

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 21 September 2017** at **10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor G Renner-Thompson
(in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D
Cessford T
Lang J
Nisbet K

Richards ME
Stow K
Swinburn M
Wallace R

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A

Lennox D

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Payne S
Sanderson J

Woolhouse R

OFFICERS

Cusack M
Finch G
Johnson A

Laux D
Little L
Tulett C
Wright A

Passenger Transport Manager
Schools' Equalities Coordinator
Interim Director of Children's
Services
Head of Technical Services
Democratic Services Officer
Head of Skills & Employability
Senior Manager, Children's Social
Care & Principal Social Worker

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from J Warner, W Daley, D Lally and G Stewart.

30. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2017, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman with the following amendment noted:

Add apologies from A Hodgson.

It was clarified that on the penultimate paragraph on page 3 that it was the local authority that had targeted the 25 schools for improvement not the Regional Schools Commissioner.

31. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

J Sanderson advised that his daughter was in receipt of SEN school transport. Councillor Campbell advised that her grandchildren also used school transport.

32. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The published Forward Plan for October 2017 to January 2018 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented. The Democratic Services Officer advised that a provisional date of 31 October 2017 had been agreed for an additional Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration of a report on the Proposed Closure of Acklington Church of England First School.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY CABINET

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

Education in Belford

An extract of the minutes of Cabinet held on Tuesday 12 September 2017 in respect of Education in Belford had been circulated prior to the meeting (attached to the signed minutes). The Committee was asked to note Cabinet's decision.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY SCRUTINY

34. REPORT OF THE HEAD OF TECHNICAL SERVICES

School Transport Safety

The report attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes provided an overview of the Council's approach to managing the safety of children who access home to school transport. The Head of Technical Services along with

the Passenger Transport Manager were in attendance to introduce the report and answer any questions from Members.

Anecdotally a problem which had occurred in Hexham the previous week when young children were unable to access the public bus service to get to school and had been stranded was brought to the attention of Members. The Committee was advised that these children were not eligible for school transport as they did not attend their catchment school, however the public transport issue was still of concern in relation to the safety of the children. The Passenger Transport team were working with the bus company to see if a larger bus could be provided in order to allow sufficient capacity to enable all the children to travel.

Members welcomed the use of CCTV on school transport and were advised that this would be written into the new specification when contracts went out to tender, although it was noted that a number of contractors had already installed CCTV. Figures would be provided on the number of operators who had already installed CCTV. Any incidents involving drivers should be reported to the transport team. Contractors must have contingency plans in place to cover any staff sickness. The local authority had a legal duty to provide transport for eligible children and there was a cost to the Authority if the child did not use the service and had not given advance notice.

Whilst the functioning of seat belts was checked as part of monitoring procedures, it was not possible to check every individual belt due to timescales. If seat belts were not functioning correctly then these seats should be out of use. It was noted that operators were subject to traffic regulations and serious sanctions would be imposed if found to be in breach of these. It was suggested that schools be encouraged to promote the use of seat belts and could implement a buddy system with older pupils helping younger ones.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The contents of the reports be noted;
2. The implementation of action points listed under Future Plans be supported; and
3. Schools be encouraged to promote 100% seat belt use.

35. REPORTS OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

(a) Learning and Skills Services (Adult Learning) Draft Self-Assessment Report for 2016/2017.

The Head of Skills & Employability was in attendance to introduce the report (attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes) which outlined the development priorities which arose from the self-assessment. She advised that the data was based on interim final year data to allow early scrutiny of performance. The final data would be produced on 15 October 2017 and would be nationally validated by January 2018. A final self-assessment would be produced and validated in November 2017. She highlighted the "Project Big 90" which set out aspirational goals for key performance indicators at 90%

or above. The priorities for development in 2017/2018 were also outlined in the report. The Interim Director of Children's Services welcomed the opportunity to bring the positive report to the Committee. He advised that the service had 4,500 learners spread over 120 venues and that the local authority had direct control of all funding.

The Committee welcomed the excellent report and progress made in the current climate. In response to questions from Members the following information was noted:-

- The Council had realigned the provision to capture NEETs (not in employment, education or training) with specific coaching provided if required. It had been recognised that medical needs were sometimes the reason for a young person to be NEET and help could be provided to overcome obstacles.
- The use of monthly hot topic sessions was highlighted as the way to provide information on safeguarding, health and safety, equality and diversity along with other current topics and this had been praised by OFSTED. A large amount of work in the sessions focussed on Prevent.
- The 67.7% achievement for A Levels was in respect of one A Level class of 6 students and caution was required when comparing with national data as this did not include information on classes smaller than 12. In respect of Adult provision the national data could also include non regulated provision. The full report would contain the number of students in relation to the percentages provided.
- There was still a 2% gap in success rates between gender with females the better achieving although the gap had been closing over the previous 5 years. During 2016/17 a programme had been introduced which specifically targeted the longer term unemployed men which included driving/fork lift truck and CSCS qualifications allowing access to building sites.
- Funding was provided from a number of sources including Education and Skills Funding Agency, ESF Funding (which would cease in July 2018), Careers Guidance and overperformance on contracts with DWP along with numerous other sources which provided a budget of approximately £4m for Adults and just under £7m for Learning and Skills.

The Committee thanked Officers for the positive report and looked forward to receiving the full report in due course.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

(b) Trans Identity and Gender Diversity : Supporting Young People in Northumberland.

The report attached as **Appendix D** to the signed minutes provided information and a website link to a recently published resource from the Schools' Equality team which contained essential practical information for schools on how best to support children and young people whose gender identity did not correspond to that assigned to them at birth. The Schools'

Equalities Coordinator was in attendance and introduced the report to the Committee. She advised that work had been undertaken in partnership with other organisations to provide the virtual resource which could be updated regularly. Whilst a free licence had been granted for the Google application at the current time, it was possible that there could be a future cost if this was withdrawn.

A full launch of the resource would take place on 10 October 2017 to coincide with the international coming out day. A reported problem with the link would be investigated prior to the launch. All schools would be notified of the resource which would offer staff the opportunity to broaden their understanding and it was suggested that a training event could also be held.

RESOLVED that the resource be approved for launch and made accessible to all schools.

(c) Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual report on Progression

The report attached as **Appendix E** to the signed minutes presented the performance of Children's Services within legal proceedings in 2017/18 to date. The Senior Manager, Children's Social Care & Principal Social Worker was in attendance and introduced the report to the Committee. She advised that the number of children subject to care proceedings in the court system was a very small percentage of the overall number of children that the service dealt with, however they were the most at risk. She highlighted that the increased number of proceedings concluded out of timescale was in part due to some very complex long cases being concluded. It was anticipated that a number of these type of legacy cases would be completed in November/December of this year. It was expected that once these cases had been concluded the average timescale should become close to the 26 week target.

In response to questions from Members the following information was noted:-

- Children were only removed from parents after all other interventions had failed and decisions were always made in the best interests of the child. There was a very high threshold before that took place.
- Barnardos had commenced a new programme which allowed them to continue to work with parents to address issues why they had a child/children removed and to help them be in a better position to care for any future children.
- It was acknowledged that the report was written in a professional language and therefore a key of terms would be provided for future reports along with the numbers of children and not just percentages.
- In respect of paragraphs 5.15 and 5.23 it was reported that additional Legal staff had been appointed and regular meetings now took place between staff and the Courts to address issues raised.
- It was acknowledged that performance was below the national average and well below the Government target of 26 weeks, however the Committee was advised some timing issues were outside of the control

of the Authority in relation to the level of Court time available and scheduling of cases. There was a spike in cases at the current time and it was expected the figures would improve.

- There were approximately 400 children in the Local Authority's care at the current date with the majority placed with foster carers, family foster carers and some in residential homes.
- The recruitment and retention of experienced social workers would assist in reducing timescales and the Authority had a rolling programme of recruitment for experienced social workers. A number of graduate social workers had been appointed and were in the process of learning how to manage cases with training and support provided by managers. There was a dedicated team for initial inspections and a triage process was beginning to evolve which would be fully operational by 2018.
- The performance of Gateshead Council was above the Government target of 26 weeks and this was reported to be due in part to the work they undertake with pregnant women and having plans in place prior to birth which it was hoped we could replicate.

RESOLVED that the information provided be noted.

(d) Arrangements to Support Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities

The report (attached as **Appendix F** to the signed minutes) updated the Committee on the self evaluation, health and social care services for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities and had been presented to enable Members to contribute to the development of the self evaluation and strategy.

The Interim Director Children's Services requested that an email be sent asking all Committee Members to provide their views/comments to the Chair and himself by email in order that these could be fed into the self evaluation and strategy. He considered this would allow proper scrutiny and input to the detailed documents. Responses would be required as soon as possible to allow the final report to be prepared by 1 October 2017.

It was noted that there was a number of acronyms throughout the reports and it was requested that a glossary of terms be provided in the future.

(e) The role of Director of Children's Services - Test of Assurance

Members had been notified previously this item had been withdrawn from the agenda. The Interim Director of Children's Services advised that this was due to the fact that the appointments to both the roles of Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive were interim appointments and the report would be brought back when permanent appointments had been made.

36. WORK PROGRAMME

The Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme was circulated for information. The Democratic Services Officer advised that an additional meeting had provisionally been arranged for 10 am on Tuesday 31 October to consider the closure of Acklington Church of England First School.

Concerns were expressed on the duration of the meetings and the number of items the Committee were expected to consider. It was commented that this was due to the number of statutory reports which were required to be considered and the meetings no longer being held monthly.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

37. 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 _____