

## **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 5 September 2019** at **10.00 am**

#### **PRESENT**

Councillor G Renner-Thompson  
(Chair in the Chair)

#### **COUNCILLORS**

Campbell D  
Cessford T  
Dickinson S  
Lang J

Stewart G  
Stow K  
Swinburn M  
Wallace R

#### **CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES**

Hodgson A

Lennox D

#### **TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES**

Payne S

Sanderson J

#### **OFFICERS**

Aviston S  
Bryden L  
Hartwell A

Jackson D  
McEvoy-Carr C

Little L  
Reiter G

Head of School Organisation & Resources  
Senior Manager - Commissioning  
Senior Manager - Safeguarding and  
Education Performance  
Service Director - Education and Skills  
Executive Director of Adult Social Care and  
Children's Services  
Democratic Services Officer  
Service Director - Children's Social Care

#### **ALSO PRESENT**

Daley W

Bushell J  
Rickeard P

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for  
Children's Services  
Headteacher, West End First School  
Director of Education, Diocese of Newcastle  
and Durham

Press/Public: 3

## **25. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor L Dunn and J Warner.

## **26. ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Committee was informed that Mr R Woolhouse, Union Representative had advised that he would no longer be attending the Committee due to a merger of Trade Unions. It was noted that Mr Woolhouse had been the longest serving Co-opted Member on the Committee. Councillor Renner-Thompson, Chair, thanked Mr Woolhouse for his attendance and input at Committees over the years.

## **27. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 August 2019, as circulated, be agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

## **28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor R Wallace declared an interest in item 5.1 as he was a Governor at Whitley Memorial CE First School.

## **29. FORWARD PLAN**

The published Forward Plan of key decisions for September to December 2019 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented. Members were advised that an additional meeting of Cabinet had been arranged for 17 September which would consider the Outcome of the Outline Business Case for the Haltwhistle Primary School Provision for Wise Academy Trust. This would be presented at an additional meeting of this Committee on 16 September 2019.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

## **REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY CABINET**

### **30. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

#### **30.1 Proposal to extend the age ranges of Bedlington Whitley Memorial CE and West End First Schools**

S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources introduced the report (attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes) which provided the outcomes of the formal statutory proposal published on 11 July 2019, which set out the Council's proposal to extend the age range of Bedlington West End First School to become a primary school with effect from 1 September 2020. The

formal statutory proposal also referenced the linked non-statutory proposal to extend the age range of Bedlington Whitley Memorial Church of England First School from 1 September 2020. All representations submitted in response to the Statutory Proposals supported the proposals. Discussions would take place with the two secondary academies to ensure sufficient capacity within the schools from September 2020.

J Bushell, Headteacher of Bedlington West End First School, spoke in support of the proposals which she advised had come forward in response to recent events and were considered to be in the best interests of children within the partnership. The consultation had received positive support from the local community and parents who wished the caring ethos of the school to continue for children through to the end of Year 6.

The recent Ofsted Inspection was highlighted which stated “The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The school is successful, happy and welcoming. Working alongside the skilled and experienced deputy headteacher, you have set a tone of persistent and relentless change in order to provide the very best for pupils. This has been in the face of potentially unsettling and distracting local school reorganisation discussions. Everyone has kept their ‘eye on the ball’ to ensure the strongest possible outcomes for pupils. Each child is treated as an individual and their needs are effectively addressed.”

The significant challenges of the school, on its limited site with an Edwardian building, were also highlighted; however, the school would continue to be creative to overcome these barriers. She asked that the proposals be supported and assured the Committee that the school would rise to the challenge and continue to provide the best education for children.

Members were happy to note that all parties consulted had been in support of the proposals and welcomed the comments regarding further discussions on increasing the SEND provision within the school.

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

### **30.2 Expansion of Whytrig Middle School, Horton Grange Primary School and New Delaval Primary School.**

S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources introduced the report (attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes) advising that the title of the report should read Horton Grange Primary and New Delaval Primary and not First Schools. There had been one representation submitted in response to the Statutory Proposal for Whytrig Middle School which raised concerns regarding increased traffic and parking in the surrounding area. Since the consultation had closed a further pedestrian crossing had been provided and the further concerns would be included in the development of plans for the new school buildings for Astley High School and Whytrig Middle School. Highways would also be asked to investigate if further measures were required

in the interim period. No representations had been received in respect of the two primary schools.

The proposals were welcomed by the Committee.

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

### **30.3 Alternative Provision Framework to Support Children Permanently Excluded from School**

L Bryden, Senior Manager - Commissioning, introduced the report (attached as Appendix D to the signed minutes) which requested Cabinet approval to proceed with a tender exercise to create a framework to support the provision of alternative education for children of statutory school age that had been excluded. Members were advised that Cabinet approval was necessary in view of the approaching expiry of the existing tender and substantial increase in the number of permanent exclusions and subsequent increased levels of expenditure. The framework would provide the mechanism to buy services, however providers would only be paid for the service they actually delivered.

The Committee discussed the Task and Finish Working Group which had been set up to investigate and address the increasing levels of both permanent and fixed term exclusions within Northumberland, although it was recognised that this was also reflected at a national level. The input by Headteachers and other professionals was recognised and a report from the Group would be provided to this Committee in October 2019. It was noted that there had been a 28% decrease in permanent exclusions and a 26% decrease in fixed term exclusions from the previous year.

It was expected that the new framework could be utilised to provide added value, managing a young person at an earlier stage to help prevent permanent exclusion or for a shorter period of time allowing a return to mainstream education. The use of the Early Help Service and Inclusion Support officers working with young people and their families was highlighted as a way to help reduce levels of exclusion. Work was also underway to grow good quality alternative provision in local areas to prevent young people having to travel long distances to access the service.

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

## **REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY**

### **31. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

#### **31.1 Current Performance**

The current performance report (attached as Appendix E to the signed minutes) was introduced by A Hartwell, Senior Manager - Safeguarding and

Education Performance. He advised that, in line with the rest of the Council, Children's Services had reviewed the Performance Indicators it reported on to reflect current areas of focus and underpinned the service statement priorities. It was noted that the financial position as set out on page 4 of the report was up to the end of June 2019 and did not take account of the recent Government announcement of additional funding.

Clarification was provided on the following points:-

- Appendix B - point 13 - Children who were placed for adoption were looked after children (LAC) until an Adoption Order had been agreed by the Court.
- Appendix B - point 5 - The Local Authority would not "allow" a care leaver to become homeless, however after some young people having been given various opportunities and different placements, these sometimes did break down. Young people could also return to a family or stay with friends which the Local Authority did not deem suitable or could be staying in temporary accommodation as they were unable to maintain longer term commitments. The Local Authority had a duty of care up to the age of 21 or 25 in some instances dependent on what the young person wanted and were very rigorous in maintaining contact if possible. It was highlighted that this year had produced the highest number of care leavers graduating from Universities.
- It was still a challenge to maintain a suitable level of cases for Social Workers although this had improved through monitoring and the implementation of the workload weighting system. It was hoped the Academy would also help with the retention of Social Workers, which had been identified as a national issue.
- The Careers Service and Virtual Headteacher worked closely with LAC during the transition into work or further education with all options explored such as apprenticeships, college or university and arranging work experience to help with career pathways.
- The Local Authority was undertaking to build new children's homes within Northumberland to expand their existing provision and reduce the need for expensive out of county placements. Two areas had been identified and it was hoped that more would be identified. However it was highlighted that the Local Authority would always look to place a child in a family setting if possible.
- It was highlighted that whilst some indicators showed as red, this was due to the high standard that the Council had set itself and in fact performance was above the required national standard.

The Committee thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for the work they carry out to benefit and improve the outcomes for the young people.

**RESOLVED** that the current performance be noted with no further issues identified for further scrutiny at this time.

### **31.2 Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression**

The report (attached as **Appendix F** to the signed minutes) was introduced by G Reiter, Service Director - Children's Social Care who advised that there were a number of reasons which had led to the decline in performance including court timetabling and the availability of experts during the care proceedings which was a common theme across the region. Northumberland had made progress in the quality of evidence being presented to Court with the Legal Gateway Panel beginning to have an impact on the duration of care proceedings resulting in an improved reputation and relationship with the Court. Historic long term cases which were now coming to a conclusion also impacted on performance figures. Work was being undertaken by the Head of the Family Division regarding the pressures on Courts and work undertaken at national level to reduce the need for expert witnesses.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted with no further issues identified for further scrutiny at this time.

### **31.3 Adopt North East - Update**

The report (attached as **Appendix G** to the signed minutes) prepared by a Senior Manager of Adopt North East (ANE) provided Members with information on the developments and progress since its launch and was introduced by G Reiter, Service Director - Children's Social Care.

It was stated that Northumberland's performance related to adoptions had always been good, including for children who were difficult to place, and the Authority was very keen to maintain and improve good practice. Stringent oversight of ANE was being provided to develop good practice with monthly meetings of Assistant Directors of Children's Services and quarterly meetings with Directors of Children's Services taking place.

In response to questions regarding ANE's performance the Committee was advised it was not yet functioning as this Authority would wish it to be however it was noted that nationally newly created Regional Adoption Agencies all had a dip in performance and ANE were only now starting to reach their full staffing structure.

Members stated that the dip in performance could have an effect on the most vulnerable children within the County and therefore requested a further report from the Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services to be provided to this Committee in March 2020 setting out the success, effectiveness and value for money of Adopt North East.

**RESOLVED** that:-

1. The information in the report be noted; and
2. The Director of Adult Services and Children's Services provide a report in March 2020 detailing the success, effectiveness and value for money of Adopt North East.

**32. REPORT OF THE DEMOCRATIC SERVICES OFFICER**

**Family and Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and Monitoring Report 2019/20**

The Work Programme and Monitoring Report was attached as **Appendix H** to the signed minutes. The extra meeting on Monday 16 September was highlighted and outstanding items would be scheduled.

**RESOLVED** that the contents of the report be noted.

**INFORMATION REPORT**

**33. 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** \_\_\_\_\_