

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, 7 December 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
A Scott
M Swinburn

E Chicken
C Seymour
A Watson

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson
P Rickeard

D Lennox

OFFICERS

C Angus
L Little
D Street

Scrutiny Officer
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Director of Education, SEND and Skills

ALSO PRESENT

G Renner-Thompson

Cabinet Member

There was one member of the press and public present.

23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Fairless-Aitken, Thorne and Waddell.

24 MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 2 November 2023, as circulated, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a true record.

Ch.'s Initials.....

A comprehensive introduction to the Annual Report 2022-23 which highlighted actions and progress against the six key priorities for Education, SEND and Skills 22-24 was provided by D Street, Director of Education, SEND and Skills. Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Inspiring Young People advised that it he was proud of the report, and it had been a privilege to present it at Cabinet and to work with the Officers involved in its production. The report linked to the Corporate Plan helping to address inequalities and driving economic growth by getting more people into well paid employment by improving education and skills.

Members welcomed the excellent report and the following information was provided in response to questions:-

- There was a shared desire and need to support the welfare of all staff within schools with guidance produced on this following thoughts and suggested solutions being shared by the staff themselves. Headteachers were encouraged to set good examples of work/life balance. Paperwork had been changed, but this had been done in order to reduce the workload for staff and Members were asked to report to Officers any instances where they thought that this had not been the case.
- Early Years education had always had successful and strong relationships between the Local Authority, schools and private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings. The amount of funding for each pupil in an age group was the same no matter what the setting with recommendations being made to Cabinet by the Schools' Forum on this. Whilst independent childminders did not have the back up support of nationally based PVIs, they did an excellent job and received direct support from the Early Years Team in relation to their quality, business and financial management. Childminders generally had strong relationships with schools, as often children attended different settings i.e. school am and childminder pm.
- In relation to SEN provision in the private sector, the use of private provision had been reduced in terms of those leaving the area to go to an out-of-county placement, with additional places being developed in Special Schools in the County to reduce travel time for pupils. However there were examples of excellent private provision and these would continue to be used if appropriate.
- The Skills and Employability Service had strong successes in providing employability skills and there had been hundreds of residents of all ages who had returned to full and long term employment. Details of these figures would be shared to Members.
- Government in an attempt to make childcare more sustainable and affordable had increased the ratio of two year olds from four to one to five to one, but the general feedback from Northumberland provision had been that the majority of providers had not increased their ratios. It was noted that the rates for children for the forthcoming years would increase.
- Campaigns were being launched to seek more staff and in relation to the education sector and it was clarified that an element of this was around the opportunity for careers encouraging people to bring in skills and stay in the that sector with an appropriate rate of pay, work/life balance and welfare at work and was not around short term employment opportunities.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- In respect of alternative provision following the closure of some PVIs it was confirmed that the needs of a high proportion of those affected had been met, however this would sometimes impact on families. There had been some disruption, but the majority had found alternative provision within four weeks.
- The need to recruit across the Early Years sector was known and there were currently 55 people engaged in the Early Years Development Programme with job opportunities available in this sector once they had qualified. It was recognised that the new level of entitlement for two year olds would be a challenge for the sector.
- In relation to falling school rolls and the effect of this on finances, Members were advised that whilst this was challenging, schools of all shapes and sizes did manage to deliver a good education and balance their budgets. This might be achieved by creating federations or working in partnership with other schools to pool resources. The 5% increase in pension payments was highlighted as a further potential problem for schools.
- In relation to the income to the Council in respect the academisation of schools, it was thought that these costs were to cover the legal expenses of the Council in relation to the process with schools receiving additional funding specifically for the academisation process and this was not taken from the normal school budget.
- The growth in the number of temporary and permanent exclusions, higher demand for alternative provision and the increase in pupils who struggled to access the traditional school model and growth in the SEND numbers were the metrics that gave rise to the statement that more young people were struggling with education. The management and growth of SEND, including those without a EHCP was a key priority for the Council with teachers being given the skills and knowledge to identify pupils who needed additional support with the resources provided to assist with this. The SEND Place Planning Strategy provided more detailed information on figures geographically and could be shared with the Committee. The figures in relation to the growth in temporary and permanent exclusions was worrying and it might be that additional work be undertaken by the Committee on this.
- The gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners in all key stages had not closed and if this gap could be closed then this Local Authority would be among the highest achieving in the Country.
- It was clarified that there were many large employers within Northumberland with whom the Council worked closely in order to provide apprenticeships and provide pupils with the skills which were required in order to gain well paid employment within these industries. Good schools were also an important factor in attracting workers to come from other areas of the Country and indeed other Countries to work within these organisations.
- The balances of all maintained schools were discussed at a monthly internal finance meetings and any school which was found to be struggling with finances now or was thought they might be within the next three years received an in person visit with discussions held with both the Headteacher and Governors on the problems being encountered. Support could be provided in various ways including how they could increase income and very close monitoring undertaken. Whilst very challenging, it was clarified that there were schools within Northumberland who were expected to be able to balance their accounts without using any carry forward and this information would be forwarded to P. Rickeard.

Ch.'s Initials.....

- In respect of an inclusive education for pupils with SEND and the possible use of non-skilled staff to support children it was stated that the Local Authority continued to develop its training programme for staff. There were some very skilled and experienced people across Northumberland who could be seconded to provide specific support to a school if required.
- In respect of the transfer of pupils with SEND between First and Middle schools it was acknowledged that both schools were required to be aware of the needs of individual pupils and work should start on these three to four years before a phased change was undertaken to ensure that both the pupil and school were prepared. Good examples of this had been seen in the Berwick partnership with work undertaken to provide advice and training with the likely timescale of support needed going forward identified.
- Low attendance figures and exclusions along with the reasons for these were monitored in all schools and any school, whether it be a Local Authority maintained or an Academy would be challenged on figures out of the norm. The Education Welfare Service monitored individual pupils where there was an identified issue and would discuss plans to re-engage pupils with schools in ways to prevent any anxiety triggers and in some instances provide a different curriculum or a non-classroom based education.

The Chair thanked all the staff within the Council, the schools themselves and support organisations for their work in support the children and young people of Northumberland.

RESOLVED that the Committee had received and reviewed the annual report recognising the performance and challenges; recognised the education achievements of children, young people and residents in 2022/23; and acknowledged the valuable support provided to all learners with all settings.

26 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 there was to be a joint meeting with Health and Wellbeing OSC on Tuesday 9th January 2024 to consider the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Adults and Children’s Safeguarding Board Annual Report. Following this the next meeting was scheduled for 7 March 2024.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.’s Initials.....