



## Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategic Partnership – Highlight Report

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of the report is to provide information to the Corporate Parenting Board regarding the delivery of the City of York Corporate Parenting and Children in Care Strategy and Action Plan and items of discussion with partners and actions agreed. This report covers the partnership meeting of the 13<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and focuses on updates from key teams including response to Covid 19.

### **Leaving Care Service Update:**

#### The Pathway Team:

The Team are currently working with 135 young people, 124 care leavers and 11 YPIC preparing for leaving care.

7 Care leavers are age 16-21 & 47 are age 21-25. (The approximate cohort of 21+ is 80)

Current average worker caseloads have increased to above 22, which is the DFE recommendation. This is in part due to an increase in care leavers post 21 requesting (Social Work Act 2017) to continue pathway support but also due to a higher than usual cohort of young people aged 18. The number generally averages 20 per annum but this year is 30 + and highlights that almost 25 % of children in care are age 15-17 and will be leaving care in the next 2 years

The service reports to the DFE on the following data:

#### In Touch

The Team is in touch with all but 3 care leavers

#### Pathway Plans

Total Plans 124

In date = 111, out of date = 13

Plans are reviewed 6 monthly.

Not all care leavers are enthusiastic about reviewing their pathway plans however we strive to keep them all up to date whilst also acknowledging Covid continues to be an issue when trying to arrange appointments.

#### Education, Training and Employment (ETE):

Prior to lockdown the national ETE figure was 52% and in York the average was 60%.

The first Covid lockdown saw the ETE figures drop to 50% in ETE, some young people laid off rather than furloughed. The Pathway ETE officer and Personal Advisor's (PA's) have targeted and encouraged young people to explore other options resulting in the ETE figure now increasing to 67.5% .

12 young people across the age range attending HE courses either at University or college. We continue to focus on the 32.5 % NEET group 9% are young mums, 6.5% % are unable to work due to illness or disability and the 16.5% who are actual NEET.

#### Accommodation:

##### Suitable accommodation

16-21: 92% are in suitable accommodation.

34% are living in independence, 19% are staying put, 4% in supported accommodation 18% with parents, 10% in community homes and 8% (6 YP's) are in custody. Positively we are experiencing an increase of young people staying put with former foster carers mirroring family life and providing the opportunity to develop and mature at a gradual pace building on positive attachment; the figure is now 17 = 14%

21–25: 91% are in suitable accommodation.

66% are living independently, 11% are in semi-independent accommodation, 5% are in community homes, 10% with parents and 9% (4) are in custody. Again to note we are working with approximately 50% of care leavers 21+.

#### **Covid 19: Support and experiences.**

The team has continued to visit care leavers and keep in touch via a number of media types, including email, text, Zoom & WhatsApp. The team received a number of donations from local businesses for Christmas presents.

The ISM and Care leaver Newsletter continues to offer the opportunity for care leavers to share their views and experiences and for us to share important information such as Covid safety guidance and payments they can apply for because of the impact of the virus.

Quote from a care leaver;

Hi .....

**Thank you for keeping us connected through this time of uncertainty. You have helped me feel a sense of community whilst being isolated during this pandemic.**

**For arranging activities to still keep us all a little sane when the world has fallen apart.**

**I love the fact of feeling part of something when the world is choosing to break apart.**

**Thanks again .....**

### **Children in Permanent Placements Update:**

The meeting heard a case example which highlighted the challenges and risks in supporting young people during Covid but also the commitment of social workers. In this case 2 young people ran off to Newbury and it was assessed that the only way to return them was for staff members to collect them at a time of national lockdown.

Upon arrival one of the young people indicated that they were symptomatic for Covid, risk assessments eventually determined that they would still be transported back by car, no easy task when they kept removing their masks throughout the journey. The following day a member of staff had to take the young person for a test which came back negative. At no point did staff waiver in their commitment to undertake their role, focusing on their objective of returning the young people to York and ensuring their health needs were met, they were not rash in their decision making but equally they were placing themselves at risk during the course of their work. Subsequently, the young person tested positive and the staff members had to self-isolate.

Following their return to placement in York, the two young people were determined to be together and on two occasions their refusal to cooperate with the requirements and to self-isolate, instead choosing to meet up with each other, led to two consecutive short term placements for one young person having to be ended with immediate effect as the carers would not permit her to return after being in contact with someone who had the virus. At every turn what was already a difficult situation was overlain with layers of complexity due to the impact of Covid.

This third lockdown has been impactful with staff aware that their own resilience is depleted and that for young people the degree to which they will continue to accept the restrictions may wane. All children are being reviewed to determine whether visits will be face to face or virtual. Every child has a risk assessment on file, which sets this out and is endorsed by the manager and reviewed every 2 weeks. Updating risk assessments has been easier with the key issues well understood and then taking forward the learning from the previous lockdowns.

Since the start of lockdown 3, discussions have taken place with all carers, children and young people to ensure that effective plans are in place for their ongoing attendance at school or access to on line provision. An understanding of young people's needs and areas of progress during the last year have been pivotal in helping to inform the decision making.

All of our children and young people are wholly aware of the current circumstances in which everybody is living and their engagement with the restrictions imposed varies from total to blatant. Both bring challenges. Young people are living with a degree of fear and for some coaxing them back to a fuller engagement in their day to day lives will be challenging when a degree of normality resumes. For a few others we are aware that current legislation to limit their movement may need to be invoked and sadly a fine may follow. The level of compliance is the primary aspect of anti-social behaviour we are currently dealing with.

Where the team is involved in supporting family time between children, siblings and parents this has in the main continued to take place outdoors, with good use being made of the quieter city centre and local resources such as Museum gardens for picnics. Those arrangements which require a greater level of oversight were accommodated on a case by case basis at Hamilton House. The latest restrictions will impact again but young people, carers and families have accepted this well. Where we are not able to undertake contact in line with the agreed care plan the majority of parents generally agree with the decisions not to proceed.

Use of the electronic PEP continues to be embedded with the PEP being reviewed each term. Work to change the reporting mechanism within MOSAIC to capture this has been progressed and the changes are now waiting to be built. Current completion rate for the team is 92%. Current completion rate across all teams for the last term is 87, supported recently by training to workers from the VSH and regular monitoring.

Dental appointments have resumed but it will take a considerable time to deal with the backlog of 70 appointments which have accumulated and further cancellations are likely to occur.

Health Assessments are taking place, there are currently now only 19 where the completed assessment is awaited, the overall completion figure is buoyant at 86.4%, with around 5% of young people declining their HNA this is taking us closer to the required figure.

### **Court Team Update:**

Court hearings remain a mixture of entirely virtual, hybrid (some in physical attendance others on video call), and in person hearings at either the family court or Hilton Court.

Virtual hearings, although clearly safer, can sometimes be a challenge due to technical issues and pre hearing discussions being limited which can lead sometimes to additional statements or amended care plans for example after hearings, as matters aren't always agreed or discussed beforehand between parties.

There has been some longer term delay with finishing cases already in proceedings due to the impact of all three lockdowns, particularly where there is a final contested hearing which needs to be in person, such as Adoption cases.

Contested hearings where evidence is required tend to take place in person or via hybrid hearings.

Virtual hearings can at times take their toll emotionally on staff as at times they feel they are not able to clarify any queries, which is not helped by the fact they do not get the natural opportunity to 'de brief' like they would when not working remotely. The manager makes time after hearings with staff to de brief.

Contact arrangements have continued to be at the centre of our care planning for children. Particularly during lockdowns this has been a challenge and at times plans that have been made with safety as the priority have been challenged for not

providing the same level of contact between parents and children or sibling groups pre- lockdown. Hamilton House remaining open is positive but their capacity is more limited due to additional safety measures to ensure it is Covid secure.

All children are being reviewed to determine whether visits will be face to face or virtual. Every child has a risk assessment on file, which sets this out and is endorsed by the manager and reviewed every 2 weeks. Updating risk assessments has been easier with the key issues well understood and then taking forward the learning from the previous lockdowns.

A tracker of all open cases in care proceedings is now in place and which captures dates for filing evidence and plans. The tracker is overseen and updated by the legal department and greatly assists in maintaining oversight of court timescales.

### **Fostering Service Update:**

Approved Foster Carers:

At the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021 we have 118 approved foster carer households:

- Mainstream carers: 69
- Connected carers: 39
- Short breaks carers: 10

### **Placement sufficiency:**

We continue to have limited vacancies within our cohort of mainstream CYC carers. Most mainstream carers already have placements, and we have a number of carers who will only take younger children, which means it is a challenge to find placements for older children with our City of York Carers. If we are unable to find placements with our own carers we will consider IFA foster carers on the White Rose Framework. The Framework Agreement is led by Leeds City Council but involves 14 Local Authorities (including York) across Yorkshire and Humberside. It increases the ability to identify placements within the constraints of an agreed contract specification, and lays down terms and conditions against which quality foster care provision should be provided. All external IFA placements need senior management authorisation and a funding agreement.

City of York Council have re-negotiated a contract with Hexagon Care to provide three residential placements in Wenlock terrace in York, from December 2020. Wenlock terrace provides care and accommodation for up to three young people, male and female, aged between 11- 17 years on admission, at any one time. The new admission criteria supports young people with more complex needs who require a medium to long term placement. Currently the needs of young people who have been referred is being risk assessed by Hexagon prior to them being offered a place. Two of the young people will transfer back from other residential provision, which will be a budget saving.

Whilst the provision of three placements from Hexagon in Wenlock is a positive, it does mean that once the home is full we have no other residential provision in York

and will require us to commission placements regionally and nationally. We are currently consulting with children and young people in care and care leavers on developing semi-independent living accommodation for 16/17 year olds to further support young people in preparing for independence.

### Reducing Service Costs Board

As part of our budget management the fostering team is now reporting to the reducing service costs board. We provide information on our in-house capacity (carers on hold, vacancies, areas of demand, recruitment) and also external IFA and residential placements and consider if we are getting the best outcomes for children and young people in that provision, with robust consideration given to whether costs can be reduced.

### Covid 19 response

We are now in lockdown 3 due to an increase in Covid 19, overall foster carers have responded well to the Covid 19 situation and associated restrictions. During lockdown 1 carers were risk assessed in terms of their family Covid 19 vulnerability, we worked within this and carers were supported via Skype when home visiting was temporarily halted. Due to the new lockdown restrictions the Covid family risk assessments are in the process of being updated and support to carer households have reverted back to being virtual for the time being, unless the placement has significant issues which require a home visit. Foster carers on the whole have managed the Covid situation well.

### Recruitment:

The digital recruitment campaign to attract new carers to foster for City of York Council has been significantly impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic, the media advertising was halted during lockdown, although the CYC resources were still in place. There have been some frustrations as the calibre of many of the applicants has been low and we have been unable to proceed with large numbers. This appears to be due to people being furloughed or having lost their jobs, but not having really thought through what fostering is.

The initial recruitment plan was to run the campaign for 1 year – January/20 – December/20, however as the campaign was paused in April 2020, and re started in June 2020 it has been extended to February 2021. Unfortunately since the new National restrictions have been implemented in January 2021 the decision has been made to halt the recruitment campaign again. This is a shame as towards the end of last year we started to see the calibre of applicants improve. Despite the challenges of the Covid, pandemic, we will have recruited 6 new foster carers by 31<sup>st</sup> March 21, against an original target of 8.

### **Assessing Permanent Carers Team Update:**

The team is responsible for completing Viability Assessments, Connected Carer assessments, Special Guardianship assessments, and Step Parent Adoption assessments.

Since October we have continued to receive referrals into the team from all areas of Children's Social Care. It was anticipated that there would be a significant increase in the number of referrals once we came out of the first lockdown and schools returned. This hasn't really borne out and it has been possible to respond to referrals into the service and meet the demand.

There has been a noticeable increase in Step Parent Adoption enquiries into the service in the last 10 months. In the summer months we were responding to over three times the number of enquiries as we normally would do and this has led to an increased demand on the service. This appears to be down to people being concerned about Covid.

In recent months we started to complete some assessment sessions face to face (but Covid secure) where we felt it was necessary to evidence the applicant's interactions with the children in their care. Due to the new lockdown we have had to revert to all assessments being done via video calls. We are now better placed in using this technology and assessments remain of a good enough quality for both Fostering Panel and for the courts.

Essential checks such as DBS and Medical checks were delayed during the first lockdown and this had an impact on the average length of our assessments. On a number of occasions we used the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) regulations 2020 that were brought in in March. These were amended again in September with many of the provisions being withdrawn.

The new way of working has highlighted the over reliance on paper forms within both the Assessing Permanent Carers Team and the Fostering Service in general. With this in mind we have been working with the Web Services team to bring all our applications onto an online system. This is currently in its test phase but confident we will be able to roll this out in the coming months.

### Fostering Panel

The Fostering Panel has continued to be held online since March last year.

The technology has been a challenge but there has been improved attendance from Social Workers and discussion has been robust. Evidenced decisions have been made and the quality assurance feedback has been positive.

In November we tested the Attend Anywhere system as we had previously had issues with Skype and understood this was a more user friendly platform for our meetings. Unfortunately we encountered some issues with this new system as with the previous one so we have paused this and continued to use Skype. We plan to revisit this with the ICT in the next month.

The Central List of Panel members has been diversified and consists of independent members with a background in health / education and also someone who has experience of being a 'child looked after'. All Panel members have received an appraisal in 2020.

A Fostering Panel development day took place in November 2020 with presentations from Legal services, the Registered Manager for Fostering, and the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO). The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and Panel Members felt they learnt a lot on the day. There will be another panel development day in spring 2021.

Quarterly meetings continue to take place between the Assistant Director, the Agency Decision Maker, the Fostering Panel chair, the Panel Adviser and the Team Manager for Fostering. This ensures effective communication between Panel and Senior Management. An Advice Tracker is also in place to ensure that issues arising from panel are addressed.

Since October there have been 5 Fostering Panels held. We would normally hold them once a month but we have found that cases are taking much longer to discuss online so we have needed to convene more frequently with smaller agendas. We will again be holding two Fostering Panel's in January due to increased demand with 6 Connected Carer assessments being considered.

**City of York Corporate Parenting and Children in Care Strategy and Action Plan:**

The strategy and action plan have been presented to the partnership and which will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board on the 19<sup>th</sup> January. An Operational Group is in the process of being established and which will take forward the action plan and report progress back to the Partnership. A report on the approach to Corporate Parenting in York is also being presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and which was discussed at today's meeting. Feedback from the partnership is positive, in particular, taking into account the views from children in care and care leavers.

Simon Fisher

Group Manager – Achieving Permanence.