



# Children in Our Care Strategic Group (CIOCSG) Update

Report for Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) 2 July 2021

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# Section 1: Items Discussed

## **Children's Services Review**

We are currently going through a Children's Services review with one aim from this review being to ensure that children are at the centre of our planning and their voices are better heard. Our focus is very much based on a strengths-based relationship approach, building strong relationships between CIOC and their workers/carers so that they receive consistency of care and through this are able to establish long lasting and trusting relationships. As part of this review we are looking at our current structures and redesigning our systems so that these structures and systems meet the children's needs – rather than fitting a child into our structures which may not always meet what that individual child requires.

We are looking to use our resources in even more creative ways; In particular, to support social workers in having the time to reflect on a child's needs, reflect on their permanency plans and consider what life is like for that child – what else can and should we be doing to improve that child's life chances?

## **Multi-agency support for vulnerable teenagers**

As part of our Children's Services review one, of many areas that we are looking at, is how best we can safely support some of our more vulnerable teenagers, particularly those who are at risk of or are suffering from some form of exploitation, without having to bring these young people into care. Part of this work is being undertaken by our Hartlepool and Stockton Safeguarding Children Partnership with a particular focus on a 'contextual safeguarding' approach. This is an approach which looks at how we can reduce and manage risk for those young people who are suffering some form of exploitation outside of the family environment. It is an approach that is based firmly in community and partnership working and offers an alternative approach to our current child protection processes which are focused on abuse which occurs from within the family.

## **Child's Voice**

A further element that we are exploring as part of our Children's review is the development of a tool specifically to support children and young people to share their thoughts, views and feelings – to provide them with a platform in which their voice is heard and is at the centre of all of our planning. This tool has been looked at by a number of staff ie speech and language workers, our children with disabilities social workers and key workers for children with complex needs to ensure that it reaches out and 'makes sense' for all of our children in care. One aim of capturing the voice of children in care is to take any learning and see how this can better shape and inform our services.

## **CIOC Health Report**

Performance information for the period 2019/2020 for children in our care (CIOC) health assessments highlighted that the proportion of review health assessments carried out within statutory timescales had dropped beneath the set threshold of 98%, particularly for the under 5 age group. In addition, for the same period the proportion of under 5's registered with a dentist and optician were noted to be lower than anticipated. On the back of this data the CIOCSG asked for an overview report to better understand these statistics. The following are the headlines from the review that was undertaken:

Analysis carried out by North Tees and Hartlepool Foundation Trust Quality Assurance Team and Stockton Borough Council Commissioned 0-19 Service, who are currently commissioned to carry out review health assessments for children in our care concluded that:

- The majority of reviews that did not take place within the statutory time period were in relation to children placed out of the area, where allocated review health assessments were carried out by health services outside of Stockton-on-Tees. For clarity, these assessments were requested in the timeframe outlined in the current standard operating procedure (8 weeks).
- A small proportion (1-2 per month) of review health assessments allocated to the Stockton-on-Tees 0-19 Service were completed outside of statutory time periods. Investigation into this highlighted the following reasons for review health assessments being completed out of the statutory time period:
  - foster carer requesting a change in the appointment time
  - foster carer forgetting about an appointment
  - staff sickness

#### Proportion of children under 5 registered with a dentist or optician

The data for registration with an optician and dentist is captured for the under 5's as a group. However, there are age differences for registration with dentist and opticians which are likely to be affecting what conclusions can be drawn from the data in its current format including:

- Children under 5 are not required to register with an optician until 4 years of age.
- Children are not routinely registered with a dentist until 12 months of age.
- Due to differences in age for registration with different health services, it is currently not possible to draw conclusions around the differences between Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool Borough Councils' performance data.

#### Recommendation

To review the method in which data for registration with opticians and dentists are broken down within the 0-5 age band. This will allow for greater scrutiny in terms of performance data for this particular age group.

#### **Children's National Review**

This is a national wide-ranging independent review launched this year which will look to address poor outcomes for children in our care as well as strengthening families to improve vulnerable children's lives. This review will set out to radically reform the system, improving the lives of England's most vulnerable children so they experience the benefits of a stable, loving home.

The review will aim to reshape how children interact with the care system, looking at the process from referral through to becoming looked after. It will address major challenges such as the increase in numbers of looked after children, the inconsistencies in Children's Social Care practice, outcomes across the country and the failure to provide enough stable homes for children.

Running throughout the review will be the experiences and voices of the children, young people and adults who have been looked after and who have received help and support from a social worker. The review will address the clear need for change that supports children to achieve their full potential.

Recent government figures suggest that nationally children who have been in care comprise 25% of the homeless and 24% of the prison population. Over a third of care leavers (39%) are not in education, employment or training, compared to 13% of all 19-21-year olds and just 13% progressed to higher education by age 19 compared to 43% of all other pupils. I would stress that these are national figures and not local ones but nonetheless do give an indication of the level of disparity affecting children in our care.

Another likely focus for the children's review is around education for children in care. Education is powerful. For every child a good education unlocks access to a broader range of life choices and chances. But this is especially true for those children who, due to difficult life experiences such as family breakdowns, miss out on opportunities and support enjoyed by their peers. For children in care a good education can be essential to their development and happiness as is getting the right place to live. We are charged as corporate parents with ensuring that the education, health and care of our children is the very best it can be. It is our job to ensure that children grow up safely and healthy, that they achieve well in school and then move into adulthood as smoothly as possible. For those children with very complex health and care needs we have a responsibility to ensure a smooth transition between children and adult services.

A further area of focus for the children's national review will likely be around the use of unregulated provision for children and care leavers. We are expecting legislation to come into force in September 2021 banning the placement of children under the age of 16 in unregulated accommodation. We are expecting a focus being on the introduction of national standards for settings that are accommodating 16-17-year-old children in care and care leavers with an OFSTED regulation of these settings. It is anticipated that OFSTED will be given new powers to take enforcement action against any illegal unregistered providers.

**Unregulated provision** – is allowed by law. This is when children (usually over the age of 16) need support to live independently rather than needing full time care. OFSTED do not currently regulate this type of provision. This type of provision should be used as a stepping stone to independence and only ever when it is in the child's best interests. For many older children it is the right choice for them.

**Unregistered provision** is when a child who is being provided with some form of 'care' is living somewhere that is not registered by OFSTED. This is an illegal placement. Once a provider delivers a care element as well as accommodation they must register as a children's home.

In Stockton we do not have any children placed in unregistered provision and have very rarely used any unregistered placements. However at a time when we are facing increasing pressures on identifying placements for high risk challenging teenagers any new legislation, although might be agreed, will no doubt cause additional pressures in terms of accommodation for some teenagers.

Findings and outcomes from the review and what this might mean for Stockton's Children in care will be shared with the board in due course.



## Priorities of the CIOC Action Plan

- Reduce the numbers of CIOC

Our numbers of CIOC are currently 582 which is a slight decrease from last month. These numbers have remained fairly stable during the pandemic, despite pressures on placements. In part this is due to the work of our 'edge of care' services and also Social Work practice in identifying those children on the edge of care earlier so that interventions can be introduced before children reach crisis point. We are also starting to see some change in social work culture in relation to children being safely supported in leaving care at an earlier stage. Our in-house therapist is offering effective work around resilience, wellbeing and relationships which is helping to maintain children within their birth families.

- Ensure best value for money

We continue to look for appropriate properties so that we have greater flexibility around placement choices. This will ensure that children who do have to come into care are offered a home which best matches their needs. The properties we are looking at currently are in or around the borough so that children can be maintained in their schools and a level of contact can continue with their family and friends.

- Ensure the right permanency options

In Children's Social Care we have implemented a legal/Care planning panel attended by senior managers and a senior legal representative which scrutinises all plans for children who are considered to meet the threshold for either pre proceedings or care proceedings or the threshold to become a child in care. Any decision to accommodate a child can only be made by a senior manager and all accompanying permanency plans are discussed to ensure that the plan recommends and supports the most appropriate permanence plan for that child. Since its implementation many of our care plans have been acknowledged to have improved in quality, are more child focussed and have demonstrated that social workers better understand the concept of 'permanency planning'. To provide some assurance for the board, below is some of the feedback received from those involved in our local family courts.

**Rhona Bollands**

**Assistant Director Children's Social Care**

**27/05/2021**

**Teesside Crown Court – CAFCASS 18/10/2020**

'Whilst there have been some professional disagreements with respect to this case, I wanted to share that the Social Worker's knowledge and commitment to these children has been little short of outstanding. It is evident that this Social Worker has lived and breathed this case and I wanted to acknowledge all of her hard work and confirm that she absolutely got the right outcome from the court as a result'. The children themselves have described this Social Worker as the best that they have ever had'.

**Teesside Family Court – Judge 02/12/2020**

'I would like to say that the Social Worker's report was the clearest, most sympathetic and informative report that I have seen in a very long time. The Social Worker has also been of great assistance to me and mothers barrister in helping to resolve issues. Please pass these comments on to senior managers at Stockton borough Council'

**Teesside Family Court – CAFCASS 08/12/2020**

'I just wanted to acknowledge the excellent work that this Social Worker did in relation to this case. This Social Worker was the child's best advocate and assessments and proposed plans were child focussed. This was also acknowledged by the Court Judge'.

**Teesside Family Court – legal parties 27/01/2021**

'Both mother and the guardian have expressed their confidence in the work undertaken by the Social Worker and how she is handling this case. The guardian feels that the Social Worker is child focussed and her work is being managed in a timely way'.

**Evidence of improved practice and planning**

**Teesside Family Court – Judge 08/02/2021**

'All parties have appreciated the hard work undertaken by the current Social Worker and Family Support Worker. The Court was impressed with the work undertaken by them and hope that notice of their contribution in this matter will be brought to the attention of senior management'

**Teesside Family Court – CAFCASS 27/01/2021**

'I wanted to acknowledge the hard work that this Social Worker has put in throughout the court proceedings for this young person. The Social Worker did everything in their power to support and appropriately plan for this young person. This Social Worker has consistently acted in this young person's best interest and I feel that this should be acknowledged'

**Teesside Family Court – Judge 09/03/2020**

'I would like to thank the Social worker for all of their hard work around this case. As a Senior Child Care Judge I was very impressed with the conduct of the Local Authority within these proceedings, as were all of the parties'

**Teesside Family Court – external Senior Solicitor 09/03/2020**

'Can I just say that this Social Worker greatly impressed the Judges who have dealt with this matter over the course of the last several months, all of whom have commented on her excellent social work practice, her ability to innovate in the face of a difficult set of factual circumstances and how she has demonstrated great commitment to the welfare of this child. This Social Worker has exhibited a mature and professional approach throughout and all have been very impressed with her knowledge of permanence planning'.