

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 29 June 2017** at **10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor G Renner-Thompson
(in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D
Cessford T
Lang J
Nisbet K
Richards ME

Stewart G
Stow K
Swinburn M
Wallace R

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A
Lennox D

Warner J

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Lyst R
Payne S

Sanderson J

OFFICERS

Bryden L
Johnson A

Little L
McEvoy C

Walker J

Senior Manager, Commissioning
Interim Director of Children's
Services
Democratic Services Officer
Service Director, Children's
Services
Head of Inclusion

ALSO PRESENT

Daley W

Deputy Leader and Cabinet
Member for Children's Services

1. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair welcomed those present to the first meeting of the Committee and introductions were provided.

2. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chairman advised of the Membership and Terms of Reference as agreed by Council on 24 May 2017.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor R Dodd, R Woolhouse and D Lally.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2017, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman with the following amendment:-

Page 2 - Minute number 70, second paragraph, second sentence should read

"The letters written by the Headteachers of *Queen Elizabeth High School and Hexham Middle School* 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."

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

R Lyst advised of a personal interest in the Post 16 Transport Report as his daughter was eligible for Post 16 Transport.

6. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The published Forward Plan for July to October 2017 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented. The Interim Director of Children's Services advised that the School Organisation Update report which was to be presented directly to Cabinet was for information only on specific matters currently in progress related to school organisation. Other matters for consideration by this Committee were on today's agenda.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET

7. JOINT REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND DIRECTOR OF LOCAL SERVICES

Changes to the Post 16 Transport Policy Payment Options

Dr A Johnson, the Interim Director of Children's Services introduced the report to the Committee. (Report attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes.) He advised that it was a statutory requirement (under Section 509AA of the Education Act 1996) that the Council publish its Post 16 Transport Policy by 31 May each year and therefore it had not been possible to undertake a comprehensive review of the scheme following the local election on 4 May 2017. A detailed review of the scheme would be undertaken during 2017/18 with any changes to arrangements published on 31 May 2018 for the new school year of 2018/19. The report provided details of a proposed amendment to the published scheme would allow more flexibility in the options for payment for the 2017/2018 school year.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee it was clarified that there were no cost implications in respect of the Academisation of schools and that only those students who had paid the fee and were in receipt of a Post 16 bus pass were entitled to access the school transport. The wider implications of demand would be included as part of the review of the scheme.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee endorsed the recommendations outlined in the report.

8. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Regionalising Adoption Proposals

C McEvoy, the Service Director introduced the report to the Committee and advised that the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency was a Government driven initiative to address a number of challenges in adoption. (Report attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes.) The vision and high level objectives agreed by the Adopt NE Project Board were outlined in the report along with the possible models for their delivery. It was noted that the Adoption Service provided by Northumberland was rated Good by Ofsted.

Members commented that whilst it was thought that Option 2 : Joint Venture between Local Authorities was the more inclusive option and more suitable to what the Council would like to see, this could still be improved upon by the inclusion of some aspects of the other options. The Service Director confirmed that concerns had been identified with all the proposed models and whilst Option 2 was the preferred model it was hoped that this could be improved upon. The Committee was advised that work was being undertaken in parallel on the financial and business cases for each of the options and a further report would be brought back for a final decision to be made.

It was commented that the drive must improve outcomes and timeliness rather than be focussed on efficiencies. Members were advised that Northumberland did not give up on an Adoption Plan for any child no matter how difficult to place and this did affect statistics on timeliness. It was hoped that the creation of the Regional Adoption Agency would provide a bigger pool of potential

adopters and it's creation would mean fewer agencies for charities to engage with.

In response to a question regarding the placement of siblings together it was clarified that it was generally felt to be in the best interests to keep siblings together unless they had significantly differing needs. All placements were assessed on need and in the best interests of each child and if separated then regular contact was encouraged and everything done to try to maintain links between siblings.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be asked to consider the comments made by this Committee in endorsing the recommendations as outlined in the report.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

9. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher 2015-16

The report (attached as **Appendix D** to the signed minutes) provided information on the education achievement of pupils looked after by Northumberland County Council during the academic year 2015/16. J Walker, Virtual School Headteacher (and Head of Inclusion) presented the report to the Committee highlighting the key issues.

The Committee welcomed and congratulated staff on the the excellent report which showed that good progress had been made. In response to questions from Members of the Committee the following information was provided:-

- The number of fixed term exclusions related to a small number of looked after children and whilst the figure had dropped from the previous year it was recognised that work was still required in order to reduce this figure further.
- No data was collected on internal exclusions within schools as comparisons would be difficult to be made due to the different criteria used by individual schools use for these type of exclusions.
- In respect of the reintegration of pupils, it was confirmed that the needs of the child was of paramount importance and support was provided through any transition period. A Pupil Placement Panel, attended by Headteachers or Deputy Headteachers of secondary schools within the County and Chaired, when possible, by the Interim Director of Children's Services, had been set up to agree the placement of hard to place children within schools. 70 Hard to place children had secured school places within the first year the majority of which were not looked after children.

- The role of the virtual Headteacher was challenging in that all looked after children had suffered some form of trauma with 50% having some form of Special Educational Need (SEN).
- Educational Psychologists had been involved in work to reduce anxiety levels in looked after children and whilst the same professionals provided support for other children this would be done as part of the individual school's SEN budget. There were national discussions regarding the mental health of children and information was also contained in the Interim Director of Children's Services Annual report.
- The improvement in KS4 performance was attributable to good individual performances and in the context of poorer performance the previous year. Cohorts are very small which meant that the results of each child had a greater impact on the overall figures. Extra resources had been put in which had resulted in more stability and personal support for each child.
- A smooth transition between schools was important for all children irrespective of whether two or three tiers.

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Children's Services stated that this was an excellent report and would have a major impact on the long term prospects of young people. Paragraph 52 of the Annual Report was highlighted and he advised that Jane Walker, along with both the support and teaching staff should be thanked and congratulated on their work to change the lives of these young people. These sentiments were reiterated by the Members of the Committee.

RESOLVED that the achievements of pupils in care and the effectiveness of Northumberland's Virtual School be acknowledged and that staff be thanked and congratulated.

10. THEMED SCRUTINY

Members had been asked to consider any items which they might wish to put forward for the Committee to examine. The Chair highlighted the difficulties encountered in the recruitment and retention of teachers especially in rural areas and the impact this had on schools and suggested that a Task and Finish Group could be convened to report on where we were now and how this could be moved forward. Members agreed this would be a suitable topic for examination and during discussions the following points were noted:-

- Any proposal regarding academisation would impact on other schools in the area. It was acknowledged this was a problem throughout Northumberland.
- Parental expectations of teaching staff were high.
- Whilst surveys of teachers had indicated that job security and satisfaction were higher considerations than pay, these surveys did not

include the teaching staff who had already left the profession due to such cuts and therefore it was felt that pay was still a big issue.

- The need for Northumberland to be on a par with other local authorities in respect of the job offer and for teaching to be considered a career pathway. The three tier structure in some parts of the county did not help, as was the nature of some very small schools. Northumberland had some very small schools which were not considered good career choices and ways to change this perception should be explored. Northumberland was an amazing County and a very good place to live and the advantages of the lifestyle should be promoted.
- It was recognised that the quality of school leadership could have a significant impact on the retention of teaching staff.
- The payment of threshold payments which allowed good teaching staff to stay in the classroom rather than having to move to a more managerial role was thought to be a good thing.
- The role of Governors and the success of Governing Bodies was also discussed with it being agreed that this should be the subject of a separate themed scrutiny after the conclusion of this one.
- The possibility of the creation of an Education Improvement Panel should be explored. Bringing Headteachers and Northumberland College together to look at the offer in Northumberland and provide a cohesive approach should also be explored. The Deputy Leader would discuss these issues with the Interim Director of Children's Services.

The Interim Director of Children's Services advised that a report previously commissioned on the subject of teacher retention and recruitment which had identified the same issues as the Committee and could be used as a baseline for the Task and Finish Group.

A formal title for the Task and Finish Group and dates would be reported to the next meeting. It was expected that four meetings of the Group would be held each lasting approximately two hours to which volunteers would commit to attending. Both the Chair and Vice-Chair indicated that they wished to be involved. Councillor Wallace and Mr J Sanderson also volunteered to attend along with the Interim Director of Children's Services. K Angus, Head of Human Resources would also be invited to attend.

RESOLVED that a Task and Finish Group be established to look at the Recruitment and Retention of Teachers with the Membership and Terms of Reference to be agreed at the next meeting.

11. WORK PROGRAMME

The Work Programme for the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee (attached as Appendix E to the signed minutes) was circulated. Any school reorganisation would also be reported to this

Committee. The following additions and amendments to the programme were suggested and would be forwarded to the Business Chair for his agreement:-

20 July 2017

Themed Scrutiny - Establishment of Teacher Recruitment and Retention Task and Finish Group

21 September 2017

Safeguarding Adults Annual Report and Strategy Refresh
Care Proceedings and Public Law
Post 16 Transport
Special Educational Needs and Disability - Area Strategy

16 November 2017

School Funding
Fostering and Adoption Annual Report
Local Safeguarding Children's Board Annual Report
Regional Adoption Agency

18 January 2018

Children in Need
Northumberland Adult Learning Services Annual Report
Principal Social Workers Annual Report

15 March 2018

Director of Children's Services Annual Report

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

12. 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. Any Member who would like a printed copy should contact the Democratic Services Officer.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR_____

DATE_____