

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, 5 January 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
R Dodd
M Swinburn
A Watson

A Dale
S Fairless-Aitken
T Thorne

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
L Little
G Reiter
D Street

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Joint Interim Director of Children's Services
Deputy Director of Education

ALSO PRESENT

P Mead

NCASP Independent Safeguarding Scrutiny
and Assurance Chair

There was 1 member of the press and public present.

55 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors C Dunbar, M Richardson and G Renner-Thompson, L Houghton, D Lennox and P Rikeard.

56 MINUTES

(a) 10 November 2022

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RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Meeting held on Thursday 10 November 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and be signed by the Chair.

(b) 1 December 2022

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Meeting held on Thursday 1 December 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and be signed by the Chair.

57 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

58 **CABINET REPORT - NATIONAL FUNDING FORMULA & SCHOOL FUNDING 2023/24**

S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources, provided a comprehensive introduction to the Cabinet report which gave an update regarding the National Funding Formula (NFF) and the implications for 2023/24 School Funding in Northumberland. Members were reminded that the figures in the report were indicative and Cabinet were asked to approve the delegation of the approval of the final formula values to the Joint Interim Director of Children's Services in conjunction with the Lead Member for Children's Services and Deputy Leader once the final budget allocations had been released. The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) figures were released on 16 December 2022 and with £9m additional grant funding awarded to this authority, Northumberland would receive just over £298m which was £17.4m more for 2023/24 compared to 2022/23 which would assist schools to meet their inflationary needs.

In response to concerns regarding the movement of funding to the High Needs Block (HNB) and membership of the Schools' Forum, it was clarified that this transfer of funds had been done for the previous 4 years due to the increasing demand for special school places as a result of schools not being as inclusive, along with the increasing number of pupils with EHCPs. The movement of funding could not be undertaken without consultation and the percentage to be transferred had reduced from 1% in 2018/19 to this proposal for 0.25% for 2023/24. A lot of work was undertaken in the background to ensure that the Schools Forum understood the reason for the transfer and it was also highlighted that previously paid for Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for SEND services had been removed and these services were now given free of charge in order to allow more strategic support for all schools to be provided. Financial impacts on schools were often related to pupil numbers and information on individual financial settlements for schools could be provided to Members. It was confirmed that the HNB funding was still being spent on Northumberland children with a large proportion of it being spent within mainstream schools for SEND pupils, and whilst it would always be good to get more Government Funding, there had been an increase of £17.4m this year. The provision of additional SEND places within County would ensure that more money remained within Northumberland rather than paying for expensive out of County placements. Assurance was provided

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that the membership of the Schools' Forum reflected the make-up of the County's maintained schools, academies, early years and alternative provisions and as a group were very vociferous and diligent in their decision making. It was noted that whilst Schools Forum was the consultation body for school funding, it was Cabinet who made the final decision.

There were limitations on what the Council could do in relation to the funding of smaller rural schools with surplus places when funding was based on pupil numbers, however the Council did pay the maximum sparsity funding and once the budgets had been set Members could be given the figures for their local schools in order for them to have more detailed discussions if they so wished.

Members were advised that in terms of funding for education, whilst significant progress had been made from Northumberland's previous position of third worst funded authority to where they were now in the middle of the table, additional funding would always be needed. The Council was still part of the F40 Group which campaigned for fairer education funding to allow equal opportunities for children no matter where they lived. Information on the F40 Group and Northumberland's funding position and comparator could also be included in the report on final funding figures for the schools.

The Chair highlighted that whilst the lack of equitable funding for education within the County was still an issue, that Children's Services was not a failing service nor did Northumberland have failing schools. All staff involved either in schools, academies or the whole education team within the Council were doing an excellent job and would be able to do even better with additional funding.

RESOLVED that

1. Cabinet be advised that this Committee supported the recommendations as outlined in the report; and
2. A report be provided to this Committee giving details of the Council's education funding position and comparator information in relation to other Local Authorities and members of the F40 Group.

59 **UPDATE OF SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN 2021-24**

Cabinet had approved the publication of the second iteration of the School Organisation Plan for 2021-24 in September 2021. It had been agreed at that time that the plan be updated on an annual basis with the latest relevant school information and data and this Committee be authorised to recommend its publication. S Aviston provided an introduction to the report and plan advising that whilst it was not a statutory requirement for a local authority to publish a school organisation plan the Council chose to do so in order to assist schools, academies, parents the DfE and other partners to understand the complicated factors that impact school place planning within the County.

Members asked that this document be shared with all Councillors and highlighted that whilst the Council had no control over the expansion or reduction of pupil numbers within free schools or academies, that 97% of pupils were given their

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first choice of schools. Officers were asked to look at the recent Government announcement in respect changes to housing developers being required to provide funding for school places.

Concern was expressed regarding the high number of surplus places within the County especially within the Haydon Bridge and Berwick Partnerships and the inability to allow new housing in rural villages due to Green Belt policy. It was felt this was a blunt instrument in preventing development which would help to sustain rural schools by attracting a younger demographic into villages. The large number of properties being used as second homes was also a cause for concern in some villages. In relation to difficulties encountered by asylum seekers in the Ashington area, it was clarified that whilst academies were their own admission authorities, that as these were vulnerable young people, decisions on their placement were made at the Pupil Placement Panel in order to determine the most suitable school for each individual child and that decision was binding on all schools and academies. The concerns of the Ward Member would be looked at outside of this meeting.

RESOLVED that:

1. The updating of School Organisation Plan 2021-24 to reflect changes to data and circumstances since July 2021 be noted; and
2. The updated School Organisation Plan 2021-24 be circulated to all schools, academies, Ward Councillors and would be published on the Council's website.

60 **NORTHUMBERLAND CHILDREN AND ADULTS SAFEGUARDING PARTNERSHIP (NCASP) ANNUAL REPORT SEPTEMBER 2021 - AUGUST 2022**

The annual report set out Northumberland's multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA) for children and young people. The safeguarding partners were required to publish a yearly report setting out what they and relevant agencies had done as a result of the MASA. The purpose of the report was to ensure transparency for children, families and practitioners about the activity agencies had undertaken and how effective the arrangements had been in practice.

A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by P Mead, NCASP Independent Safeguarding Scrutiny and Assurance Chair. Members were advised that this was a transition year following a decision to join up the Children's and Adult Services Partnerships which would provide a better use of resources and align priorities and that the next report would be a joint report. Assurance was provided that this was being done in order to be able to work more effectively and was not about budget savings. In response to a question, she advised that her biggest concern was how children could be protected throughout the pandemic when there were no "eyes on them", stating that there was a need to ensure that processes and systems were in place to support parents and prevent the tragedies that had happened elsewhere in the Country.

Members were advised that a report at the next meeting would provide details of

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school attendance and the work being undertaken to get children and young people back into school following the pandemic and provide assurance of the good systems and oversight provided by the Virtual School Headteacher.

There were challenges nationally regarding mental health provision as there had been an increased demand for services due to the effects of isolation and social media use within a reducing workforce capacity to ensure that the most vulnerable were prioritised. Following partnership challenge, data from the Mental Health Trust provided some assurance that this was being done and that there was very good early help provision for both children, young people and parents within Northumberland.

Clarification would be sought from the ICB on whether GPs were providing face to face appointments for children following concerns that some were only being offered telephone appointments. There was a lot of training and systems in place to ensure the safeguarding of children in Northumberland with the work undertaken by the Midwifery Service highlighted.

Members questioned the HR implications section of the report and whether additional resources needed to be identified by the Council to pick up work currently being done by other organisations or the voluntary sector if these were to cease for any reason, to ensure early identification of safeguarding issues usually made by them continued. It was stated that this was a partnership report and there were limitations on what could be included in this report about arrangements for individual partners. However what this Partnership would do if a service was reduced or withdrawn was provide challenge to whoever was responsible, on what the impact would be and how this would be mitigated. Any staffing implications for the Council would be part of any future report should additional services be required to be provided.

Members thanked P Mead and the Partnership for their work and comprehensive report.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report and responses to comments from the Committee be noted.

61 **REVIEW OF SEND PROVISION IN NORTHUMBERLAND: SCOPING REPORT**

In November 2022, this Committee recommended creating a task and finish group to examine the continued increase of children and young people requiring an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP). The scoping report requested this Committee to agree the terms of reference/scope of review along with the membership and timeline for the task and finish group.

It was clarified that this report provided an outline of the way in which the task and finish group would work however members would be able to request the attendance/input from other officers and organisations as thought relevant to the review.

RESOLVED that:

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1. The terms of reference and scope of the review be agreed;
2. The membership be agreed as:

Councillor R Dodd (Chair)
 Councillor C Ball
 Councillor A Dale
 Councillor M Swinbank
 Mr J Sanderson (Co-opted Member)

3. The timetable for the review to be completed be agreed by the members; and
4. The findings of the review be reported to Family and Children’s Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

62 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 Scrutiny Officer advised that it was hoped that the School Transport report would be brought to the Committee in March.

Members requested that the 12 month update report in respect of Atkinson House which Cabinet had requested be brought to this Committee prior to Cabinet and that an information report also be provided on the progress of the movement of the Riding for the Disabled from the Pegasus Centre to Kirkley Hall College.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

63 URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair and Members of the Committee offered their congratulations to Susan Ghulam, Home Manager at Barndale House short break unit for receiving a well-deserved MBE in the King’s New Year’s Honours List and thanked her for her excellent work and commitment to Barndale.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.’s Initials.....