

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, 3 February 2022 at 9.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
R Dodd
L Dunn
T Thorne

A Dale
C Dunbar
M Swinburn
A Watson

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

D Lennox

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

J Sanderson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
A Hartwell

A Kingham
L Little
G Reiter
L Spaven
D Street
J Walker

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Senior Manager, Specialist Services
Deputy Director of Education
Head of Virtual School

ALSO PRESENT

P Mead

Cabinet Member

53 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Carr and Renner-Thompson, A Hodgson and P Rickeard.

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54 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 6 January 2022, as circulated, were agreed as a true record and were signed by the Chair.

55 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

J Sanderson advised that he had a personal not prejudicial interest in agenda item 7 as he was an employee at Kyo House where they used restraint.

56 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

The Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions for February to May 2022 had been shared with Members for information.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

57 **VIRTUAL SCHOOL HEADTEACHER'S ANNUAL REPORT 2021**

J. Walker, Head of Virtual School provided a detailed introduction to the report outlining the issues which had impacted on the learning of pupils and the interventions put in place to address these challenges. The headlines for 2021 were highlighted including the number of looked after children who had progressed into further education, the improving achievements at KS4 and there being no permanent exclusions for the 13th consecutive year. It remained a priority to reduce the number of fixed term exclusions, mid-year school moves and rates of persistent absence from school.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee, the following information was provided:-

- Whilst some looked after children who progressed into further education did level 3 qualifications, the vast majority undertook vocational qualifications or a mixture of vocational and academic qualifications.
- All pupils in years 11 and year 6 had been offered 1 to 1 tuition with approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of the cohort taking up the offer, ideally everyone would, but it was up to the pupil and school as to whether they wished to do so.
- Continuous work was undertaken with schools and a child to prevent exclusions and to come up with strategies for each individual child, however it was difficult to quantify the level of exclusions this had prevented.
- A huge breadth of work was undertaken in bringing the levels of persistent absence down for looked after children.
- Any children who left care this year had been included in the figures in this report and whilst they might no longer have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) in place, the schools retained the Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding for the remainder of the year and the service still continued to work with the schools and pupils until the

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natural conclusion. At present children who had left care were not monitored after that school year, however from September 2022, the Virtual School Head would have a duty to promote the education of any child with a social worker and work was underway to take this forward.

- It was often the most inclusive schools who the service worked with most around exclusions. During the pandemic there had been issues with the way schools had to operate and restrictions put in place with which some children had found it difficult to cope and most exclusions were behaviour related.
- The priorities for the improvement in the service were identified in the Improvement Plan and the service had governance through the Multi Agency Local After Partnership (MALAP) who were the governing body for the virtual school and who in turn reported to the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group who held the service to account throughout the year. A report could be brought back at any time to this Committee on how progress was being made.
- The virtual school were very good at getting young people into further education, training and employment with only 3 young people NEET in September, however the challenge was in keeping the young people on a 2 year A level course as day to contact was lost with the young person and they encountered different challenges. There were 2 Careers Guidance Officers who worked with NAS to support the young people in their post 16 pathway plans and to monitor them through their Social Workers to see if they required support. This work was undertaken with other partners through the E Clinic to track those who were felt to be at risk in dropping out of Education, Employment or Training (EET), and some improvement in the level of young people in EET would like to be achieved.
- It had been the ambition for a number of years for all schools and all staff within the schools to understand the needs of looked after children, the majority of whom have experienced neglect, have attachment issues and all have experienced trauma in their lives. This was being undertaken through the THRIVE Attachment Programme which was offered free from the virtual school through PP+ which was very popular and was having an impact. Going forward criteria for schools was being developed to target all children who need help, not just looked after children.

Members welcomed and commended the report and it was requested that if possible all Members of Council be provided with a copy as they all had a corporate responsibility for looked after children in Northumberland. The work undertaken by the Team in having a positive effect on the lives and futures of these children was recognised with the Committee thanking all involved.

Officers appreciated the positive comments received advising that the virtual school was a real strength for the Council working across all services to help provide stability for looked after children. The Virtual School was also continuing to develop opportunities for care leavers across all Directorates within the Council to continue their education and training, with corporate parenting a key priority for the Council. Part of the strategy was also to work with private industry and a lot

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of work had been undertaken already in respect of this which would be outlined in the Annual Learning and Skills Report on the agenda and in the Annual Report from the Director of Education at the next meeting.

RESOLVED that the education achievements of looked after children and the ongoing challenges caused by the disruption to education during the pandemic be noted.

58 **SCHOOL ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS FOR COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY CONTROLLED SCHOOLS FOR THE 2023/2024 ACADEMIC YEAR**

S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources provided an introduction to the Cabinet report which advised of the outcomes of the consultation on School Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for the 2023/24 Academic Year as required by the School Admissions Code 2021.

Members were advised that only two responses had been received within the consultation period from the governing bodies of Pegswood Primary and Seaton Delaval First School stating that they supported the proposals to reduce the Planned Admission Number (PAN) at their respective schools. These reductions were as a result of parents choosing alternative schools for their children after expansion of the schools following an expected increase in pupil numbers.

Following a question in relation to Academies, it was clarified that Academies were their own admission authorities and whilst some used the Council's admission policy others made their own arrangements. The Local Authority were consulted on these alternative policies and did try to influence where possible, but acknowledged these anomalies did cause some turbulence in the system and the Local Authority continued to work with Academies to ensure that policies met the needs of their local communities.

The School Organisation Plan set out how numbers were monitored and predicted from new house building and birth rate and where places needed to be expanded due to bulges in numbers and the need for increased capacity in schools. This was monitored on a six monthly basis and funding was also set out in the School Organisation Plan with a policy now in place for S106 funding from new house building.

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

59 **NORTHUMBERLAND STRATEGIC SAFEGUARDING PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21: SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN IN NORTHUMBERLAND**

P Mead, Independent Chair and Scrutineer of the Northumberland Strategic Safeguarding Partnership (NSSP) provided a comprehensive introduction to the report, advising of the details which must be included in the annual report and stating that a young peoples and children's version had also been produced.

In respect of a concern in relation to the correlation of the high and increasing

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levels of poverty within the South East area of the County and rising number of child protection interventions Members were advised that information provided as part of the performance reports produced for the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group gave details of home addresses of the children who became looked after. As part of the current independent national review being undertaken in respect of children's social care the North East Directors of Children's Services had responded advising of the impact of poverty on families trying to access services and the tensions and pressures that brought. There was a range of early help available and preventative services were targeted in areas of increased deprivation. There was very specific legal criteria which must be met for children to become looked after in relation to safeguarding and risk of harm and these were assessed individually. It was stressed that whilst poverty did impact on parents' ability to look after a child, children who experienced neglect came from all areas and were not just restricted to socially deprived areas and similarly children from such areas also experienced happy and safe childhoods. It was thought that the increase in engagement in the West locality was possibly due to the virtual delivery making it more accessible for those in more remote areas. Reference was made to the Marmot Report of 2010 and the subsequent Marmot Review – 10 years on published in 2020 as suggested reading material for Members of the Committee.

It was felt that the increasing pressures families were under due to the pandemic and poverty had led to the increasing number of children being referred due to neglect in the North East. The importance of raising the public knowledge of safeguarding and the duty placed on everyone for the safety of children was highlighted with information provided on how to identify signs of abuse etc. Information would be requested to be provided on the number of children who have accessed the virtual youth clubs, if they were able to provide 1 to 1 contact and how they were publicised.

Members welcomed the report and thanked P Mead for her report and attendance at the meeting.

RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted.

60 **ANNUAL REPORT FOR LEARNING AND SKILLS SERVICE 2020/21**

A Kingham, Service Director, Education and Skills provided an introduction to the comprehensive annual report which highlighted the performance during the academic year 2020/21. The report also presented the work of the Careers Guidance Team and provided an understanding of the role and impact of the Employability and Skills team within the wider service.

The importance of ensuring that every person was able to identify their skills, access the right programme of learning for them and progress into employment that they enjoyed was highlighted. Work was being carried out in conjunction with industries and businesses of all sizes to ensure that skill shortages could be addressed and the appropriate training courses provided, with suitable work placements available for students. A transformation of the service was underway with more training related to outcomes and changes to the courses on offer with the ambition that more students access their next steps within Northumberland. The development of own business and entrepreneurial skills was only at an embryonic stage at the current time but was a priority moving forward and further

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information would be provided on this in the future.

The Office for Students collected information on the retention and destination of graduates and whether they used the degree that they were awarded and a report would be collated to provide this information in the context of how these routes could be developed within Northumberland. Development was in the very early stages regarding routes using sponsorship and using the apprenticeship levy.

To address the current shortages and health and social care, supported internships were provided by the Health Service on a full year carousel basis which allowed experience to be gained within the different services and opportunities found for employment within the sector with a new training centre being opened in Cramlington. A programme had also been developed across the County with North of Tyne funding for care leavers to gain experience of working in the health sector. Health sector uniforms were also being provided to primary schools introducing the world of work to children at an early age and providing a link between learning and earning.

The excellent report was welcomed by the Committee.

RESOLVED that:

1. The content of the annual report be noted.
2. The approach to developing the Northumberland curriculum models to enhance the learning experience and support students to acquire the skills and knowledge to be successful in life be endorsed.
3. The performance given the continuing challenges of the global pandemic against operating circumstances and the valuable support provided to all learners with all services be recognised.
4. The progress in respect of the improvement actions set out in the 2019/20 report be noted.
5. The identified areas for improvement and the routines established to monitor progress be agreed.

A short recess was held at this point and the meeting recommenced at 11.35 pm.

61 **CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY 2022 - 24**

The report which outlined the key issues and challenges in relation to placement sufficiency for children in care was presented by L Spaven, Senior Manager, Residential and Family Placement Service. The Children in Care and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy 2022-24 set out the Council's approach to meeting its responsibilities to provide secure, safe and appropriate accommodation to children in care and care leavers, identifying appropriate planning and delivery of sufficient and high quality placements and associated support. This report was also linked to the next report on the agenda in relation to Children's Home Build Progress which sought to increase the number of residential placements available within Northumberland.

It was clarified that comprehensive data was available in relation to the increased number of children entering care with details provided through the Safeguarding

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and Corporate Parenting Group, however it was likely that this was within the NE24 postcode as a lot of work was focussed around that geographical area. An audit/analysis undertaken of children entering care had not identified a specific trend as to why there had been a gradual increase in numbers within the 5 – 9 age group. The use of the Local Area Councils to promote foster caring was once again suggested.

The additional residential placements currently being developed were not for children with specific health needs or disabilities. The only residential unit which was set up as a business was the secure unit at Kyloe House which was for national use but was run by Northumberland County Council. All in-house capacity for residential placements including the proposed new build and the extension to the existing residential home would be utilised by children from Northumberland as in-house provision had been found to be of better quality and provided more stability. Atkinson House was a separate provision to residential care and the proposals for its relocation and rebranding would increase the number of school places for children with social, emotional and mental health needs within the County in line with the Council's priority to meet these needs closer to home.

There remained a challenge with emergency placements where children or young people came into care or there had been a breakdown of their placement after all alternative regular provision had been explored and there was a need for a bespoke package. This had only ever been done when there were no alternatives and for the shortest period of time until regular provision could be arranged. There had been no bespoke placements for children under 16 this financial year.

The Officers and teams were thanked for their continuing work in meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report and the Children in Care and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy be noted.

62 **CHILDREN'S HOMES BUILD PROGRESS**

An introduction and discussion of the progress on the building of the children's home had been undertaken as part of the previous item on the agenda.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

63 **ANNUAL ENGAGEMENT STATEMENT**

The report provided an overview of the Annual Engagement Meeting held with Ofsted in October 2021 and was presented by G Reiter, Service Director, Children's Social Care.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

64 **SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS**

In line with Standing Orders and as the meeting approached the three hour limit it

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was proposed by Councillor Swinburn, seconded by Councillor Dunbar and agreed that Standing Orders be suspended and the meeting continue.

65 OFSTED AND INSPECTION FRAMEWORKS FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A Hartwell, Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support presented the report which provided an overview of the range of inspections and external scrutiny that Ofsted and other inspectorates provided to local authority children's services departments.

The Chair commented on the fantastic staff involved and provided assurance that the correct checks and balances were in place, of which this Committee was a part of. Officers advised that they appreciated the challenge provided which had led to supportive actions being taken.

In response to a question it was confirmed that Ofsted had not undertaken Children's Social Care inspections and had amended visits to children's home inspections during the pandemic, however these were now being undertaken with some elements still taking place virtually. Some schools had deferred visits from Ofsted due to Covid, sickness levels and also recent storm events where some schooling was still being undertaken virtually.

The Chair highlighted the feedback from the Ofsted inspection undertaken in 2020 which had been rated as Good which had been due to the actions taken to strengthen the role of this Committee and the work undertaken by both D Lally, Chief Executive and C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Children's Services and Adults Social Care along with other officers. Councillor Dale also highlighted the strong interest Councillor Daley had taken in Children's Services which had also contributed.

RESOLVED that the information and range of inspections be noted.

66 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.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that all Members had been invited to attend the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday 7 February where the budget would be discussed. Councillor Ball questioned if the papers she had received on the budget had been updated as these contained reductions to Children's Services which it had been commented earlier in the meeting that there were none.

The Chair advised that the Leader would be attending along with other partners an Inequality Summit on 4 March 2022.

In response to a question from Councillor Swinburn on the safe School Streets initiative pilot and if this was now policy or being rolled out across the County, the Chair advised that this would be investigated and it might be that a report be

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brought back to the Committee.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

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