

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF** on **Thursday 23 March 2017** at **10.00 a.m.**

PRESENT

Councillor B. Gallacher
(in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Burt, E.
Dale, P.A.M.
Murray, A.H.

Rickerby, L.J.
Smith, J.E.
Thorne, T.N.

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Lennox, D.

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Payne, S.

Woolhouse, R.

OFFICERS

Johnson, A.
Little, L.
McEvoy, C.

Director of Education and Skills
Democratic Services Officer
Service Director, Children's
Services
Commissioner for Early Years and
Primary

Street, D.

ALSO PRESENT

Arckless, R.

65. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

A one minute's silence was held to remember the innocent people who had been killed and injured in Westminster the previous day.

It was advised that three independent appointments to the Committee would be reported to Council in April for agreement.

66. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Cartie and Foster, C. Dyson and D. Lally.

67. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2017, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

68. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Burt declared a personal interest in item 6 on the agenda as she was a Magistrate, however she advised that she did not sit in the Family Court.

69. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The published Forward Plan for April to July 2017 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY CABINET

70. REPORT OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP

Cabinet at their meeting on 7 March 2017 considered a report of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Meeting regarding the above. An extract from the minutes of the meeting was attached at **Appendix B**.

Councillor Dale, Chair of the Group advised that she had attended Cabinet. She felt that the issue had not been discussed as it should have been and that the real problems outlined in the report had not been understood. The letters written by the Headteachers of Hexham and Middle Schools to parents asking for financial support for the schools were highlighted along with a video made by the Headteacher at Ponteland High School also requesting support. She advised that she had written to her local MP regarding funding for rural schools and hoped that all other Members had also contacted their own MP regarding the issue.

Councillor Arckless advised that Members of the Cabinet were aware of the challenges and a formal submission had been made based on work of the Schools Forum and he had written to the Prime Minister himself. He had also signed a letter from the F40 Group to the Prime Minister and highlighted that no additional money had been made available it was just being distributed in a different way. A Trade Union Representative commented that whilst schools had coped until this point if no increase in funding was forthcoming the County Council would need to consider the closing of schools.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

71. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression

The report attached as **Appendix C** to the signed Minutes provided information on the performance of Children's Services within legal proceedings in 2016/17 to date. The Service Director advised that following the report presented to Committee in November 2016 progress had been slow, however some improvement had been made regarding timeliness. There had been a number of legacy cases and action had been taken regarding some staff who had not fully understood Care Proceedings. Work was ongoing with Judge Hudson and the Local Family Justice Board and should help to improve the reputation of the work undertaken by the Council with the judiciary. Communication between the Legal Team and Children's Services had been an issue and meetings were now being held regularly to ensure more effective communication and management oversight and tracking of legal cases and, where if for any reason these were unable to progress, the Courts were now being informed.

Additional training was being provided in order to understand the evidence that was required to take to Court and some positive feedback had been received from some Family Judges. In respect of the timeliness, whilst this Council was not the worst in the North East or Country, 32 weeks was still above the target and the requirement for reports/evidence presented to the court to be of a good quality was highlighted.

The Committee was advised that there was a national shortage of experienced Social Workers with 20 newly qualified staff having been recruited to the Council over the last six months. To develop the skills of these staff it had been agreed to provide an academy style of training over 12 to 18 months. This would allow support to nurture the newly qualified staff by providing mentoring and a measured and protected caseload along with suitable training to provide a solid foundation. It was expected that an evaluation of the training would be undertaken by the end of the year. In respect of the salaries paid to attract suitably qualified Social Workers the Committee was advised that whilst Northumberland had increased the salary offered, other authorities had also increased theirs in order to retain their qualified staff, and therefore recruitment and retention of staff was still an issue.

Members thanked the Officer for the report and work undertaken over the previous six month period. They were pleased to see that an holistic approach was being taken and were also pleased to note the regular audits. The situations, very complex cases and complex issues which staff dealt with on a daily basis were recognised.

RESOLVED that the information be noted and a further report be received in six months.

72. REPORTS OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

72.1 Outcomes of Task and Finish Group - Implementation of Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

The report attached to the signed minutes of the meeting as **Appendix D** informed Members of the outcomes of the Task and Finish Group established to investigate the implementation of the Special Educational Needs Reforms and Code of Practice. The report included the notes of the three Task and Finish Groups and a report from the Director of Education which summarised the findings of the Group.

Councillor Burt, Chair of the Task and Finish Group advised that intensive scrutiny had been undertaken on a very complex subject to consider what was required. A lot of work had been undertaken and the Council was now on track to ensure that the Area arrangements to ensure the SEND code of practice was implemented. The key was partnership working across Health, Social Care and Education and the self evaluation and Action Plan made this very clear and set priorities for the future.

Members of the Task and Finish Group thanked Councillor Burt for her good Chairmanship and acknowledged the wide spectrum of SEND. Members praised the young people they had met who had been confident and knew what they wanted to achieve. Early intervention was the key to achieving success for all, including gifted pupils.

In relation to page 22 paragraph 7, the Committee was advised that the Council reviewed the effectiveness of its SEND practices every six months and an annual report produced. Every local authority would be subject to an inspection by both the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted before 2020 and would be given one week's notice of any such inspection.

Councillor Burt thanked the Director of Education and his staff for their work and the opportunity to visit the young people.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

72.2 Outcomes for Early Years Education

The report attached as **Appendix E** to the signed minutes informed the Committee of progress made in Early Years education across Northumberland. The Commissioner for Early Years and Primary advised that this was the first time that the outcomes for children in Northumberland had been above the national average.

It was noted that the majority of children first engaged with the foundation stage curriculum through a registered childminder, PVI or school nursery setting and this worked especially well when there were close links and good relationships with schools. The Early Years team worked to develop these relationships and also worked with health partners and social workers to ensure that any additional needs of children were recognised and acted upon

in a timely manner. Practitioners were aware of the criteria and recorded against them and in respect of media it was commented that the majority of children had access to the news and providers would be focussing on recent events and how the children coped.

In respect of the gender gap in Northumberland between girls and boys it was noted that whilst the achievements of boys had improved the girls had also improved at a higher rate.

Members congratulated and thanked the Officer for the excellent report.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

73. Policy Digest

This report, available on the Council's website, provided details of the latest policy briefings, government announcements and ministerial speeches which might be of interest to Members.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

74. URGENT BUSINESS

Councillor Arckless advised that as this was the last scheduled meeting of the Committee prior to the Election and as he would not be standing, he would like to thank all those he had worked with over the past 18 years on the Committee. He advised that his role had been different over the last four years and asked that his thanks to both Senior Officers and staff who had supported him in this role be placed on record.

The Chair and Members of the Committee thanked Councillor Arckless for his work and Officers for their honesty and integrity in presenting reports which had been honest and to the point and for their professional answers to very searching questions.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____