

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 July 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

A Dale
S Fairless-Aitken
M Swinburn

C Dunbar
M Richardson
A Watson

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson

D Lennox

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

J Sanderson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Barron

L Little
L Spaven

D Street

Scrutiny Officer
Strategic Lead for SEND & Designated
Clinical Officer
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Senior Manager, Residential & Family
Placements
Deputy Director of Education

14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Ball, Dodd, Thorne and Renner-Thompson along with A Kingham and G Reiter.

15 MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 May 2022, as circulated, be agreed as a true record of each and be signed by the Chair.

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16 FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

17 SEND STRATEGY PROGRESS REPORT

S Barron, Strategic Lead for SEND & Designated Clinical Officer, provided an introduction to the report with the aid of a power point presentation. Members were advised that the Council had been approached by Ofsted to pilot a new inspection framework which would provide an opportunity for external scrutiny and test understanding of progress with a number of actions undertaken by inspectors. The Learning from this pilot inspection was that there was a passion and commitment within the local area SEND partnership; a strong understanding of the needs of children with SEND; SEND strategy was strong and based on a robust needs assessment; the partnership knew itself well and early help support within children's social care was an "incredible strength" with families feeling very well supported. Progress on the four key strategic priorities of the SEND Strategy was detailed in the report.

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

- A data analysis had just been undertaken on where Northumberland was in relation to the provision of EHCPs and the national picture. Northumberland was average in terms of the number of children and young people who were declined for a EHC needs assessment however were very timely in support of EHCPs, with the national at approximately 60% and Northumberland in the low 90%. Northumberland's performance around the system was strong, but was continually looking to improve the quality of EHCP, and was also looking at improving the communication around the whole process.
- In relation to sensory profiling, it was confirmed that the model used was based on best practice and staff with the relevant experience had been recruited. It was likely that the new model would include advice online so that access to help would be available even before referral to the service.
- Ongoing work had been carried out throughout the year to expand specialist SEND provision in the County. The growth in EHCPs over the last 5 years had increased by approximately 10% creating more demand for specialist places. Between September 2021 and September 22 there would be a 19% increase in the number of specialist places and work was also being extended with the independent sector and alternative providers who were better placed to meet individual needs. The strategy for the next five years would be reported to this Committee in October.
- In relation to support and challenge for schools, Members were advised that the analysis of need was better now than ever before with the vast majority of SEND learners served well. Whilst the report highlighted the whole school SEND project, there were other workstreams tied to SEND and School Improvement which provided a lot of support and challenge to schools.
- The 10% year on year growth of children and young people with EHCPs was a national figure and was one of the reasons for the release of the

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Government Green Paper which was welcomed.

- There were 402 early years providers across the County who were all very well supported by the Early Years team which included three inclusion consultants. Procedures were in place that when issues were recognised either by the early years settings or parents, then liaison would take place with a consultant to see how individual needs could be met. There were also the same processes in place as those for school aged children with pathways for EHCP applications and financial support which allowed the setting to provide support over and above the usual levels and which could include training or additional staff. Portage could also be provided if more specialist provision was required. The statutory requirement for the 2 year old health and education check also assisted with early identification of additional need. The Early Years passport in which a series of supported assessments were undertaken which highlighted the pathway a learner was on had been highlighted as an area of good work.
- The three Specialist Practitioners posts had been planned for in conjunction with children's social care to provide the right skills mix and were over and above the existing service. This would strengthen the support for mental health and allow clinical oversight of the work undertaken.

It was noted that whilst there had been a lot of discussion surrounding early help for early years, that changes to circumstances could occur at any time and access to early help was important at any age.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and the Committee supported the next steps to be taken.

18 **THE ANNUAL REPORT OF NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE 2021/22**

L Spaven, Senior Manager – Residential and Special Placements provided an introduction to the report with the aid of a power point presentation. The key highlights were outlined along with the aims and objectives for 2022/23. A day time event held recently for, and celebrating foster carers, had been very well attended and appreciated. Whilst it was too late to organise an event for this year, it was hoped to be able to reinstate a similar event for looked after children. Twenty new foster carers had been recruited over the past year and there was a constant recruitment drive for potential new foster carers to come forward.

It was confirmed that currently there were 27 children placed with foster carers who weren't Northumberland foster carers, but it was commented that sometimes children needed to be placed outside of this area. The difference in fee structures between private and local authority foster carers would possibly be the subject of a discussion at a later date.

The approximate timescale from applying to be foster carers to being approved was 4 to 6 months as there were a lot of checks to be undertaken and references to be obtained. This would be followed by skills training and a full assessment being undertaken before an application was put before the Fostering Panel for approval. Discussions were often held regarding children who needed

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placements nearing the end of the process and once approved it might only be a short time before a child was placed with the new foster carer.

The Chair asked that the appreciation and thanks of the Committee be passed on to the fostering team and the foster carers themselves for making a difference to the lives of the young people.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and the performance information for the period April 2021 – March 2022 be acknowledged.

19 **BRIEFING NOTE - POTENTIAL MULTI ACADEMY TRUST OPPORTUNITY**

A briefing note had been provided on the opportunity which was now open for Local Authorities to register their interest in developing a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) which included the Council's previous interest in this area and work undertaken at that time. A Kingham, Joint Interim Director of Children's Services had written to all schools to ascertain interest and approximately 40 schools had registered their interest.

A concern was raised by a Member if there was a large rural MAT established for first/primary schools they would not link into the secondary schools and that this should be used as an opportunity to bring schools together in order to provide a seamless transition for children. It was clarified that for this particular opportunity it would be limited to 10 schools and it would make sense to encourage families of schools to work together.

In respect of a concern raised in respect of whether a Local Authority MAT school would be treated differently to a maintained school with different resources available, it was clarified that if this moved forward, the equity of school provision would be paramount. Any financial impact on individual school budgets would also need to be considered, but it could be that the sharing of leadership and back office staff would help school budgets.

The view of the Committee was to continue dialogue being cognisant of locality based issues and ensuring that the ethos of individual schools was not lost.

20 **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 of a number of changes to the work programme and a revised work programme would be circulated after the meeting.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

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21 **URGENT BUSINESS**

The Chair advised that following the Max Caller Report on Governance within the Council, as the Chair of this Committee he had asked that the number of delayed Subject Access Requests (SARs) in respect of children or looked after children which had been highlighted in the report be investigated. He had been assured that measures had been put in place to deal with outstanding SARs for looked after children and the detail of this would be shared with all Members after the meeting. If Members had any comments on the information once it had been circulated then they should contact himself or the Scrutiny Officer.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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