

## **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, 21 April 2022 at 9.00 am.

#### **PRESENT**

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

#### **COUNCILLORS**

C Ball  
R Dodd  
M Swinburn  
A Watson

A Dale  
L Dunn  
T Thorne

#### **CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES**

D Lennox

#### **OFFICERS**

C Angus  
S Aviston  
A Hartwell  
  
A Kingham  
L Little  
C McEvoy-Carr  
  
G Reiter

Scrutiny Officer  
Head of School Organisation and Resources  
Senior Manager - Performance and Systems  
Support  
Senior Service Director  
Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Executive Director of Adults and Children's  
Services  
Service Director - Children's Social Care

#### **88 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies had been received from Councillors S Fairless-Aitken, G Renner-Thompson, A Hodgson, L Houghton, P Rickeard and J Sanderson.

#### **89 MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 3 March 2022, as circulated, be agreed as a true record and be signed by the Chair.

#### **90 THE OUTLINE BUSINESS CASE FOR THE REPLACEMENT SCHOOL BUILDINGS FOR ASTLEY HIGH AND WHYTRIG MIDDLE SCHOOLS**

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The report, which was presented to this Committee for pre-scrutiny was requesting Cabinet approval of the Outline Business Case to provide new school buildings for Astley High and Whytrig Middle Schools. An outline capital allocation for investment in education had already been made within the Council's medium term capital programme. The outline business case was seeking to confirm the estimate of capital required for the proposed scheme. A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources.

In response to assurances sought by the Committee, Members were advised that the sporting facilities, which included a new swimming pool, on the preferred Option 6 provided additional community benefit in that they would be available for weekend community and sporting groups use. The proposed car parking provision would be a considerable increase in that currently provided, providing both some on-site provision and off-site drop off, staff and 6<sup>th</sup> form provision which would be available for public use outside of school hours. The development would be the first net zero school to be provided in the County making use of new and innovative technology ensuring savings on the running costs of the schools. A desktop study had indicated that there was nothing of archaeological interest on the proposed site and environmental checks had also been undertaken.

It was confirmed that a right of access would be maintained over the existing 8m wide access which would be used to bring in services for the building and the widening of this access could continue to be pursued. Inflation costs had been built into the expected outturn budget of just over £37m for option 6, however the £40m allocated in the Council's medium term capital plan would remain. An inconsistency in the scoring matrix was highlighted and this would be clarified with the independent surveyor who had undertaken scoring.

It was confirmed that a number of schools sites within the County were leased with the Council having a longstanding relationship with the Hastings Estate. The lease for the land would be for 125 years which would be in excess of the lifetime of the building. The detailed design would take into account the Traffic Impact Assessment and as the majority of students who would attend the school would be from catchment, the problems encountered in Ponteland due to pupils travelling from Newcastle, would not be repeated. Whilst it would be the schools responsibility to provide a School Travel Plan, it would be requested that Local Councillors be involved in its development.

In response to a question regarding the social value in regard to the use of local contractors and provision of apprenticeships, it was clarified that there had been a lot of activity of this nature during the construction of the new high school at Ponteland with some students who had been involved on site going on to careers or training in these areas and it was expected this would be replicated.

Members welcomed the report and progress being made and in conjunction with C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director, thanked S Aviston and her Team for the work undertaken on this project.

**RESOLVED** that Cabinet be advised that this Committee unanimously supported

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the recommendations as outlined in the report.

## 91 **THE ROLE OF DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES - TEST OF ASSURANCE**

Statutory guidance on the role of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) required the Council to carry out a "test of assurance" when the responsibilities of the DCS change. Given the forthcoming departure of the current DCS, Cath McEvoy-Carr, who currently also had responsibility for Adult Services and was the Deputy Chief Executive, the Committee were advised of the interim arrangements which were to be put in place. An introduction to the report was provided by A Hartwell, Senior Manager, Performance and Systems Support.

Members were informed that the duties of the DCS would be shared between two current Service Directors in Children's Services, Audrey Kingham, Senior Service Director and G Reiter, Service Director for Children's Social Care who would be supported by two experienced and knowledgeable senior management teams in order to provide continuity and stability. As there must be one nominated DCS for statutory purposes this would be G Reiter.

In response to questions from Members, and a statement that it would have been of benefit for the Cabinet Member to be in attendance to respond to the questions and concerns the Committee had regarding the interim nature of the appointments, the following information was noted:-

- The interim arrangements had political support and discussions had been undertaken with both the Leader and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and had also been approved by the Staffing Appointments Committee.
- The interim arrangements were being put in place as discussions were ongoing on the Senior Management Structure of the Council and therefore the role of DCS could not be advertised at the current time.
- Joint meetings would continue to be held between A Kingham, G Reiter and N Bradley who was to take over responsibility for Adult Services.
- A Kingham and G Reiter were very strong leaders and worked well together, however for statutory purposes and following advice from the National Association of Directors of Children's Services, G Reiter would be the nominated DCS.

Members paid tribute to Mrs McEvoy-Carr and the work she had undertaken during her time with the Council, highlighting the transformation in the relationship and dealings with the family court and impact this had on vulnerable children in the County. It was stated that it was due to the large amount of work undertaken by Mrs McEvoy-Carr, Daljit Lally, Chief Executive and the Administration that Children's Services in the County had improved and were now rated as Good by Ofsted. Members advised that she would be a massive loss to the Authority and offered their very best wishes for her continued success and in her new role with Newcastle City Council.

**RESOLVED** that whilst the Committee had concerns regarding the interim nature

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of the appointments advising of the need for a Senior Management Structure to be agreed as soon as possible, the contents of the report were noted.

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

The work programme had been circulated for information and any issues which Members wished to bring to the Committee should be raised with the Chair or the Scrutiny Officer in the first instance.

It was suggested that a document could be provided giving a framework of how education was being provided in all schools across the County, including information on how individual Trusts worked. Information was also requested on the maintenance programme backlog in light of the lack of government funding for new schools with capital investment for these having to be provided by the Council and the impact this would have for many years on Council Tax payers.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**CHAIR.....**

**DATE.....**

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