

## 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, 2 November 2023 at 10.00 am

#### PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

#### COUNCILLORS

C Ball  
C Seymour  
A Watson

E Chicken  
M Swinburn

#### CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

D Lennox

P Rickeard

#### OFFICERS

C Angus  
D Chambers  
A Kingham

L Little  
G Reiter

Scrutiny Officer  
Head of Quality Assurance  
Executive Director - Children, Young People  
and Education  
Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Director of Children, Young People and  
Families

#### 18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Scott, Thorne, Waddell and Renner-Thompson along with Mr A Hodgson and Mrs L Houghton.

#### 19 MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 7 September 2023, as circulated, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a true record.

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## CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE: QUALITY OF PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

The report provided information on the framework that was used to provide reassurance about how the practice in Northumberland's Social Care was evaluated. The framework outlined the numerous mechanisms that were used to explore the quality of practice and identify learning and continuous improvement. The document highlighted the quantitative and qualitative methods that were adopted in Northumberland, striving for better outcomes for children and young people through early help and statutory functions. A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by D. Chambers, Head of Quality Assurance with the aid of a power point presentation. In response to questions from Members the following information was provided:-

- Minor changes had been made during the first review of the document, which was about the wider practice rather than just looking at key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs were looked at alongside the quality of work to understand the impact of decisions on a child or family and understand trends and what, as a learning organisation, we could do better. The model operated within Northumberland was held in high regard and had been developed over time.
- Whilst the Head of Quality Assurance was part of the organisation, the role was unique, sitting away from teams and therefore allowing an objective view to be undertaken.
- Information regarding the numbers of compliments or complaints would be provided as part of the report expected at the next meeting, however there was regular work undertaken with client relations to gain feedback and work was ongoing on ways to increase feedback from families to increase the quality of learning.
- Signs of Safety had been chosen as the practice model to be adopted as this was a recognised framework which had been used for a number of years. Northumberland was committed to ensuring an effective framework was in place across all services with key elements embedded and this process would continue to evolve. The consistency of practice across the service as a whole was key.

**RESOLVED** that the way in which the Council assured itself that they were improving the lives and safeguarding children and young people was recognised by the Committee.

## CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE ANNUAL SELF-ASSESSMENT

The report shared the content and findings of the children's social care annual self-assessment. The self-assessment supported an evaluation of the progress and current practice in children's social care and identified future actions to support the continuous improvement that was required in order to strive to achieve the vision of being a service where meeting the needs of children, young people and families was the focus so that they were able to get the best out of life.

A comprehensive introduction was provided to the report by G Reiter, Director of Children, Young People and Families, with the aid of a power point presentation.

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A copy of the presentation would be filed with the signed minutes and uploaded to Council's website. Members were informed that the report was something required by Ofsted and it would be a key document for their next visit, which was due at any time, however it was also used as a tool to look at what range of actions were needed to be carried out to continue to support and look after children and young people within Northumberland.

During discussions and in response to questions from Members of the Committee, the following information was noted:-

- Attendance at schools was still not back to pre-pandemic levels and conversations around this were ongoing with the DfE. Officers were aware of the schools where the challenges were to bring attendance back up, however there were none with specific spikes. In relation to school avoidance work would be undertaken with the wider social worker team, family hubs and school inclusion team. There had been some good successes in certain areas and it was hoped that this could be replicated in the rest of the County, however it was taking time to get to pre-pandemic levels.
- In regard to the attendance drop and the main factors for this and how the local authority could assist, it was suggested that a further report be brought to the Committee. There were various reasons for non-attendance including health/anxiety issues, children and young people not wanting to come into busy school classrooms and difficulties parents were having in persuading their child to attend. Members highlighted that poverty might also be a factor in non-attendance and stressed that the reasons needed to be understood. There was pilot work being undertaken in Northumberland in relation to Mental Health Trailblazer, however there were many very individual circumstances.
- It was clarified that this report was for last year and things had moved on since then. There was no attendance hub identified within Northumberland, but there were some areas of good practice and officers were working with some Head Teachers to identify what they were doing right and how this could be replicated, however it was highlighted that the demographics were very different across the County and this also needed to be taken into consideration. A great deal of work had been undertaken with Social Workers so that they understood the importance of attendance and relationship and inclusion summits between social care and education officers had taken place.
- The percentages of children with less than 50% or 60% attendance were known so officers would ensure that this data was also provided in the report and look at the wider services and how these were used.
- It had been stated that DfE did not fund attendance hubs and funding for these were provided by schools, and in response to a question if this was something that the Council could do, the Chair advised that he would look into this.
- It was confirmed that A Kingham and G Reiter had been to the Conservative Group meeting the previous day and would be attending other political Group meetings shortly with questionnaires for Members in relation to their skills and how these could be used for the benefit of young people and for Members to understand their corporate parenting responsibilities. A suggestion was made that there should be a standing

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item on this Committee's agenda on the risk register so that Members were updated regularly on any potential issues whether it be around poverty, staff shortages etc.

- There were a number of different routes for young people aged 16-18 into health and social care such as apprenticeships along with the very good offer from Northumberland Skills and also Northumberland College. The funding and the training opportunities were there, it was how young people could be encouraged into that sector. The need to understand and appreciate how it was a sustainable, worthwhile career and the difference they could make to the lives of children or family long term was huge. G Reiter was leading with this regionally, however he was also involved nationally on this. Locally we needed to help students from year 7 onwards to realise that it was a career route for them, and officers would welcome ideas on how this could be achieved.
- The Chair advised that prior to the meeting a discussion had been held on the format of reports which came to this Committee which as statutory reports contained historical data, however live data was available and the potential for data dashboards to be presented would be explored. In relation to attendance he would discuss with the A Kingham the possibility of convening a special meeting for this topic specifically.
- The agreement for ICB funding had been in place for four years with no change to the level of funding across that time and there was a good relationship with the local place contact person around that. However officers were aware that there would need to be a regional view from the ICB in relation to consistent funding across the region.
- Officers had lobbied for funding for apprenticeships and for the first time there were five new starters to the Academy who had come through this route. However more national support was required in order to continue to increase these numbers. There had been very good attendance at a recent open day for the recruitment of residential staff with a wide demographic of people who were interested in a variety of roles. Ways of engaging people were always being looked at. In relation to funding streams there were many different streams however some of these were time limited and funding needed to be managed well. Innovative ways of maximising opportunities from funding were always being looked at.
- In relation to changing the perception of health and social work as only being for those girls not going down the academic route, A Kingham advised that she was very passionate about changing these type of outdated influences which were not only in relation to health and social care. Innovation work and connections had been made between industry and education and more work would continue on this. National occupational standards for health and social care balanced the opportunity agenda at GSCE, BTEch and A level and careers guidance provided within Schools. North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) advisers were also used well.
- With the creation of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA) this would provide funding opportunities above and beyond what was already being provided through NTCA. In education in particular there had been a great deal of opportunities taken around such issues poverty, leadership, inclusion and some good work being undertaken. Work was now ongoing on shaping what NEMCA would become and build upon what already existed within the constituent local authorities. The additional

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funding would be used to enhance and build better opportunities and narrow gaps and a joined up approach to help children grow up well. The Chair advised that he currently sat on the NTCA Inclusive Growth Board and he would arrange for the reports on inequalities and supporting at an early stage to be shared with Members of the Committee.

- It was highlighted that the reduction in the use of agency staff and the comparison with the national levels should be celebrated with the result that funding remained within the local authority.
- In response to comments made on the importance of the Council having their own youth workers who worked in partnership with others and the need to find funding for youth services and youth clubs, Officers advised that the model developed would work well going forward and the importance of youth provision and clubs was recognised. However, it was thought that the best way of supporting these, both financially and otherwise was not through the Council but with partnership working. There had been a mapping of provision across the County through the Family Hubs with young people support workers now based in the Hubs so that the context of how young people could be supported was understood with the support workers able to make connections with both partner organisations and the young people and families themselves. There were more funding opportunities though partnership working and the vast majority of provision had been maintained. It was important that a joined up strategic approach was used and Family Hubs allowed this.
- In response to queries regarding the youth service provision and lack of consultation with organisations in the Blyth area, it was noted that this would be discussed outside of the meeting. The Chair advised that there was a lot of support organisations that were doing amazing jobs and advised that he had requested that an All Member Briefing be held on this in order that Members were able to see the bigger picture. Work was ongoing across the whole sector to further develop networks and see what mutual support could be offered.
- It was commented that Local Area Councils should be used to disseminate information on topics which it was felt that both Members and the public would have an interest. In relation to the significant changes which had been brought about by Covid, it was stated that this authority had been well placed to be able to react quickly and this should be recognised. The Authority had benefitted significantly from the creation of the Academy and other areas where this type of provision could be replicated were being explored.
- More use of satellite units linked to existing children's homes would be explored as this type of provision was able to be provided in a timelier manner than the provision of a completely new home allowing increased capacity for the care of children within the County.

#### **RESOLVED that**

1. The areas of good practice in safeguarding and supporting children young people and their families be recognised; and
2. Areas for additional scrutiny and challenge had been identified and clarification provided.

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22 **REPORTS OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER**

The Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions that had already been taken and future items was circulated for information along with the work programme for this Committee. Members were advised that an additional meeting would be held on 7 December 2023 and that there was to be a joint meeting with Health and Wellbeing OSC on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> January.

Reports on attendance and the risk register would be added to the work programme.

**CHAIR**.....

**DATE**.....

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