

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 March 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
R Dodd
L Dunn
M Swinburn

A Dale
C Dunbar
Fairless-Aitken
A Watson

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson
P Rickeard

D Lennox

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

L Houghton

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
N Dorward

A Kingham
L Little
G Reiter
B Smeaton

D Street

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Senior Manager - Education Development &
Collaborative Projects
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Children's Improvement and Development
Manager
Deputy Director of Education

Around 1 member of the press and public were present.

67 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Thorne and Renner-Thompson along with J Sanderson.

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68 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 3 February 2022, as circulated, were agreed as a true record and were signed by the Chair.

69 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Councillor Dodd advised that the landowner in respect of agenda item 13 on the agenda had previously been the Leader of the Conservative Group and therefore he would withdraw for that item. Councillor Daley advised that he had also been lobbied by Northumberland County Council three years ago on agenda item 13 when he was Deputy Leader, however he had not had any further involvement.

70 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

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

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

The Chair advised that the agenda would be reordered and Item 8 on the agenda would be taken next.

71 **SCHOOL TRANSPORT REVIEW - BRIEFING NOTE**

A Kingham introduced the item to the Committee with the aid of a power point presentation advising that this briefing note was to inform Members of the forthcoming review of the school transport arrangements at Northumberland County Council. The review was being undertaken following a request by this Committee for a review of the governance of school transport with the terms of reference and the timed phased approach outlined in the report and an overview of the process was provided.

In response to a question related to the costs involved in providing schemes which were legislated for by Government and those which the Council provided above this, and the integration of school and passenger services to reduce costs and benchmarking, Members were advised that the review would address this with details provided in the final report which would make clear the costs of the statutory service and those which were choices and followed the priorities of the Administration.

Assurance was provided that a variety of checks on operators were already being picked up as part of the review and that this was not a cost saving exercise but was about ensuring that appropriate transport was provided to meet the needs of children. The review was about internal checks and balances at this time, however it might be that parental involvement might come out as a recommendation of the review. A response would be requested from the School Transport Team on pressures and safeguarding in response to the increase in cost of fuel.

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RESOLVED that the terms of reference and tasks outlined were agreed.

72 **FINAL DECISION ON THE STATUTORY PROPOSALS FOR ATKINSON HOUSE**

The Cabinet report, which was being pre-scrutinised by this Committee set out an analysis of the representations received from interested parties during the four-week statutory consultation on proposals for Atkinson House Special School. A comprehensive introduction to the report and a power point presentation was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources, who advised that within statutory guidance Cabinet should give greatest weight to responses from those stakeholders likely to be most affected by the proposals. Paul Samson, Headteacher at Atkinson House and David Harrison, Chair of Governors at Atkinson House were in attendance. Mr Hodgson advised that he had spoken to the Roman Catholic Diocese who had expressed their support and this would be reported to Cabinet when they made their decision.

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

- Whilst there would be capacity for the number of pupils to be increased, the Headteacher advised that many of the pupils attending the school, all of whom had an EHCP and had SEMH needs, found it difficult being in larger classes. The school currently allowed for smaller groups to be taught together and should the numbers of pupils attending the school increase then a review of the nature and the type of students attending the school would be required.
- There would be a name change for the new facility, however this would be the subject of discussions with the Headteacher and Governing Body. It was important that every child was given the opportunity to develop within the new facility and services such as Educational Psychologists and speech and language specialists would be co-located on site to assist with this.
- The proposed Gilbert Ward Academy was a fixed size and footprint and would not be expanded to meet any increased demand, instead alternative and improved provision would be looked at to meet the needs of children closer to their home areas and three new build opportunities were being considered. It was expected that the Planning Application would be submitted in approximately 4 weeks for the Gilbert Ward Academy, however Members were asked to note that this was to be delivered by the DfE and not the team at NCC.
- The refurbishment of the existing Richard Coates site offered a significant level of space to that which would be provided if it was a new build under the DfE formula and the existing building had been well looked after. Mr Samson advised he had visited new build schools and whilst they were well built, they were quite clinical. It was thought the Richard Coates site would better meet the needs of the children, many of whom found change difficult, with the school being zoned in order to help support individual needs. He understood the safeguarding concerns and welcomed the partnership work with both the Primary School and the Pele Trust.
- The new facility would be covered by CCTV both external and internal and fencing will be kept inside the hedge line.

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- It had long been an ambition of Atkinson House to be co-educational, however the existing building did not allow for this and it would be the role of the leadership team to deliver the vision and create an environment which allowed each child to have the best opportunity.

Members welcomed the proposals and felt that Officers had addressed the concerns of residents in relation to highways and safety raised during the informal and formal consultation very well.

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

73 **ANNUAL REPORT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS SERVICE 2020/21**

The report presented the work of the central Education and Skills team and its impact in supporting the continuing education challenges throughout the ongoing Covid 19 global pandemic. A detailed and comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by A Kingham, Service Director – Education and Skills in which she highlighted key areas and issues. A power point presentation was also provided.

Members welcomed the excellent report and the Chair asked that it be placed on record appreciation of both the core team in Education and Skills and the wider teaching and schools workforce, who had stepped up and despite all the challenges both prior to and during the pandemic, had demonstrated their commitment to the future of children and young people in Northumberland.

It was clarified that additional detailed information could be found on the digital version of the report. In response to some concerns regarding KS4 results, it was highlighted that the majority of secondary schools in the County were academised. It was suggested that it would be helpful if the Regional Schools Commissioner be invited to attend this Committee to discuss performance within secondary schools and what could be done, working in partnership, as some had made little improvement since being academised. Members were advised that work had been undertaken through the School Improvement Programme and following closer working between maintained and acadamised schools during Covid, Officers were confident that as OFSTED picked up the pace of visits that improved results would be seen over the next 12 to 18 months.

In relation to concerns regarding flooding and drainage issues encountered at the new Queen Elizabeth High School in Hexham, Members were advised that there was an issue with run-off from land above the school site and discussions were ongoing with the landowner. Work had been undertaken on site and at the off-site culvert which had partly addressed the problem which mainly occurred on a Saturday and Sunday when the school was closed. It was confirmed that the old building had now been demolished.

Members thanked officers for the excellent report.

RESOLVED that the digital annual report be received and the performance given the continued challenges of the global pandemic and the value support being provided be recognised.

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74 **SAFEGUARDING ACTIVITY TRENDS AND BENCHMARKING REPORT**

The report provided an analysis of trends within the social work activity in responding to safeguarding concerns regarding Northumberland's children and young people. Key performance indicators and comparisons to national and regional variations were incorporated into the report. An introduction to the report was provided by B Smeaton, Children's Improvement and Development Manager.

It was clarified that more detail on the areas from which children came into care was provided as part of reporting processes to the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group. Efforts were made to place children locally and rates of placing children within 20 miles of their home address was higher than both the national and regional average. Performance information was scrutinised at Senior Management level at least once per month, but this was drilled down even further by service area and changes made when it was necessary.

In response to a question in relation to immunisation and checks on teeth it was advised that efforts were being made to get looked after children prioritised and this was being monitored through the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group. Whether the use of private dental care for looked after children had been undertaken would be checked. Members were advised that Officers were aware of the trial being undertaken in Wales to provide care leavers with a basic income although they did have some concerns on how it would work.

The target of child and family assessments for children being carried out within 45 days was set nationally however there was management oversight of the process from the beginning to the end of the process and if it was found that services were required during the assessment process then these would be picked up and offered at that time rather than waiting until the end of the assessment period. A number of cases would require no further action because of the work undertaken during the assessment period. A great deal of detailed information had previously been provided to the Committee on the recruitment and retention of social workers.

The Chair and Members welcomed and thanked Officers for the very detailed report.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

75 **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 attendance of the Regional Schools Commissioner at a future would be discussed between Officers and the Chair after the meeting.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

76 **URGENT BUSINESS**

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G Reiter, Service Director – Children’s Social Care advised that through the work of the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group and to see how Members could support and undertake their corporate responsibilities for looked after children, it had been agreed that a skills audit, initially of Members of both this Committee and the Corporate Parenting Group, would be undertaken and a questionnaire would be circulated to Members shortly.

77 **PART II**

78 **SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS**

In line with Standing Orders and as the meeting approached the three hour limit it was proposed by Councillor Swinburn, seconded by Councillor Dunbar and agreed that Standing Orders be suspended and the meeting continue.

79 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED:

(a) That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items on the Agenda as it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act, and

(b) That the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons:-

Agenda Item

13 Paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 as it contained information related to an individual; information which was likely to reveal the identity of an individual; and information related to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding the information)

and

the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure would adversely affect the authority’s ability to conduct its affairs.

Councillor Dodd and L Houghton left the meeting at this point.

80 **RDA RELOCATION FROM TRANWELL (PEGASUS CENTRE) TO KIRKLEY HALL CAMPUS (NORTHUMBERLAND COLLEGE)**

The report summarised a cost-based proposal in relation to the possible RDA relocation from Tranwell (Pegasus Centre) to Kirkley Hall Campus (Northumberland College). Neil Dorward, Senior Manager - Education Development & Collaborative Projects provided an introduction to the report

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advising of the background to the proposals and the support provided by the Council and Active Northumberland to the Centre.

The Committee in discussing the contents of the report highlighted the great social value the RDA provided and strongly supported their work. Members did, however, raise several concerns and considered that the report did not include enough information for the Committee to feel they could support the recommendations outlined in the reports and asked that additional information be made available.

The Committee were informed further information was available but could not be provided at this stage. Members therefore felt they could not support the recommendations as outlined in the report and requested that the report be returned to the Committee for consideration after addressing the points raised.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that the recommendations could not be supported by this Committee as insufficient information had been included in the report to allow an informed decision to be made.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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