

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 **Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF** on **Thursday 6 September 2018 at 10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor G Renner-Thompson
In the Chair

COUNCILLORS

Cessford T	Stewart G
Horncastle C	Stow K
Richards ME	Wallace R

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A	Warner J
Lennox D	

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Lyst, R	Sanderson J
Payne S	Woolhouse R

OFFICERS

Aviston S	Head of School Organisation and Resources
Jackson D	Service Director - Education and Skills
Little L	Democratic Services Officer
McEvoy C	Director of Children's Services

ALSO PRESENT

Daley W	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services
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Press/Public: 1

19. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from D Campbell, J Lang and K Nisbet.

20. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 July 2018, as circulated, be agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

21. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair reminded the Committee that agenda item 6.4 Youth Service Review had been withdrawn from the agenda.

22. FORWARD PLAN

The published Forward Plan of key decisions for September to December 2018 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET

23. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Regional Adoption Agency

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report (attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes) to the Committee advising that this was the third and final report to be presented to Cabinet in respect of the creation of the Regional Adoption Agency. It was expected that the Regional Adoption Agency would commence on 1 December 2018 using a local authority hosted model following approval by the each of the participating local authorities. North Tyneside Council was to be the lead and host authority.

There had been a great deal of work undertaken during the last two years in respect of the financial arrangements. The Committee was advised that whilst the figure for Northumberland did appear higher than other authorities this was due to a larger number of adoptions within Northumberland and the Council not selling adopters to other Agencies. The average cost in Northumberland was £22,000 - £23,000 per adoption which was the second lowest in the region.

Members considered this option as cost effective and the best way forward and acknowledged the good work that had been undertaken by the team involved in the development of the Regional Adoption Agency.

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

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

24. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

24.1 Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report (attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes) to the Committee she advised that the average time for a case in care proceedings was now 33 weeks and whilst this was an improvement on the previously reported figure was still outside the 26 week target. Work was continuing to improve this figure and Judge Hudson from the Family Court was working with all local authorities in the area to identify why there were still delays, however it was recognised that some delays were outside of the control of the Council.

In response to questions from Members she advised that information on each case which went out of date was gathered and analysed to see what lessons could be learned to prevent this happening again. The target of 26 weeks was imposed by Government which was a massive challenge to achieve in all cases and she highlighted the importance of achieving an outcome which was in the best interests of each individual child whether this met the 26 week target or not. It was generally found that children became distressed if they were not aware of what was happening, however it was also important to protect them. Social Workers worked closely with the children involved and the Court appointed a guardian to ensure plans were appropriate for the child with a legal representative also appointed. No work had been undertaken on how children were affected by the length of time proceedings took but it could be an interesting piece of work for the future. It was not thought that expert witnesses were required in each instance but there was a need to ensure that the decision to remove a child was correct. Figures for cases which took less than 26 weeks could be provided for the Committee's information.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

24.2 Finance and Performance Six Monthly Report

Councillor Daley, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Children's Services advised that this was a regular report provided to the Committee in order to transparency over performance and the budget in relation to Children's Services covering both Social Care and Education and Skills. He advised that over the last year the Administration had been keen to address historic issues within this budget and the recurring £2m saving which had been impossible to deliver had now been removed and there was now a current overspend of £1.6m. He advised that the figure quoted in the press that morning of £6m was not correct and an amendment was to be printed the following day.

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report (attached as **Appendix D** to the signed minutes) to the Committee. She highlighted the level of exclusions as a concern and challenge and advised that work was being undertaken on how inclusion could be supported and encouraged across the County. Data related to achievement was unvalidated at this time and a report would be provided at a future meeting on the validated results.

In respect of a question related to the academisation of Hexham Priory School following the investment by the Local Authority to increase the number of SEN places the Committee was advised the Local Authority had a good relationship

with the school and that there had been no suggestion that the school would not work collaboratively in relation to placements of children.

In respect of concerns raised again by the Committee in respect of the level of exclusions it was confirmed that it was a priority for the Local Authority to prevent exclusion and encourage more inclusion. The report to a future meeting would include data on the schools with the highest level of exclusions and work would be undertaken on how to facilitate them to be more inclusive. It was clarified that there was a pupil referral unit for pupils in KS3 but not KS4. There was no additional funding to address the problem, however it was hoped that schools who had developed their own provision would share knowledge with others and options were being considered about how to address the issue a. It was reiterated that permanent exclusion must be a last resort after all other avenues explored.

The Committee was advised that whilst the data was unvalidated at the current time it was thought that results from KS4 were the strongest for a considerable length of time and good improvement had been shown. An improvement at all levels had been achieved this year which was it was stated was a culmination of the work undertaken by Dr A Johnson, in his role as Director of Education over the past four years.

In respect of SEND top up band levels the Committee was advised that whilst this was still an issue it was expected that the increase in SEND provision within Northumberland would reduce the need for external residential placements and eventually the associated costs would be reduced. There would still be cost pressures on budgets over the next few years but it was hoped that the deficit would eventually be cleared. An invitation had been extended to Damien Hinds MP to visit Northumberland to understand the pressures.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

24.3 Children's Social Care Practice Week

The report (attached as **Appendix E** to the signed minutes) was introduced by the Director of Children's Services provided details of the findings from the children's social care practice week which took place in January/February 2018. This was the first time that Northumberland had undertaken such a process and was undertaken to identify what had happened since the the 2016 Ofsted inspection.

The Committee welcomed the positive report.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

25. Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and Monitoring Report 2018/19

The Work Programme and Monitoring Report was attached as **Appendix G** to the signed minutes. The Committee was advised that the Vice President of

Northumberland College would attend the meeting on 8 November to provide a presentation as had been requested at Chairmen's Group.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

26. 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.

27. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

- (a) That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item on the Agenda as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act, and
- (b) That the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons:-

Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A

3 - Information relating to (the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information). The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure would prejudice the ability for the County Council to obtain a competitive price through the re-tendering of the design and build contract.

REPORT TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET

28. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Ponteland Joint School and Leisure Facility project update

A detailed introduction to the Cabinet report (attached as **Appendix H** to the signed minutes) was provided by the Head of School Organisation and Resources setting out the background to the actions which had taken place over the previous few months in connection with the project following receipt of

the final and best offer from the preferred bidder. She highlighted the recommendations which Cabinet were being asked to agree.

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

CHAIR _____

DATE _____