

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a virtual meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday, 16 July 2020 at 10.30 am**

PRESENT

Councillor G Renner-Thompson
(Chair in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D	Stewart G
Cessford T	Stow K
Dickinson S	Swinburn M
Dunn L	Wallace R
Lang J	

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Lennox D

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Parkin J

OFFICERS

Angus C	Scrutiny Officer
Hartwell A	Senior Manager - Safeguarding and Education Performance
Jackson D	Service Director, Education & Skills
Lally D	Chief Executive
McEvoy-Carr C	Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services
Morgan E	Director of Public Health
Pearson S	Senior Manager - Specialist Services
Reiter G	Service Director - Children's Social Care
Taylor M	Director - Business Developer (Care Services)

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor W Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

S Brennan, Northumbria Police Chairperson for MSET.

75. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from A Hodgson, P Rickeard and J Sanderson. It was noted that S Payne had permanently retired from his post.

76. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 12 May 2020, as circulated, be agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

77. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Campbell declared an interest in item 4.2 as a member of her family had received a business grant from the Council during lockdown.

Councillor Cessford also declared an interest in item 4.2 as he was Treasurer of a club that had received a grant.

The Chair confirmed that legal advice provided had confirmed that interests such as these would not have any impact on the agenda.

78. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair informed members that Dean Jackson, Service Director, Education and Skills, was retiring in August and this was his last meeting. He said Mr Jackson had been a fantastic help to the committee over the last two years and wished him all the very best for the future.

The Chair then advised members that the agenda would be reordered to bring forward the reports in item 5.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

79. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

79.1 Current Performance

The above report provided details of performance for Education and Skills (E&S) and Children's Social Care (CSC) up to the end of the 2019/20 financial year and the budgetary position for services within the committee's terms of reference. A copy of the report is attached to the signed Minutes as Appendix C.

The Senior Manager Performance: Education and Safeguarding gave a brief

summary of the report which had been delayed from May's meeting and contained data and information up to the end of March. Monitoring of the Covid-19 situation had been carried out weekly and data was available for this.

The Exclusions Task and Finish Working Group had previously expressed an interest in figures around exclusions and in response to questions the following information was provided:

- There had been 54 permanent exclusions at the end of March 2020 in comparison to 69 at the end of March 2019.
- In the current school year there had been 55 permanent exclusions in comparison to 89 in the previous school year.
- There had been 1569 fixed term exclusions in the current school year in comparison to 3441 in the previous school year.

The Vice Chair commented on the massive amount of work and effort which had gone into achieving such a significant improvement and thanked everyone involved for such outstanding results. These comments were echoed by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services who then referred to some reports in the press which had given a false impression around the percentage of pupils being offered their first choice of primary school in Northumberland. These reports had been based on the national average and Item 2 of Appendix A highlighted Northumberland's performance, showing that a performance level of 98.2% had been achieved against a target of 98%. This was 7% above the national average.

The Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services confirmed that the Council's Communications Team had taken this up with the newspaper concerned who had acknowledged the information reported had been taken from a national press release and they had used Northumberland as an example.

In response to further questions, the following information was provided:

- Information regarding trend lines came directly from the Council's system. It did not give a totally accurate reflection with regards to direction of travel and was not an entirely like for like position compared to the previous year as some of the indicators had slightly changed.
- Significant challenges were set in terms of data targets in order to push the Council harder to progress. Where there were national benchmarks the national average was included within the narrative and, with some indicators, Northumberland had set very challenging targets.
- In terms of 3 and 4 year olds in the county, i.e. the cohort of children receiving free education, Northumberland had the second highest number in the country and was running at a performance level of 110%.
- Over the last few years Northumberland had set targets against national averages rather than the North East league table in order to progress further.
- With regard to the rise in the number of looked after children, this was a national issue with a trend of more children coming into care and it was confirmed that this did have an impact on finances.

- The Council had Gateway Panels to look at the rationale and reasons for children becoming looked after, decisions were scrutinised and there were regular audits to make sure children were not being brought into care inappropriately. Officers were confident that the decision making process was appropriate but were looking at what services could be provided at an earlier stage to potentially prevent children coming into care at a later stage.
- With regard to the impact of Covid-19, Courts had not been sitting in the same way so proceedings had not been concluded and this had resulted in children not being able to leave care and move on.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the information in the report be noted;
- (2) further information regarding exclusion levels be provided.

79.2 Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficking Report (MSET)

The above report provided information relating to MSET which was responsible for coordinating and ensuring the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people who went missing or were at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and/or trafficking. A copy of the report is attached to the signed Minutes as Appendix D.

Sharron Pearson, Senior Manager Specialist Services and Sharron Brennan, Northumbria Police Chairperson for MSET were in attendance to present the report which was part of an annual report to Scrutiny in relation to the activity and work undertaken in this area.

Comprehensive and detailed information was provided to members as set out in the report and questions were invited.

- On a point of clarification regarding paragraph 3.4 it was stated that when intelligence or concerns were received about young people frequenting a particular area or address, that information was considered along with other factors and Community Safety, the Police and Social Care came together to define on what level that household should be approached. Each organisation had a role to play and the most successful approach was when all three visited a household together to disrupt what might be happening.
- There was a risk of substance misuse or criminal activity occurring at the address but it was also possible that adults living at the address did not know the child was missing and had children of a similar age who had invited them over.
- If criminal activity was found, enforcement action would be taken. The approach taken was found to be working and had been very successful.
- A suspect household would be allocated a single point of contact (SPOC) and any intelligence would be fed through that one channel. Depending

on what information was received, the first step would be to issue a warning then build up a picture which could result in a conviction and tenants having to leave the property.

- Depending on the nature of the intelligence received it would be reported to the landlord who was often Northumberland County Council. The Council could then issue a warning to tenants that they were in danger of losing their tenancy if such activities continued.
- Reference was made to paragraph 6.1 which stated that the highest proportion of children identified as being vulnerable to exploitation lived in the Blyth or Cramlington locality. It was agreed that a breakdown of this figure should have been provided to give a clearer picture for each area and this would be done for the next report.

RESOLVED that

- (1) The report and range of support be noted.
- (2) A breakdown of the figure for children vulnerable to exploitation in the Blyth or Cramlington locality be provided for each area.

79.3 JTAI Action Plan

The above report invited members to consider sufficiency of progress with the action plan resulting from the Joint Targeted Area Inspection of Child Exploitation (JTAI) in 2019. A copy of the report is attached to the signed Minutes as Appendix E.

Graham Reiter, Service Director - Children's Social Care presented the report which summarised the progress of the actions arising from the JTAI inspection last summer. Overall the action plan was overseen by the Safeguarding Committee and actions were progressing although there had been some slight delays as a result of Covid.19.

The actions highlighted in the red quadrant of Appendix A had further progressed and members were assured that the scrutiny and partnership oversight of those actions were progressing where possible. Findings of the ILACS inspection had shown very positive partnership working in Northumberland and the identification of partnership responses to children at risk of exploitation were very strong and prompt.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

79.4 Northumberland Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) Action Plan

The report updated members on the development, submission and progress of the ILAC action plan following the inspection of Northumberland's Children's Services undertaken by Ofsted between 20 and 31 January 2020. A copy of the report is attached to the signed Minutes as Appendix F.

The Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services introduced the report explaining there had been an opportunity to delay its submission due to Covid-19 but officers had decided it should be business as usual. The action plan, based on the recommendations made by Ofsted, had therefore been submitted by the original June deadline and discussions with Ofsted would take place in two weeks' time.

RESOLVED that the submission and content of the action plan be noted along with progress made since the inspection.

SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

80. REPORTS OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The following reports of the Chief Executive were considered by the Cabinet on 13 June. The Committee was requested to consider issues arising from those reports.

80.1 Covid-19 - Northumberland County Council Response

This report provided Cabinet with a full update on the impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on the work of Northumberland County Council and provided an overview of the Council's immediate emergency response from mid-March until the date the report was published. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix A.)

80.2 Covid-19 - Planning for Recovery in Northumberland

This report outlined the Council's plans to support residents, businesses and communities to recover from the Covid-19 crisis in the coming weeks and months. The report was not intended to be guidance to residents, businesses or other organisations regarding the Covid-19 restrictions and nothing in this report should be interpreted either explicitly or implicitly as guidance. In all cases, residents were asked to refer to the latest Government guidance which was available online. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B.)

The Chief Executive introduced the above reports together emphasising that it had been a very difficult time for communities, vulnerable residents, young people, children and families.

In terms of the corporate response, the Council had mobilised the following emergency structures:

- Emergency Community Assistance Plan (ECAP)
- Business Continuity Plans (BCP's)
- the Council's Emergency Committees

It had moved quickly to establish its structures to ensure clear and accountable arrangements were in place. These were enacted at short notice with cross party representation to ensure that advice was taken appropriately from members. The County Council Executive response had been enacted as follows:

- Covid Executive Team (Gold (strategic) Command), led by herself as Chief Executive which set the strategic direction and response priorities for the organisation.
- Business Interruption Management Team (Silver (tactical) Command) Chaired by the Director of Adult Social Care, which ensured operational issues were managed across services and essential service delivery was maintained.

This had ensured that relevant actions had been picked up and acted upon quickly and promptly.

In terms of advising scrutiny committees, when the report was taken through the Cabinet process, it would have been usual to have pre-scrutiny but it was felt that, given some of the issues in this significant event, post scrutiny would be more effective.

Strategic arrangements included:

- The Council had linked in with the Local Resilience Forum based on the footprint of Northumbria Police comprising the 6 local authorities in the force area. This was a much wider forum dealing with health issues through NHS England and a whole range of other partners.
- Linking back to Council Members through Leader's briefings, group briefings or via Cabinet.
- Sharing delegated decisions with group leaders to ensure agreement or the opportunity for discussion.

There were 4 priorities to ensure that overarching arrangements met the needs of the County.

- To respond to a rapidly changing situation which meant establishing new structures and delivery including setting up a Community Hub and Business Hub. The Council's response through Northumberland Communities Together had addressed very urgent issues around shielded and vulnerable communities.
- Continuing to deliver and maintain essential services for residents in a safe and effective way.
- Looking after the health, safety and wellbeing of staff.
- Looking at how to aid the county, residents and communities with arrangements to ease lockdown in the safest way possible.

Specifically in relation to the Family and Children's Scrutiny Committee:

- The vast majority of Northumberland schools had remained open.
- Trade unions had been very supportive.

- Cath McEvoy-Carr had shown positive leadership across schools and Family and Children's social care arrangements.
- The Chief Executive placed on record her personal thanks to trade unions, staff in schools and the leadership team.

Reference was made to the reports discussed earlier in the meeting which highlighted that important work was ongoing. Social work teams, all associated care support teams and family support services had worked very hard to ensure, wherever possible, that families, particularly the vulnerable, had received prompt responses and mechanisms had been put in place to keep everyone safe.

In terms of general information within the report:

The Community Hub

- 18,000 shielded residents had been identified across Northumberland, 13,000 of which had received some support or contact from the Hub or wider network which included over 1,000 registered volunteers across Northumberland, the VCS and community based non profit organisations.
- Support from the Council included financial support, food parcels, delivering medication and teams chatting to isolated individuals. This had been a great team effort by staff and volunteers.
- There had been great support from teams in local services, essential services, communication and IT.
- Not all decisions made were correct, it was a learning curve and constructive criticism was welcome.

Business Hub

- A pot of over £95 million funding had been received from the Government for Northumberland.
- over £86m had gone out to over 7,650 northumberland businesses.
- Currently working on the Discretionary Grant Scheme, an additional £4.6m funding, for a range of schemes.
- The vast majority of grants had been issued within days of application.
- An additional £1.5 m had been secured from the North of Tyne Combined Authority which would enable the Council to support recovery processes.

In terms of the Recovery report, this contained details about the work which was ongoing around economic recovery and about working safely with partners going forward. It was needed to ensure that, as lockdown was eased, health and safety were put first in supporting residents, businesses and communities. The Chief Executive expressed her appreciation to Cath McEvoy-Carr and Liz Morgan for the leadership and support they had shown in their areas of expertise and to all the teams involved. She concluded by urging caution as the lockdown was eased so as not to put vulnerable people at risk.

Councillor Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, wished to echo what the Chief Executive had said and place on record his thanks to the

central team and all school staff for the phenomenal amount of work done. All services had pulled together and there had been a collective effort which had made a massive impact. In a wider context, across the board and all political parties, he said the crisis had shown how fantastic local government could be.

Councillor Daley then highlighted the following points:

- In the first 10 weeks of lockdown there were 52,000 pupil attendances.
- On average, when only vulnerable children and those of key workers were attending schools, 145 Northumberland schools were open to support those families.
- On-line learning had been available and 86% of apprentices had been involved in significant learning of some kind.
- The Education Challenge had been repurposed and a submission would go to the Government about how schools would be supported post a Covid-19 environment when there would be issues around how to deal with the learning loss.
- Schools were being supported to develop a recovery curriculum. The transition issue had been complex during lockdown but joint working on the transition recovery was taking place and an Educational Improvement Board had been developed to help with this journey.
- During the summer 28 pop ups had been introduced around the County to offer children an intense period of support.
- Special Educational Needs provision and Children's Homes development were being looked at.
- A schools liaison service would be set up to look at the link between employers and young people as young people would be disproportionately impacted as a result of Covid-19.
- The Council needed to lead the way to show it was offering apprenticeships and Councillor Daley wished to place on record his thanks to Councillor Stewart for his help in developing the programme.
- With partners at the North of Tyne, the Council had received £205,000 to support laptop and internet access for students and £0.5 m to develop community hubs.
- Further work being done with the North of Tyne about how to support apprenticeships and how to add value to the work of supporting young people post school education.
- The Government had announced a £1 billion fund to support education through the Covid crisis. Part of that funding was for additional tuition for young people and the Council was ready to look at bringing in former teachers to support young people should support be needed.
- An important message to convey was about the multi million pound grant from the Government to support a wide range of businesses. Within that grant there was nearly £0.5 million to allocate to early years providers and to registered childminders so an eligible early years provider could receive up to £5,000 and an eligible registered childminder could receive up to £500. Details of this scheme could be found on the Council's website and would be promoted on social media.
- It was a collective team effort and any suggestions for improvement were welcome.

The Chair then invited questions and comments from members:

Councillor Campbell praised Daljit Lally and all the teams involved for Northumberland's response to Covid-19 and suggested a plaque should be erected to thank them and the Health Service for what they had done during this terrible time. She added that feedback received from residents had shown nothing but praise for the Council and personally she could not fault what the Council had done. She wished to place on record her thanks to the administration and all involved and hoped the recovery plan would succeed going forward.

Councillor Dickinson also wished to place on record his thanks to Daljit Lally and officers for the way they had conducted themselves during the pandemic, not only from an operational and clear safety point of view for staff and residents of Northumberland, but equally from an information sharing point of view. Briefings had been outstanding and information from these had been provided to Parish Councils and others.

Councillor Dickinson also praised the Executive Board for their communication with opposition leaders and expressed thanks and appreciation to Councillor Daley who, at the beginning, had communicated with every member to keep them informed. Nationally there had been concerns about the lack of guidance but Northumberland had responded in its own way and, from a personal point of view, he was aware that care homes and learning disability homes in his Ward had valued the work of the social care team supported by the Council. He recognised there would be financial implications and issues to deal with for recovery but emphasised the importance of working together, cross party, to ensure Northumberland fared well during the pandemic without underestimating the challenges ahead. A concern raised by Councillor Dickinson was the speed at which it was attempted to open some public lavatories and facilities which drew people to the area and that some of the country parks had reopened without members being informed.

In response the Chief Executive thanked the members for their kind comments and stated that her main concern had been for front line staff who had worked throughout the pandemic. This was an unprecedented situation and looking back she acknowledged that some mistakes had been made and there were things which could have been done differently.

Moving forward the Executive Team was looking at how to say thank you to staff and reward them. Alongside a financial reward consideration was being given to having an art display of photographs showing some snapshots of those who had been out in the midst of the pandemic doing their best to keep everyone safe. Mrs Lally said that In Northumberland public services had always been loved and appreciated but it was times like this when their true value was seen.

In response to questions the following information was provided:

- With reference to page 21 of Appendix A, concerning schools and other providers, the national average of pupils back at school was 16% and in

Northumberland the latest figure was 22%. In addition there had been some excellent on-line learning offers and school staff would be working throughout the summer break to ensure the safe and secure return of pupils in September.

- In terms of additional tuition, finance and the recruitment process, funding for catch up tuition had been identified from the Government's £1 billion fund for schools. Officers would be looking at this and if required an appeal would be made for tuition support. There was very little guidance to date but it was understood that a proportion of the £1 billion funding would be allocated to schools on a per pupil basis, meaning all schools would receive a share, which was welcomed, and the other proportion would be allocated to major tuition firms. A number of schools were looking at this and were trying to recruit recently retired teachers or out of work graduate students from September. As soon as more detail was available it would be provided.
- With regard to funding to support vulnerable families who had particularly suffered throughout the pandemic, officers were not aware of any additional funding within schools over and above the tuition funding and pupil premium targeted specifically for educational and catch up purposes.
- The Chief Executive said a critical piece of work was being done on a connection between Children, Families and Adult Services and wider services which included schools. She made reference to:
 - Funding for IT and additional equipment provided for families and more vulnerable children through the North of Tyne or Government;
 - support offered by Northumberland Communities Together;
 - a specific piece of work regarding employment and future availability of employment across the county to ensure the Council was ready with a safety net around skills safety;
 - schools were a trusted place for families but the Northumberland Communities Together work had demonstrated that, from a public health and community basis, people were willing to link up and support each other and this had been shown in many ways on a corporate basis.
- Councillor Daley referred to a dedicated service which supported children with sensory issues, speech and language difficulties or autism and said this service was now provided inhouse free of charge.
- The Vice Chair referred to the huge amount of work being done around health and safety issues for children returning to school and all of the procedures which needed to be in place. Children themselves wanted to return to school but some of the negativity and scaremongering by the media and others was causing apprehension. He acknowledged that it was a scary and difficult time but felt there could be more informative and educational messages being shared by the media.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for her attendance and for the comprehensive discussions held.

The next scheduled meeting was in September but there could be an additional meeting called if necessary.

At that point, on behalf of the committee and himself, Councillor Daley expressed gratitude and thanks to the Director of Education and Skills for the massive improvements he had made during the two and a half years he had been in post. He highlighted Mr Jackson's many achievements in that time and said it was important to recognise that he had made a difference. The Chair acknowledged the progress and improvements made by Mr Jackson and echoed the comments made.

RESOLVED that the reports on Northumberland County Council's response and recovery be received.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____