

**Meeting: Children, Education and Skills Sub-Committee**

**Date: 14 January 2021**

**Title: Corporate Parenting Activity During Covid 19 Pandemic**

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**Service: Children's Social Care  
HECS**

**Wards affected: All**

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## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update regarding the activities of the service to meet the Corporate Parenting Responsibilities of the Local Authority during the Covid 19 pandemic.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 The committee is asked to note the work undertaken and identify any areas of support and/or challenge to improve services to children in our care and care leavers.

## **3. Details**

- 3.1 We have 299 children and young people in our care and 162 care leavers at the time of writing this report.
- 3.2 The majority of the children in our care live in fostering households. The fostering service has continued to operate all aspects of the service during the Covid 19 pandemic. Staff are working remotely from home and maintaining contact with all existing carers with visits taking place where required, subject to individual risk assessments.
- 3.3 The foster carer community in North Tyneside have responded to Covid 19 with stoic resilience. We have seen carers step forward to take children from households that have not socially distanced, potentially placing themselves and their families at risk, we have moved children to adoption and continued to offer stable care to children throughout.
- 3.4 We have 157 Approved Foster Carers and of these 59 are Connected Person Foster Carers. We have 224 Children placed with Foster Carers, 73 of these children are placed with Connected Person Foster Carers.

- 3.5 We are using 18 Independent fostering homes and have 36 children and young people living in these homes. 3 of these young people are in 'Staying Put' arrangements
- 3.6 We took every opportunity during 'Foster Care Fortnight' during May to raise the profile of foster care in North Tyneside and are delivered a 'thank you' gift and card to each of our 161 foster carer during the fortnight. These were well received, and we recorded as many as we could to support the next media campaign.
- 3.7 In addition, we are launched our recruitment video on social media. It can be accessed using the following link [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q\\_-cJoERZw\\_mOD8ADYG-As\\_xCBKyTk/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q_-cJoERZw_mOD8ADYG-As_xCBKyTk/view) this is intended to be deliberately emotive in order to stimulate positive views of children in care as well as encourage people to foster. This campaign is being revisited in the run up to Christmas to continue to promote the need for more foster carers in North Tyneside. We have a fostering strategy which has a recruitment target of 30 foster carers this financial year. We have successfully recruited 12 new carers this year and have 8 in the various stages of assessment at this time. We track each enquiry to identify any barriers to fostering with us that we can or should remove and to best target our recruitment activity. We anticipate the continued social media campaigns to further stimulate enquiries and continue to seek to provide a responsive and child focused response to carers to progress as quickly as is productive into approval.
- 3.8 Currently recruitment activity is continuing. The team is configured to direct staff at the beginning of the recruitment process and to maintain contact with people who have expressed an interest while initial checks are undertaken. This keeps people engaged with fostering and has supported in some cases the ability to run the stages of fostering concurrently.
- 3.9 Usually a person expresses an interest in fostering and this is registered with us, we then undertake some initial screening, discussing the role, expectation and the practicalities (such as bedroom space, working hours), subject to this going well we then progress to formal checks with DBS, medical reports, employers, and personal references.
- 3.10 If these progress successfully we allocate a social worker to undertake a fostering assessment. This is then presented to the fostering panel and a recommendation is made to the Agency Decision Maker to determine suitability to be a registered foster carer.
- 3.11 In summary, foster care recruitment continues and is monitored against the strategy to reduce the spend on Independent Fostering Agency placements.
- 3.12 We have 36 children and young people placed in IFA arrangements. Of these 10 are long term matched and we would not propose to make any changes to these arrangements. The children are settled and thriving in what they have been told is their forever home. A further 10 have been with their carers for a considerable period and a match is likely to be presented soon. This is in line with the child's care plan and reflective of their stability and sense of belonging

where they are. We would not propose to disrupt these children's care arrangements by bringing them back into in house foster care, although some carers may choose to foster with us over time.

- 3.13 The remaining 16 children have differing plans and each child is considered individually to plan their safe and stable care. Many of these children are the subject of legal proceedings and if the outcome is that they need to remain in care we would seek to place them with North Tyneside foster carers on a long-term basis.
- 3.14 North Tyneside currently has 5 registered children's homes with a further 2 homes pending registration. Each of these homes has a specific statement of purpose and is designed based on the need for care to children linked to the sufficiency plan for children's placements.
- 3.15 The homes are;  
Addison Street Short Break Care children's home. This home offers up to 5 beds per night short break care to children with disabilities, including learning disabilities and autism. Children aged from 7-17 can access the service. The home works closely with social work services to seek to make sure that the children referred to the service are those in most acute need, and that any whose needs could be met in a short break foster care arrangement are directed to that service. This is planned to support the homes ability to meet the needs of children with more complex health and behavioural needs in order to reduce the need to use external providers to do this.
- 3.16 During the Covid 19 pandemic it has been necessary to carefully manage the children accessing the service in order to reduce risks to the children accessing the service and to the staff group as best as we can. This has included reducing bed nights for some children, although we increase capacity to its safe maximum wherever we are able to do so.
- 3.17 Service improvements at Addison Street include those to the building lay out and appearance, the staff team are stable, and report being well supported.
- 3.18 Lime Tree House Children's Home** has 5 beds for children with Autism and Learning Disabilities aged from 7-17 and our in our care. Lime Tree House is a replacement for the service that has operated from Heatherfield Mews in Annitsford and is in Forest Hall. It is a more substantial building with bedrooms on 2 levels. It has wet room bathrooms and significantly more space for the children to play and socialise. The move of home allows the service to meet the needs of children with more complex needs. Children are aged from 7-17 can live at the home.
- 3.19 The Heatherfield Mews building was split into 2 parts and the larger 4 bed home is being used by 2 young men who have lived there as children and are now over 18. Adult services are developing a service for them to move into with least disruption to them. The other, smaller 3 bed part of the property is being registered as a children's home and this is detailed below.

- 3.20 Sycamore House** is a 5 bed children's home for children in North Tyneside who have a care plan which includes remaining in a children's home for the duration of their childhoods. Children aged 13-17 can live at Sycamore House. Sycamore House is on the Riverside site in North Shields. It is supported with a stable staff team and management group. The service works closely with Elm House which is a Department of Education funded pilot service called 'Staying Close' which looks at the support young people who have lived in children's homes, need when moving towards adult life.
- 3.21 Riverdale Children's home** is a 5-bed home which is on the approach to the Riverside site on Minton Lane. This home offers children's home beds to children at entry to care, or who have disrupted care experiences and provides an assessment of their care needs to inform future planning.
- 3.22 Beech House** has been established at short notice and registered as a solo bed children's home to meet the needs of a young person with complex developmental and learning disabilities. This young person is known to services and it was agreed that this would best meet her needs. Beech House is within the Bridlington Close Supported accommodation service and it is planned that Beech House be used to support the transition of children with disabilities from external placements to adult service provision with North Tyneside.
- 3.23** In North Tyneside we are in the process of registering 2 further solo homes as we have identified young people who have experienced considerable instability. One of these homes will be on the existing Heatherfield Mews short break care site and the other is on the site of Howdon's children's centre in the previous care takers cottage. Permission has been granted to recruit a staff team for one of these homes and the second is in negotiation. This will allow young people with complex needs to remain in North Tyneside, better supporting their ability to form lasting relationships, maintain education provision and allow therapeutic work to be put into place to aid them as they mature. In addition, it is identified as more cost effective to maintain these young people in house if possible, to do so.
- 3.24** All children living or staying in the homes in North Tyneside have an allocated Key worker who takes responsibility for the co-ordination of the child's experience in the home. The key worker will seek to establish a positive and caring relationship with the child which supports the ability to undertake any work identified to address trauma experienced or need.
- 3.25** In order to safeguard children in our children's homes we encourage independent visitors and advocacy services to meet with children to explore their experiences and help them to raise any issues of concern.
- 3.26** The children's homes in North Tyneside all require investment in the fabric of the buildings. Each home has specific challenges linked to the repairs required and the nature of the service provided. While every effort is made by the staff teams to maintain a homely environment issues such as double glazing, boilers

and bathroom refurbishments are outside of their capacity. Work is progressing to have these areas addressed.

3.27 Each home is regulated by Ofsted and all homes provided by North Tyneside Council are currently rated GOOD.

### **3.28 Children Placed Outside of North Tyneside.**

3.29 There are currently 18 children placed in children's homes outside of North Tyneside. Of these 4 have a disability. One child is placed in secure accommodation. 4 children are under 13 and it is acknowledged that these children are very young to be placed in children's homes and that work needs to progress to consider the Local Authority position with regards to meeting the needs of younger children placed in children's homes.

3.30 The cost of placing children outside of the area is considerable at around £183,500 (average cost) and the decision to do so is carefully considered and revisited to monitor progress and welfare of each child through a variety of mechanisms. These include social work visits, quality assurance visits by a registered manager from North Tyneside, commissioning oversight and review at both Resource Allocation Panel and High Cost Panel.

3.31 Where appropriate work is progressed to return children to North Tyneside with specific advertising campaigns linked to children's needs to recruit carers for them. This work involves identifying education placements for them along with any health or specialist services that may be required. Often this contributes to some of the additional challenges.

### **3.32 Education and Health.**

3.33 The education and health needs of children in care are promoted by the foster carers and staff teams with the support of the HIVE service (previously RHELAC).

3.34 Children are expected to attend school daily and their successes are celebrated within their homes. Where additional support is needed outside of that which the school could reasonably be expected to provide the virtual school steps in to support each child with support tailored to need. Each child in care is supported with a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which details their educational successes and support needs. Where required all children in care and care leavers have been provided with IT equipment to support remote learning in the form of laptops and internet access. This has been supported with Department of Education equipment where required.

3.35 This has supported our ability to increase methods of communicating with children and young people, using social media and video calling. This has been positively received by young people who were accustomed to doing this in their social networks and have reported enjoying this level of contact with professionals.

3.36 During the first Covid 19 lockdown children and young people were not attending school or college. Many initially experienced this opportunity to spend dedicated time with adults who were themselves not following usual routines to be a positive and nurturing experience. They appeared to benefit from the reduction in pressures of formal education. They were however ready to return to see friends and re-establish routines when schools reopened in September.

For some the variation in timetables and the break has created additional anxieties on return and support in the form of teaching and counselling is in place.

**3.37 Care Experienced Young People.**

- 3.38 The Personal Advisors in the leaving care team have been working from home maintaining contact with young people using telephones, face time and social media.
- 3.39 The resilience shown by our care leaving population has been humbling. They have come together to support each other practically and emotionally and have developed networks to problem solve. Prior to lock down the team made sure that all young people had the means to remain in contact by providing tablets and IT dongles to any who needed them.
- 3.40 Young people were also supported to identify where they would stay during the pandemic. This has largely been successful with individual issues being resolved as they have arisen. Colleagues from housing have been supportive and responsive to resolving difficulties with pragmatic solutions.
- 3.41 In addition to the maintenance of contact through welfare calls the team have provided arrange of activities for young people, such as cake making kits, exercise equipment and games. These have been very well received and many young people have expressed their delight with these. A weekly newsletter has included advice to maintain emotional and physical wellness, quizzes and updates regarding staff and each other's achievements.
- 3.42 As the Covid 19 restrictions begin to lift young people were being supported to bid on properties where appropriate to move on and were enjoying more direct contact with their personal advisors. The extent to which the young people and the personal advisors missed direct contact with one another is testament to the relationships they have.
- 3.43 The team works out of the lodge in the riverside centre and as this is a very small building with maintenance requirements it has been difficult to return to a business as usual model as there is insufficient space for more than 3 people to be present at any one time. This removes the much-needed drop in facility, and we have asked for additional space at the Riverside Centre to be able to retain this offer for young people once the latest lockdown measures are eased.
- 3.44 North Tyneside have been selected as one of eight Local Authorities to work with Coram Voice to consider how we involve care experienced young people in strategic planning of services for children in care and care experienced young people.
- 3.45 The project aims to challenge Local Authorities to consider the experience of care leavers in real terms and to use that experience to raise the ambition of services towards young people in care and who have experienced care. This includes all aspects of young people's lives including health, education, housing, leisure, transport, financial support. In North Tyneside in order to improve the experience of care leavers we are clear that we need to begin with the experience of children in care, we seek to use the experience of care leavers to improve not only their lives and futures but those of children currently in our care.
- 3.46 Our care experienced young people have been involved in the production and completion of a survey to gather the views of fellow care leavers regarding our

offer to them and their current involvement in strategic planning within the local authority. We submitted a higher return rate than anticipated with 72 out of 162 young people completing the survey and while we acknowledge that the impact of the Covid 19 restrictions may have formed part of the responses we have noted that the exercise of completing the survey has been useful to young people and their personal advisors.

3.47 The report provided indicated several strengths in North Tyneside care leavers perceptions of their experiences and the support they received. These include:

- ✓ Stability of Personal Advisor
- ✓ Relationship with Personal Advisor
- ✓ Ability to contact Personal advisor or someone else in the team who would help
- ✓ Housing options available to care leavers in North Tyneside
- ✓ Feeling Safe at home and in the community
- ✓ Understanding why they had been in care

3.48 Areas identified for development included;

- Mental health and wellbeing (loneliness and anxiety, particularly for males)
- Long term health and disability
- Support network – trusted persons and friendships
- Managing financially
- Appearance (link to wellbeing)
- Sense of achievement

3.49 The young people involved are currently developing an action plan linked to their priorities and their preferred method of holding officers and members to account for progress against this and will share this in the coming weeks.

### **3.50 Covid Planning**

3.51 The statutory activity of children's services has continued throughout the pandemic. Social workers and social care staff have continued to come to work and to work remotely to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in North Tyneside.

3.52 Children's homes and foster care have remained 'business as usual' during the Covid 19 pandemic with staff and carers working throughout. There have been challenges with young people struggling to cope with the implications of lock down and some not being able to adhere to the social distancing rules.

3.53 Staff and carers have been supported additional welfare support from managers and psychologist support. PPE has been made available and has been used. Where young people have needed to self-isolate due to be symptomatic, they have been cared for within the homes and we have limited visitors to those who are essential to service delivery at these times.

3.54 We have had young person tested positive for Covid 19 and it is a testament to the care provided by staff who work in our children's homes that staff have volunteered to work in these homes with young people in a 'care bubble'.

3.55 All staff at work with identified under lying health complaints are supported with individual risk assessments and when required to do so those who are extremely clinically vulnerable are at home with work provided.

- 3.56 Business continuity planning has included the implications of one or more staff team needing to self-isolate or becoming symptomatic at the same time. Arrangements are in place for staff from other homes to provide cover if required and several staff from other areas of the council have been inducted to support this work. This has been tested several times so far and has supported the safe running of services.
- 3.57 Addison Street is identified in the Business Continuity Planning as the only non-statutory children's home and as such it is possible it could be closed, and the staff used to support children in care with Covid 19 if required.
- 3.58 It has been apparent during the Covid 19 pandemic that some of the areas of focus from the Corporate Parenting Forum have shifted, with for example concern for the number of children missing from care declining dramatically. Other areas such as the need to promote the health needs of our children, and to ensure that children are placed as close to or within North Tyneside as possible remain areas of priority.

#### **4. Background Information**

- 4.1 The following documents have been used in the compilation of this report and may be inspected at the offices of the author.

Fostering Strategy 2020  
Children's Homes (Individual) Statements of Purpose  
Coram Voice New Belongings Survey Results.