

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at Meeting Space - Block 1, Floor 2 - County Hall on Thursday, 4 November 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
L Dunn
C Taylor

D Carr
M Swinburn
T Thorne

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson
P Rickeard

D Lennox

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

J Sanderson

OFFICERS

C Angus
Hartwell

A Kingham
L Little
C McEvoy-Carr

Scrutiny Officer
Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Adults and Children's Services
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Deputy Director of Education

G Reiter
D Street

ALSO PRESENT

G Renner-Thompson

Cabinet Member

Press/Public : 1

26 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair advised that there had been some changes to the Membership of the

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Committee which had been agreed at Full Council the previous day with Councillors Carr, Dodd and Dunbar being appointed to the Committee and Councillors Ferguson and Stewart coming off. The Chair thanked Councillor Stewart who had been the Vice-Chair, and Councillor Ferguson for their work on the Committee and welcomed the new Members to the Committee.

27 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dodd and Dunbar along with L. Houghton.

28 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 7 October 2021, as circulated, were agreed and signed by the Chair.

29 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Mr J Sanderson advised that he was an employee of Kylloe House.

30 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for November 2021 to February 2022 be noted.

31 **PERFORMANCE & FINANCE REPORT (CHILDREN'S SERVICES)**

A Hartwell, Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support provided an introduction to the report in which Members were asked to consider current performance and the budgetary position for services within the Committee's terms of reference. Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member advised that he was pleased with the report and the regular updates which had been provided and he acknowledged the skills and expertise of the staff.

In relation to the work of the School Improvement Partnership (SIP), judgements had improved dramatically over the previous four years and were more closely aligned to Ofsted judgements with improving trends in relation to Primary schools. The SIP team worked tirelessly to understand issues with schools to help shape and improve outcomes for schools.

The improvement in the time taken for permanently excluded pupils returning to education was due to the focussed work with schools, pupils and their parents being undertaken by Exclusion Workers. Headteachers were commended on their understanding of the inclusion work being undertaken and had embraced the inclusion agenda. Schools were robustly challenged on the levels of fixed term exclusions for SEND pupils and the issue was the subject of discussions at the Senior Management Team meetings weekly with data interrogated to identify any trends.

It was clarified that the championing of strong outcomes for all care leavers was undertaken by the Senior Manager and team with contact maintained with all the

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young people on a regular basis to offer support. At this point in the year, there was an underspend on the “business as usual” Children’s Services budget but an overspend on the Covid budget. Some, but not all of the Covid expenses could be claimed back and this would have the result of reducing the level of underspend on the overall Children’s Services budget.

A suggestion that the Local Area Councils could be used as a vehicle to promote Fostering within the County would be explored. It was felt that the graphs included in the report could be clearer this would be fed back for future reports to the Committee.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

32 **CHILDREN'S HOMES PLACEMENT & SUFFICIENCY**

G Reiter, Service Director Children’s Social Care, provided a comprehensive introduction to the report which outlined the key issues and challenges in relation to placement sufficiency for Looked After Children. The sufficiency strategy was currently being reviewed and updated and would be presented to this Committee in January 2022.

Members welcomed the impressive report and recognised that this was a very complex area. It was thought that the quality of the support provided in in-house residential placements was a key factor in the longer duration of these placements, and whilst there were some good quality external residential facilities, these were more likely to give short notice of termination due to relationship breakdowns. It was challenging to be able to find emergency accommodation in these instances as there were very few registered facilities for emergency placements.

The building of the two new children’s homes had been delayed with it being explained that one of the locations previously identified had since been deemed inappropriate and a new site was being sought. Building costs had also increased and a bid had been made to the DfE to match fund the project of the total build costs. Reconfiguration of an existing home would also be made in order to assist to meet the demand for places. The need to grow the in-house provision was stressed along with the need for communities to understand the purpose of the children’s homes and how the communities themselves could help with the integration of the young people into their community.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

33 **SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

G Reiter, Service Director Children’s Social Care provided an introduction to the report which gave an overview of the challenges of and responses to the recruitment and retention of social workers.

Members were advised that the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers was an issue for all local authorities. Northumberland’s well established AYSE Academy for newly qualified social workers was well regarded within the

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region with competition for places strong, which assisted in “growing our own” workforce. The decision for social workers within the Academy to return to office based working in order to ensure that they received the appropriate level of support during the continuing pandemic, was welcomed by the Committee.

Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services advised that the recruitment and retention of social workers was one of his six key priorities and was also a part of the Council’s Corporate Plan. He encouraged Members to visit the Academy and stated he was keen to invest further to increase numbers in the Academy.

Members recognised that social work was an extremely demanding profession and it took a special type of person to do this role. Councillor Swinburn highlighted that Kevin Waggott, one of our social workers was up for a National Award. Monitoring was undertaken of Covid related illness against other illness with sickness levels dropping during lockdown as people could work from home. Sickness levels had now increased as people no longer worked from home in the same way and people were more likely to be mixing and picking up viruses. Whilst some staff were required to be office based for operational reasons, a large number of staff were still working from home and it was confirmed that support was still being provided to these staff members.

Members suggested that options could be explored which would allow more flexibility in working arrangements for social workers to prevent them leaving to take up positions with agencies for this type of reason. It was also highlighted that the informal networking which took place in office environments was significantly underestimated and time should be built into the working week for people to be able to talk to each other. The importance of the Academy in transitioning the newly qualified social workers into teams was outlined with this being reflected in increased retention of these staff and the wider effective use of the Academy to train staff for a variety of roles in Northumberland. It was clarified that all staff had flexible working arrangements however this must be balanced with the need for a consistent service to be provided.

In response to questions related to the retention of those social workers coming through the Academy, it was clarified that some of the first cohort had since moved, however this was to be expected as they gained more experience and were promoted. There had only been one or two who had dropped out from the Academy with a significant number of those joining the Academy having already been students at Northumberland. The suggestion of expanding the Academy to carry out the service on behalf of other local authorities had been thought about, but had not been progressed.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

34 **NORTH EAST SUBMISSION TO THE CARE REVIEW**

The report which provided an overview of the North East Association of Directors of Children’s Services submission to the ongoing National Care Review was introduced by C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Children’s Services. She advised that this was a once in a generation opportunity to influence the way in which Children’s Services were provided going forward and had attracted a great

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deal of media attention. She highlighted the funding cuts which had been made within the North East and the stark data within the North East.

The Chair highlighted the stark differences even between areas within Northumberland with life expectancy of 104 in one area compared with 86 only two miles away and that the first 1001 days from birth make a massive difference on an individual's life. The tackling of inequalities was one of the most important issues for any Council or Government. He highlighted the work of the Poverty Working Group and the need to address the inequalities and provide a fairer opportunity for all.

In response to a question related to what would be appropriate funding, Members were advised that it was not just about the funding that came in, it was also about managing care markets and these being fair for all. It was not possible to provide a definitive figure of what was required, however there was a massive growing gap between the levels of funding being provided and what was actually needed. Northumberland had ensured that there had been sufficient funding this year to make sure that Children's Services did not have an overspend. Each year there were increasing costs related to SEN, additional needs and care costs and it was a constant battle to ensure that appropriate levels of support were provided internally by the Council to maintain the services required. This was an opportunity to influence this nationally and also to manage the costs of services that we commission.

Members fully supported the involvement with the submission on behalf of the 12 Local Authorities in the North East and it was stated that the focus should be on providing the appropriate levels of care and to ensure that the young people should not be treated as an asset for profit.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

35 **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT 2021/22**

The Scrutiny Officer advised that there were two additions to the January meeting and he would circulate an updated work programme which would include the changes to the membership of the Committee.

It was confirmed that a report on safeguarding on School Transport, as requested by Councillor Ball, would be brought to a future meeting.

The Chair advised that he would meet with Councillor Dodd and the Scrutiny Officer to discuss themed scrutiny.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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