes to ensure all children who need long term foster care are permanently matched where appropriate in a timely way.
5. The implementation of the legal gateway panel has ensured that there is much clearer planning at the point of entry to the looked after system and improved tracking systems are in place to ensure oversight of the progress of plans from that point. Once the child has been looked after for four months, the statutory review at this time is pivotal to ensuring that there is a plan for permanence for that child. This remains an area for ongoing development with a planned audit to take place in this area, and current performance indicates that 71% of these reviews detail a plan for permanence.
6. Work to improve the quality of written plans overall is a key area of focus in social care currently. Our quality assurance processes have identified that the quality of plans has improved and do cover key areas of work and actions but need further development to ensure that they consistently detail desired outcomes and timescales and are written in a more child friendly way.

Going forward

- Improve the timeliness of the care proceedings completion
- Further improve the timeliness and process for matching all children in foster care who require long term placement.
- Ensure all statutory reviews at four months clearly detail the plan for permanence.
- Further improve the quality of written plans to support the timely achievement of permanence.

Strategic priority 5: Improve the access of looked after children to mental health services and ensure that the service is responsive to the particular needs of the child

1. Strength and difficulty questionnaires and timely health assessments and reviews alongside social work assessments do contribute to the identification of children with mental health support needs. This has been supported by the recent development of referral clinics for social workers with a mental health clinician.
2. Work under the Transforming Services is currently taking place to improve the access to mental health services for all children and within that, representatives are working to ensure clear pathways for looked after children
3. Further developments are required to ensure that joint commissioning with the CCG effectively identifies looked after children's health needs

Going forward

- Ensure that pathways to services for children with mental health support needs are effective and timely for children looked after.
- Ensure services offered are effective and meet the needs of the child
- Embed the joint commissioning of services with health colleagues

Strategic priority 6. Support family and friends carers and special guardians to provide quality and sustainable placements.

1. Work to date has focused on improving the identification, assessment and support to family and friends who are caring for children under fostering regulations has been detailed earlier in the report. The report has also positively detailed the numbers and percentage of children who exit care through SGOs.
2. Current family and friends guidance has been refreshed and further work is currently taking place to develop shared North of Tyne policies and procedures in this area of work. Allowances for family and friends carers in line with their status are in place and are compliant with legal and regulatory requirements.
3. Following the implementation of the RAA/ANE, we are reconfiguring our fostering service and this will include a dedicated family and friends service.
4. While ongoing support is offered to children who are subject to SGO through the range of available services, we are currently developing a dedicated service to be available to further support and be a first point of contact for the increasing numbers of children who are placed on an SGO and their carers.

Going forward

- Reconfigure our fostering service to maximise the response to and support for family and friends carers.
- Develop a dedicated support service for children subject to SGO.
- Explore regional innovation opportunities for sharing and developing good practice in this area of work.

Strategic priority 7 : Improve services to care leavers.

1. The service review for care leavers identified in the original work plan has been completed and the leaving care provision has been split between those care leavers who are under 18 and a new dedicated resource for those aged between 18 and 25. Further to this, the accommodation framework in the original work plan has been recommissioned to deliver a wider range of support for care leavers who need out of hours and weekend support.
2. Developments in the participation service have ensured there is renewed and effective engagement with care leavers, which was well illustrated by the recent presentations of care leavers to CPAG.
3. Further to our internal performance and quality assurance processes, the service has been the subject of external peer challenge, a detailed report of which has previously been presented to CPAG.
4. The impact of these developments can be seen by the improving performance information, including currently being in touch with 97% of our care leavers (better than regional (94%) and national (88%) averages), 93% of our care leavers living in suitable accommodation (regional 91% national 84%) and 53% of our care leavers being in education, employment or training (regional 52%, national 51%).
5. In terms of young people who stay put, we have 23 young people, twelve of whom have stayed with in-house carers, eleven of whom have stayed with IFA carers. This has increased from 15 young people in staying put arrangements at February 2018.
6. Council tax exemption for care leavers has been agreed very recently and will be backdated to April 2018.
7. While improvements have been noted in timeliness and quality of pathway planning, further improvements are needed to ensure consistency and that the plans are led by the young person. CPAG has received a recent report on the development of the care leavers covenant, and this will contribute to ensuring that our care leavers have the best education and employment opportunities that the council can offer.

8. The service has already responded to the requirements for care leavers in the Children and Social work Act. Support is being offered to young people up to the age of 25 where they request this and there is a local offer available for young people on the website, but work is being undertaken to improve this

Going forward

- Deliver the action plan developed in response to the peer challenge.
- Identify more apprenticeships and mentor for care leavers, including the development and delivery of the NCC care leavers covenant.
- Embed the positive improvements in the voice of care leavers in service development , delivery and individual case planning.
- Ensure the local offer for care leavers is as clear and accessible as possible and the support requirements for care leavers up to the age of 25 continue to be met

Strategic priorities 8 and 9: Performance and quality assurance

1. As can be evidenced from this report and the range of performance and quality assurance reports and information that has been presented to CPAG, the quality and oversight of activity has significantly improved from the original work plan. This has been part of the overall improvement work within children's social care and is subject to ongoing development to meet changing needs and to support the culture of learning and continuous improvement.
2. The improved engagement and participation of care leavers has been noted above and in the majority of individual cases, the views and experiences of children and young people are clear and taken into account. Further work is required to ensure effective participation of a wider range of children looked after are embedded in service developments and activities. .

Going forward

- Ensure that a wider range of looked after children contribute effectively to service development and activity.

Strategic priority 10: Culture

1. The aim of this priority was to ensure that there was a culture of collective responsibility, excellence and ambition for our looked after children and care leavers. This has been evidenced by the improvements that we have seen and continue to aim for, but importantly has now been enhanced by the implementation of the children and social work act 2017 which details the principles of corporate parenting. This culture development has also been supported by the leadership pledge in children's social care which underpins how we all will work in partnership with children and young people and their

families and that we relentlessly challenge ourselves to continuously improve the services we offer so that we support children to achieve the best outcomes possible.

2. We need to ensure these principles and the culture we have been developing continue to be embedded in our work and supporting our pledge to do and be the best that we can with and for our children and young people.

Going forward

- Continue to develop and strengthen the corporate parenting arrangements to ensure alignment with the statutory principles and to keep embedding our desired culture of responsibility, excellence and ambition for our children and young people.

Education of looked after children

The progress and areas for improvement relating to the education for our looked after children have been detailed in separate reports and action plan which have been regularly presented to CPAG. The action plan will be linked to the corporate parenting strategy going forward.

Conclusion

There have been significant developments and progress in the quality and effectiveness of services for our looked after children and care leavers as evidenced in the body of the report. The revision of the strategy and the associated work plans do need to be seen in the context of and linked to the wider improvement work across social care. The areas for ongoing and further improvement within corporate parenting have been detailed in the report and it is crucial that we strive to do and be the best we possibly can with and for our looked after children and young people and our care leavers.

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	The LA is required to have strategies which identify how we will achieve good outcomes for looked after children and care leavers, ensure permanence for those children who are not returning home and that we have sufficient placements for our looked after children .
Finance and value for money:	No implications from this report.
Legal:	The strategy aligns with the requirements of the children and social work act 2017.
Procurement:	No implications from this report.
Human Resources:	No implications from this report.
Property:	Council funds have been committed to increase the in-house provision of residential care. It has not been possible to locate appropriate land or building as yet to progress this key element of our strategy
Equalities: (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	Looked after children and care leavers experience poorer life chance outcomes than the general population. This strategy aims to mitigate many of those factors which lead to poor outcomes.
Risk Assessment:	Not appropriate
Crime & Disorder:	No implications from this report
Customer Considerations:	Looked after children and care leavers are a priority group for the Council and the involvement of children and young people in the development of our strategy is important to its success.
Carbon Reduction:	No implications from this report.
Wards:	No implications from this report.

CONSULTATION

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Report Sign Off

Finance Officer	N/A
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A
Executive Director	Cath McEvoy - Carr
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Wayne Daley

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