



Children in Our Care Strategic Group (CIOCSG) Update

Report for Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) 10 December 2021

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Section 1: Items Discussed

Preventing and reducing Youth Homelessness

We recently invited scrutiny from our Home Office to look at ways that we prevent and reduce youth homelessness for care leavers, 16/17-year-olds and vulnerable young people aged 18-25 years. Findings were positive. It was found that services in Stockton work well together to maximise opportunities for early identification of young people who need help or are on the edge of care through a visible youth service, Early Help SPOC'S, a One Stop Shop drop in and our vulnerability dataset linked with schools and colleges.

It was found that housing, Children's Services and partners worked positively and collectively to ensure the best delivery models, using various tools to ensure 'step up/step down' models support commissioned services.

Our accommodation panel was found to have strong representation from key partners with a broad scope of knowledge and experience

Our Local Offer for Care Leavers was found to be well developed. Young people's voices are heard both locally and regionally.

We were found to have a good range of accommodation options for older children in care, care leavers and homeless young people aged 16/17 years. This was reinforced by DfE data (2020) which showed that 92% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation.

There were some areas for further development highlighted and an action plan is in place to drive this work forward – we are in the process of reviewing our joint protocol to ensure that housing are more inclusive in the options and choices available for young people, further embed our 'Duty to refer' in Children's services, further review and map the supported accommodation for 18-25 year olds to inform better commissioning and undertake some deep dives of our children's data to better identify and map journeys of our care leavers.

Our Care Leaver protocol was considered to be a very strong example of good practice and is to be shared by the Home Office with other Local Authorities for learning.

Virtual School - Care Leavers accessing further education

Our Virtual School continue to undertake some excellent work with our Children in Care, offering additional support and challenge as required. We can see an example of the impact of the role of the Virtual School in the numbers of Care Leavers who have reached and surpassed their potential educationally.

Currently we have 26 Care Leavers who attend university accessing courses from Biopharmaceutical Science, Electrical and Electronic Engineering to Physiotherapy. Two of our Care Leavers are undertaking a master's degree in M.Sc. Medical and Molecular Virology and LLM Law and Legal Practice.

There is a near equal mix of these young people having lived in foster care versus internal residential care indicating that with the right quality of care, many children can achieve just as well in residential care as they can in a foster placement.

IRO role in supporting CIOC and Care leavers

Our Team Manager from our Review and Development unit who manages our Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's), gave an overview of the IRO's role and what work had been undertaken during the past year by the IRO's to support CIOC and Care Leavers.

The role of the IRO is a statutory requirement and the Council is required to have a formal process for the IRO to carry out the specific aspects to the function: to chair a child's review, offer overview, scrutiny and challenge regarding the case management and to monitor the appropriateness of the child's care plan ensuring that the care plan fully reflects the child's current needs, including whether any safeguarding issues arise and to ensure that milestones set out in the plan are achieved in a timely manner. Within this, IRO's have a duty to inform the child of their rights and assist in obtaining an advocate and/or legal representation.

CIOC reviews are chaired by IRO's and should be held following the child or young person being accommodated – the first review within 20 days of accommodation, the second within 3 months and thereafter at a minimum of 6 monthly. The purpose of the review is to ensure that appropriate plans are in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child in the most effective way and achieve permanence within the appropriate timescales.

Over the period 2020/21 there were a total of 1469 CIOC reviews held and chaired by IRO's. During the last reporting period 7% of CIOC reviews were not held within timescales. This was for a variety of reasons such as staff sickness, carers/officers being unable to attend due to other commitments. Whilst our performance remains favourable in comparison to regional figures it is an area for improvement moving forward.

A key role of the IRO is to ensure that the voice of the child is central to the review process. The views of children and young people are gathered through direct work and the use of different consultation tools. Latest performance data shows that 80% of CIOC had participated in their reviews, either directly or had their views shared via an advocate on their behalf. Over the next year the IRO unit plan to continue to promote the 'voice of the child' and further improve numbers of children and young people participating in their care planning process.

Over the last year the IRO's have further embedded their quality assurance (QA) tool, developed following our ILACS inspection in 2019 when it was found that IRO's could be more visible and demonstrate stronger challenge. The QA tool provides the IRO with the opportunity to review a child's case file and creates an opportunity for constructive feedback with the social worker and team manager. This allows for open discussion with regards to tasks that may need to be completed whilst also noting areas of good practice. An evaluation undertaken this year where QA tools have been used evidence that actions have been robustly responded to by social workers to rectify issues raised.

IRO's are now more involved in the training provided to newly qualified social workers and provide a mentoring role to students and those on the social work apprenticeship scheme.

Moving forward, further improvements are planned: reintroducing peer audits and group supervision sessions to further develop the IRO role, develop further networks regionally with other IRO's and further embed a culture of practice and performance, support and challenge, to ensure that outcomes for CIOC are improved.

UCAS National Transfer Scheme

Following the launch of the new national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum seekers (UCAS), Stockton became part of a regional rota to take in UCAS and we have just welcomed our third young person with a fourth expected before Christmas. These numbers are higher than we anticipated at this stage and are in response to the increased demands/situation which we have recently seen widely reported in the media.

All our young people are males and based on information and dental evidence are approximately aged between 14-17 years old.

We have developed 'Our Place' as an intake base where the young people can reside as an interim measure before identifying a more permanent home for them. 'Our Place' have developed strong links with health, CAMHS, local religious groups, specialist food suppliers, education and translators to support the young people to settle in. Legal advice has been sought in respect of each young person due to their status i.e. there is no one exercising parental responsibility for these vulnerable young people. All have arrived showing signs of extreme trauma and have required a high level of support and nurturing. All three young people have since been placed in Independent Foster Care and are reported to be settling in well.

The North East Migration partnership have asked to share our approach and our use of 'Our Place' with the UCAS regional leads as a model of good practice.

CIOC and Care leavers action plan - progress

Mockingbird Model

We plan to expand our in-house fostering capacity by shortly launching our new and refreshed foster care offer, and alongside this and as part of our ongoing children's review, increasing capacity within our fostering team. The implantation of the Mockingbird model in Stockton is progressing well. The region has received funding from the DfE with Stockton receiving its share of monies. A worker in our fostering team has been identified as a lead contact/mentor and is attending regional meetings where good practice is being shared. The Mockingbird model has been shared with our own Foster Carers and has been enthusiastically received with all those who provided feedback seeing this model as hugely supportive.

Sufficiency

Analysis from our data around demand and need in relation to placements is continuing but it is already clear that there are increased pressures to find placements for those young people on the 'edge of secure' and those with complex needs. Discussions have been held with Spark of Genius, our Joint Venture, to establish whether they would be able to provide this type of provision. We are currently writing a paper detailing our preferred models with costings.

There are significant challenges currently around the availability of experienced residential children's homes staff to manage these more challenging children and young people. We are looking at our recruitment and retention package and in response have recently increased the pay grade of our Homes Managers, so we become more competitive. Further incentives are being considered.

EET

Our numbers of 17/18 year olds NEET is an area of focus for us moving forward. Our Stockton Employment and Training Hub has recently moved to larger premises in Wellington Square with facilities which incorporate training and interview rooms and are available for under 25's.

Work is underway to promote apprenticeship opportunities for the young people of Stockton with opportunities now being promoted on the national apprenticeship website and also posted on Tees Valley Jobs. The website will be updated on a weekly basis. Our recently formed EET task and finish group is looking at ways to further encourage local employers to offer apprenticeships to care leavers.

Our new business and IT centre is now up and running in our central library. This new facility is a very useful source for our young people and includes access to data bases, information on how to set up a business etc. Expert help is available for those accessing this support.

Child's Voice

The task and finish group with responsibility for ensuring that we listen to all children and young people and improve practice around communication continue to look at ways in which we can effectively capture the child's voice – how this might happen, the various tools that we can use and learn from examples of outstanding practice. A child's voice guide has recently been developed and will be rolled out to all staff to support the voice being heard (Attached).

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