



Children in Our Care Strategic Group (CIOCSG)

Update Report for Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) June 2022

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Section 1: Items Discussed

1. CIOC and Care Leavers action plan – progress

Priority 1. We will always be informed by the views, voices and opinions of care experienced children and young people.

1.1

Work continues to develop a participation strategy to clarify the purpose, role, need for and importance of the voice of the child to ensure that this is embedded in all that we do and hope to achieve – ‘You spoke – we listened’. We are moving away from just participation with a stronger focus on engagement and communication. This strategy is to become a co-production strategy to be developed in partnership with children and young people. A task and finish group has now been set up with young people contributing. Currently we are reviewing our existing contracts and documents to ensure that the voice of the child is captured and incorporated into all of our contracts.

We have reviewed our use of MOMO and sought the views of children and young people around the usefulness of this tool in capturing the voice of the child. It was apparent from feedback that since COVID children and young people have adapted and prefer other forms of communication i.e. WhatsApp, facetime, messaging. On this basis we have agreed NOT to renew our MOMO contract when it expires later this year.

We continue to develop our ‘More stuff Like This Please’ (MSLTP) model with our lead cultural partner ARC. One area that we have agreed to progress in terms of capturing the voice of the child is the development of stories – children and young people putting into their own words, working alongside representatives from ARC, their journeys and experiences of becoming CIOC. Listening to their experiences may inform changes in how we deliver services and respond to need.

Additional resources have been identified as part of our ongoing Children’s Services Review resulting in the appointment of several new ‘Keeping in touch’ workers to improve communication and engagement with our Care Leavers. This will improve our knowledge of where our Care Leavers are, ensuring that they are safe and that their needs are being met whilst also capturing their voice to inform improved practice.

Priority 4. Develop and communicate our vision, embed our approach and intent.

4.1 Placement managing and modelling

We continue to proactively manage placements to try and reduce our overspend. A new CIOC strategy and investment group has now been set up chaired by the DCS. The plan is to implement a strategy framework to:

Reduce the need for residential care

Reduce the need for high-cost residential care

Make/purchase partner options.

Regular meetings with finance are also now taking place to ensure closer working and monitoring of budgets. This has created improved understanding of where the biggest costs are and where savings need to be made. This work ties in closely with our residential children’s homes programme and sufficiency strategy.

Our current CIOC numbers do remain fairly static and have done since prior to COVID. However, it should be noted that whilst the reduction of our overspend is an area of priority for us, the demands and pressures on placements continue. Our high-cost placements are generally in relation to older young people with very complex needs, often displaying high levels of risk-taking behaviours. We are experiencing increased numbers of external

providers giving immediate notice in relation to these young people, one reason given being the lack of appropriately skilled staff they have to safely manage these levels of challenging behaviours.

Priority 5. Improve outcomes for Care Experienced Young People (Care Leavers)

5.1 Refresh our current Care Leavers Offer.

Our current Care Leavers offer is undergoing further refinement, involving young people in the updated design and development. Work is ongoing to look at and learn from other Local Authorities to see how our offer compares, what else might be offered and what successful marketing looks like.

Our new website has now been launched with improved data which can now inform us of how well our offer is being accessed. Subsequent analysis indicates that our offer is still not being accessed or used as much as we would want, and work is ongoing to understand why this is and what improvements can be made to ensure all Care Leavers are aware of the support that is accessible to them.

5.4 Redefine the current approach to increase opportunities for getting Care Leavers into EET.

An area of priority for us is to increase the opportunities for children and young people to access Education, Employment and Training (EET). As part of the ongoing Children's Review, additional resources were identified to recruit 'Employer Engagement' workers - with part of their role being to support employers to better understand some of the barriers/vulnerabilities that can be faced by Care Leavers and how these might be overcome to ensure successful outcomes.

A small, task and finish group has recently been established to consider a model currently being used by another Local Authority in the region which offers 3 x yearly work experience opportunities for Care Leavers. Additional support is being offered, and as part of the wider Corporate Responsibility, by our Human Resources department who are developing a programme to better support our children and young people in preparing for interviews – how to dress, present, talk positively around how their experiences can be transferred into the workplace, aspirations and ambitions.

5.5 Ensure appropriate accommodation is available for Care Leavers

We continue to undertake work to ensure that our Care Leavers are offered appropriate accommodation – staying close, and or semi/independent living opportunities to meet their needs. One of our providers has secured St James Hostel, which from October 2022 will provide up to 12-19 units for our use. We plan to keep one unit available for out of hours emergency use, an area where we are experiencing increased placement pressures. This will also ensure that young people are not kept in custody due to no alternative safe accommodation being available.

5.9 Our Pathway Plan Reviewing Officer will ensure oversight of plans.

Our Pathway Plan Reviewing Officer continues to undertake pre meet reports in a timely manner with quarterly monitoring reports now developed in order to increase scrutiny. Training around the expectations of what a 'good' pathway plan looks like has been rolled out to staff to ensure good quality improved practice, based on need and appropriate planning.

2. Supported Accommodation

We have been looking at how we can improve our supported accommodation offer for our 16/17 year olds who are able and wishing to live either semi independently or independently. Work around this area was delayed due to COVID but has since been reviewed and re defined to ensure that we understand the needs and demands of this cohort. This is a group of young people whose numbers have steadily increased over recent years.

All of these young people have very individual needs and so we wanted a model that provided greater flexibility in order to meet these needs. We have recently therefore agreed on a partnership approach with 'Changing Lives' as our commissioned provider who will act as a 'tenant' for 'Newwart' who own St James Hostel. Our plan is to enter into an agreement where we have the use of 12 units initially with flexibility to use up to 19 units, with additional space to undertake remedial work with those young people who require this additional support. We are proposing to use one of these units for emergency use i.e. out of hours placements We are anticipating that these units will be available from the 1.10.2022, to allow time for refurbishment.

3. National Transfer Scheme (NTS) update

We continue to welcome UASC under the NTS. Since our first NTS arrivals at the beginning of September 2021 we will have received 18 referrals by the time tranche 3 of the rota has concluded. The initial indications were that we would not be expected to receive more than 3 referrals in the first year and not unsurprisingly we are now facing significant challenges in identifying suitable placements for these young people. We have recently placed two 17 year olds in the Durham area and currently have two outstanding 15 year old young people who require placements.

In the six months since the NTS rota was mandated a total of 1131 children have transferred to Local Authority's in the UK. In the same period 87 children have been referred to local Authority's in the North East of which 20 are still being processed and awaiting transfer. The Home Office have advised that they have seen more arrivals on the South coast this week, with a large number arriving in the last 24 hours and as a consequence the number of children in the interim emergency hotels are rising. We have subsequently been advised that Local Authority's in the North East can expect to receive further mandated UASC referrals under cycle 9 this week.

As a result, we (along with several other Local Authority's in the region) will face increased pressures to identify appropriate placements based on need. We are currently seeking different accommodation options including from Stockton Campus to see if they can offer some shared houses for us to use for UASC's.

4. Report into the Independent Review of Childrens Social Care (Josh MacAlister).

The CIOCSG was sighted on the recently published report following a review undertaken by Josh MacAlister into Council run Children's Services. Whilst the review focussed on a wide range of issues involving a child's experiences, in relation to CIOC, Mr MacAlister estimates that without significant Government investment and a reform of Children's services this time next decade we could have as many as 100,000 children in care (up from 80,00 today).

The review focussed on how we can ensure that children grow up in loving, stable, safe families and, where this is not possible, care provides the same foundation. This sentiment forms the basis of our vision moving forward and is very much the focus of our CIOC and Care leavers action plan.

The review found, amongst other findings, that more investment should be made in recruiting foster carers in order to provide children with a loving home and maintain them close to their own communities. Our ongoing Children's review has invested increased resources in our current Fostering teams with commitment to the implementation of the Mockingbird model in order to try and encourage greater numbers of internal foster carers.

The review also noted the increased pressures placed on Local Authorities in relation to identifying good quality residential homes to meet need and offer stability and care. It sights challenges such as a shortage of homes, weak market oversight and high profit making and costs by the private sector as reasons to transform the care for children when they need it. Our Residential Children's Home programme is designed to increase internal options, with a commitment to maintain children, who cannot remain within their birth family, close to their community, family and friends.

As with most reviews, there has been some challenge made towards the findings i.e. a lack of research/ evidence in which to base some of the findings. However, what isn't in doubt is the increase in numbers of children in care that we have witnessed over the last few years resulting in less choice in which to identify appropriate placements based on need.

The full report can be found at:

<https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

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