

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 Council Chamber - County Hall on Thursday, 6 October 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
R Dodd
S Fairless-Aitken
M Swinburn
A Watson

A Dale
C Dunbar
M Richardson
T Thorne

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson
P Rickeard

D Lennox

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

L Houghton

J Sanderson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
L Bryden
N Dorward

A Kingham
L Little
D Street
G Younger

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Senior Manager - Commissioning
Senior Manager - Education Development & Collaborative Projects
Joint Interim Director of Children's Services
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Deputy Director of Education
Accommodation Lead

ALSO PRESENT

K Cowell

G Renner-Thompson

Around 1 member of the press and public was present.

34 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

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Apologies had been received from G Reiter.

35 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 8 September 2022, as circulated, be agreed as a true record and be signed by the Chair.

36 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

P Rickeard advised that he was the Director of Education for the Diocese which had 5 schools within the Berwick Partnership.

37 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

38 **REGIONAL SCHOOLS DIRECTOR OVERVIEW**

Katherine Cowell, Regional Director North East, was in attendance to provide a presentation on the purpose and responsibilities of the Regional Director and Regions Group which now brought together improvement and intervention work in Children's Social Care, SEND and schools and was accountable to the Secretary of State. She advised that the Regions Group had been established in July 2022 as the final stage of the structural changes to the Department for Education and that had been when her role had changed from Regional Schools Commissioner.

The actions and interventions which could be taken in the case of inadequate schools or Academy Trusts were outlined. Close working with local authorities was also undertaken in respect of school places and sufficiency. The Schools White Paper set an ambitious goal of all schools to either be in, have plans to join or form a strong multi-academy trust (MAT) by 2030. Information was also provided on Education Investment Areas whereby 55 local authority areas had been identified in the Levelling Up White Paper with the implementation of a package of measures to drive school improvement and pupil outcomes.

In response to a question raised on failing academies, Members were advised that there were a range of different ways in which academies could be supported and it was the view that academies performed better in a strong MAT. In respect of replicating the success of the London Challenge it was confirmed that there had been some good results in the North East as part of the Education Challenge.

The Regional Director advised that her role did not have direct links with teaching staff as she worked closely with local authorities and at Trust level but did recognise the additional expectations which were being put on teachers. However

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strong trusts also focussed on workforce wellbeing and had strong emphasis on student inclusion and destinations and it was not about size. The good relationships between the Regional Group, local authorities and the two dioceses working for the benefit of all children in the region was highlighted.

The Chair and Members thanked the Regional Director for her attendance, advising that she would be welcome to attend future meetings.

39 **CABINET REPORT - OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION ON BERWICK CONSULTATION**

The Cabinet report set out the feedback received from stakeholders arising from Phase 1 of informal consultation with stakeholders in the Berwick Partnership area and other relevant parties on whether any models of organisation that may be brought forward with specific proposals for schools (Phase 2) should consist of only 3-tier models of organisation or include 3-tier and 2-tier (primary/secondary) models of organisation. As a result of the feedback, Cabinet was being recommended to approve Phase 2 consultation on specific proposals for individual schools in the partnership within both a 3-tier and 2-tier (primary/secondary) structure, including some school closures. This would consist of a 15 week (school weeks) consultation beginning on 31 October 2022.

A comprehensive introduction to the Cabinet report was provided by Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources who advised that this was a good example of partnership working and whilst account would be taken of the responses received, this would not be the only determining factor in making any decision and suggestions made at this stage would be subject to change following the next consultation.

In response to a request to include GCSE results for Berwick Academy in the next report if it was agreed to proceed to the next stage, it was confirmed that whilst this information could be included, this data would not be validated until January 2023 and should not be compared to previous data due to the impact of Covid. It was commented that staff in schools had been disappointed to read of possible school closures in the report and had not been advised of this prior to its publication. S Aviston advised that this was disappointing as they had been working with the Headteachers over the past twelve months and the possibility of the closure of schools had been made clear. All Headteachers had received a telephone call from a senior manager on the detail of the report and a link sent to the report on the Council's website as soon as it had been published. Reassurance was provided that all staff would have the opportunity to express their views fully and work would be undertaken, as usual on the possible redeployment of any affected staff should this be needed.

Mr Hodgson apologised that no response had been received from the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and advised that they were in support of a 2-tier option. He highlighted that due to the long distance to the secondary Catholic School, which was in Bedlington, a high proportion of children opted to stay within the Berwick Partnership.

It was clarified that mapping systems giving details of schools and catchment

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areas was available on the website and these had been provided as part of the consultation documentation and would also be made available at consultation events. At the current time approximately 200 children left the partnership to be educated and it was essential to gain local community support to ensure that the high school remained viable and the development model was sustainable. If it progressed to the next stage, the importance of increasing engagement was highlighted with officers confirming that the options outlined were a starting point and a lot of engagement work was still to be undertaken allowing ideas to come forward and options evolve.

Members particularly welcomed the proposals in relation to the development of SEND provision.

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

40 **CABINET REPORT - SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION AND LODGINGS FOR CARE LEAVERS AND YOUNG HOMELESS - PERMISSION TO TENDER**

The report sought permission from Cabinet to go to the market to commission a range of services to provide supported accommodation and lodgings for Northumberland care leavers and young homeless which would assist the Council in meeting its statutory duties. An introduction to the report was provided by L Bryden, Senior Manager, Commissioning and G Younger, Accommodation Lead.

Members were advised that since the current framework had come into place there had been 156 young people placed across a whole range of services. Since April 2022 there had been 55 placements. The service was seeing a large increase in the number of young people requiring placements with a 116% increase in the numbers between 2020/21 to 2021/22 across a number of types of providers and this increase in demand would continue to rise as the Council was now part of the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied young asylum seekers.

The Chair suggested that as this report was only requesting permission from Cabinet to go to tender to create a dynamic purchasing system it would be useful to ask the officers to attend a future meeting to provide an account of the service and this would be scheduled into the programme.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee supported the recommendations outlined in the report and asked that a report be brought back to the Committee at a future date outlining the available services and anticipated placement numbers.

41 **THE NORTHUMBERLAND STRATEGIC INCLUSION PLAN 2022-2026**

The report provided the first Northumberland Strategic Inclusion Strategy which had been developed in response to the recommendations of the Exclusion Task and Finish Working Group and follows previous reports to this Committee on their findings and recommendations. An introduction to the report was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources who highlighted the work of the Task and Finish Working Group in securing resources for the appointment of

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additional team members to help address the previous high levels of exclusion.

In response to a question regarding the affordability of alternative provision, Members were advised that meetings of the Inclusion Group were to be held fortnightly where schools would be able to request extra support for a pupil or where assistance was required with the cost of transport to alternative provision.

More detail as to the reason why Ashington, Bedlington and Blyth had the majority of the exclusions would be provided. It was clarified that the majority of academies access the free support and guidance offered and whilst it was more challenging to get information from certain academies, the important issue was that they all knew that the support offer was available. The Committee was advised that there was currently a free school bid being developed for alternative provision which it was hoped would impact on the number of permanent exclusions.

C Angus would do a briefing note for Members on the detail of Appendix 2 which would be circulated and a further decision would be made on whether a more detailed report would be required.

Councillor Swinbank was thanked as the Chair of the Task and Finish Working Group for the work undertaken on this and he in turn thanked all those that had been involved in the Working Group and also the staff and schools who had worked to reduce the level of exclusions. He questioned if information on good practice was being shared and expressed disappointment that those pupils with SEND and EHCPs were being excluded

It was clarified that no exclusions had been the result of uniform infringements and the detail of exclusions would likely be included within the Annual Report. Members were also invited to visit the Pupil Referral Unit. In response to a question regarding early identification of dyslexia it was confirmed that early identification of any SEN was important and whilst a number of central teams focussed on early literacy there was not a particular strand specifically for dyslexia, but this would be picked up with officers.

RESOLVED that the Committee welcomed the report and noted the content and detailed strategy along with the impact that the work undertaken within Children's Services and Schools has had on the lives of Northumberland children.

42 **POST CABINET DECISION UPDATE: RDA RELOCATION FROM TRANWELL (PEGASUS CENTRE) TO KIRKLEY HALL CAMPUS (NORTHUMBERLAND COLLEGE)**

The report set out the progress made in preparing to deliver the capital project since approval being granted by Cabinet in March 2022 and was introduced by N Dorward, Senior Manager, Education Development & Collaborative Projects.

Members expressed their disappointment that the delay had resulted in children not being able to take part in riding lessons and stated that in future arrangements should be made in advance to ensure a smooth transition, which was what had been expected by this Committee.

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RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted.

43 **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT 2022/23**

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.

The date of the next meeting has been changed to 2.00 pm on 10 November 2022.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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