

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 February 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

R Dodd (Vice-Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

C Ball
S Fairless-Aitken
M Swinburn

A Dale
M Richardson
A Watson

OTHER COUNCILLORS

G Renner-Thompson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
M Connor
A Kingham
L Little
L Pyle

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Head of Service, Children's Social Care
Joint Interim Director of Children's Services
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Co-ordinator
Joint Interim Director of Children's Services
Deputy Director of Education
Head of Virtual School
Principal Education Welfare Officer

G Reiter
D Street
J Walker
S Wintringham

There was 1 member of the press and public present.

64 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors W Daley, C Dunbar and Mr A Hodgson.

65 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair commenced the meeting by reflecting on the tragic events that took place in Hexham on Friday 27 January when Holly Newton suffered fatal injuries following an incident in the town centre and a teenage boy also suffered serious

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injuries. The incident had come as a complete shock to our community and thoughts were with the families and friends of all those touched by this. An extract of a statement which had been issued by Holly's family paying tribute to her was also read out. The Council had been working closely with Northumbria Police and other organisations to provide all the help it could and wellbeing support currently being provided for both staff and students at Queen Elizabeth High School would continue to ensure that all were fully supported during this upsetting time. Members were reminded that as there was an active ongoing police investigation there should be no further comment or discussion on this during the meeting.

66 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Meeting held on Thursday 5 January 2023 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair with the following amendment noted:

Page 6 – the membership of the SEND Review Task and Finish Group should read Councillor M Swinburn and not M Swinbank.

Clarification would be sought on the timescale for revision of the Northumberland Local Plan.

67 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

68 **CABINET REPORT - SCHOOL ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS FOR COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY CONTROLLED SCHOOLS FOR THE 2024/2025 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 2024/25 academic year.

It was clarified that suspected fraudulent applications would be initially investigated by the Admissions Team then passed to the Fraud Team if found necessary, however those numbers were low. The change to the catchment areas for Broomhill First School and Felton Primary School was a minor amendment and those involved had been consulted. A full scale consultation for all catchment areas was undertaken every seven years. A sibling link formed part of the application criteria and there was no plan to move this further up the list at the current time. There was an appeals process in which an independent panel would listen to any concerns from parents whose child had been refused a place at their chosen school with the panel making the final decision.

Due to the reducing birth rate there was an ongoing process to reduce the number of planned admissions to schools, however there were no school closures proposed at the current time.

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

69 **VIRTUAL SCHOOL HEADTEACHER'S ANNUAL REPORT 2022**

An introduction to the report was provided by J Walker, Virtual School Headteacher, with Councillor Renner-Thompson, Portfolio Holder, specifically highlighting the work being undertaken in relation to employability opportunities for looked after children and care leavers which supported the Council's priority of providing employment opportunities for local people.

In relation to persistent absences Members were advised that numbers were higher across all groups at the current time, but it was a particular problem for a group of school aged looked after children who had difficulty engaging in school for a number of reasons. The numbers had increased as schools struggled to deal with the diverse needs of all children, with the complex needs of some looked after children not able to be met in mainstream education, and alternative provision required to be found. The Education Committee had just commissioned a review into persistent absences across the Country and it was hoped that this would include those of looked after children. Additional support for looked after children was also provided by the Education Welfare Team and it was known that persistent absentees were safe when not in school.

Members requested additional information and feedback be provided on the headline content of the report and this would be taken on board for next year's report. It was clarified that the School Improvement Plan which was available on line provided full details of what the improvement priorities were and how these would be achieved.

In terms of looked after children with SEND or EHCPs, Northumberland always had a lower than national figure however numbers were rising and due to Covid and the lack of professional contact with children during that time, early identification of needs had been impacted with some catch up now being required. It was confirmed that work was undertaken with pre-school children and all looked after children were in the early years passport system so that all information was known and support systems in place for each child starting school. It was known that some did not engage in pre-school provision, however the service worked with foster carers etc to ensure that a child was school ready and was proactive in trying to close the gap.

In respect of absence trends nationally, no data had been provided as there had been no figures for the last three years. This information had been included in previous reports and would be included in the future. Through the National Association of Virtual School Headteachers regular meetings were held and good practice shared, the Association also had good links with Ofsted.

RESOLVED that the educational achievements of Northumberland's looked after children and care leavers and ongoing challenges caused by the disruption to education during the pandemic be noted.

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A Kingham left the meeting at this point and the Chair and Committee offered their congratulations on her appointment as the permanent Executive Director for Children, Young People and Education.

70 CHILDREN NOT IN SCHOOL

An introduction to the report was provided by J Walker, Virtual School Headteacher who advised that whilst school attendance within Northumberland was improving this had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. The implementation of new Department for Education guidance would introduce compulsory electronic registration and give access to live data. A multi-agency approach was used to identify persistent absentees, the reasons for absence and how to get these pupils back into education. The number of elective home educated rose during the pandemic, however these numbers had stabilised but were still high. More support for home schooled pupils sitting GCSEs would be welcomed along with strengthened powers to ensure that all pupils had to be seen as part of the yearly review. A significant number of previously home educated pupils had gone on to further education colleges or school sixth forms.

In response to concerns raised by members regarding deprivation being a reason for absence, it was agreed that this was a challenge due to the volume. Multi-agency arrangements were in place to safeguard children who were not in school and at risk of missing out on a full time education, however one difficulty in identifying deprivation as a reason for absence was that families often did not like to share this type of information. It was considered that school absence due to deprivation should be raised within the Inequalities Working Group. Members were advised that there was not a consistent reason for pupils to come off school rolls, however once this happened then legislation only allowed for one visit to be made per year and this did not need to involve the child or allow access to the house and more regulation would help with this. Whilst it would be known if a child removed from a school roll had any SEND requirements, if a child moved into the County, had never been on a school roll, or was diagnosed as having SEND after being removed from a school, then these would only be known if the parent advised of these.

Members agreed that a breakdown of the data was required in order to identify those being electively home educated due to not being able to afford to attend school.

RESOLVED that:

1. The update on safeguarding arrangements for children who were not in school were noted;
2. The continued impact of Covid 19 on the number of children not in school and the potential implications of this on education outcomes be noted;
3. The implications of changes to legislation relating to children not in school be noted;
4. The identification and number of pupils being electively home educated due to deprivation be established and a report on this to be prepared for the Inequalities Working Group.

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71 SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

M. Connor, Head of Service, Children's Social Care provided an introduction to the report advising that the recruitment and retention of social workers remained a national issue. In response to the consultation by Josh McAllister and in acknowledging the challenge, an announcement had been made by Government that more investment in social worker apprenticeships was to be provided and the use of agency staff looked at. It was stressed that authorities in the North East had tried to work together in respect of rates of pay and use of agency staff, however a national solution was required.

Members thanked the staff for the fantastic job they did under the pressures they were facing and in recognising the success of the ASYE Academy questioned what was being done to attract 16 year olds into social work and if there was potential for the academy route for this age group. Also whether the setting up of an in-house or North East Agency was feasible which would allow flexibility for staff to prevent money leaking out of the Authority. In response M Connor advised that there was a need to make social work a career of choice and they were working with the Learning and Development Team on this. There were opportunities for apprenticeships which allowed staff from different roles to be supported through degrees and more discussions were required on how to grow our own model and get people to commit to Northumberland. There was a staff bank which semi-retired social workers could sign up to. The creation of a Regional Agency had been discussed however there were significant challenges and legalities involved in this not least not wanting to disadvantage permanent staff members.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

72 DOMESTIC ABUSE

An introduction to the report which gave an update on the current domestic abuse multi-agency partnership arrangements and domestic abuse service provision to ensure the Council met the requirements of the statutory duties within section 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was provided by L Pyle, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Lead.

Members welcomed the amazing work being undertaken and questioned if more training should be provided to Councillors and Staff on recognising domestic abuse. It was suggested that a presentation could be made to the Local Area Councils on what services were on offer and how these could be accessed and also the signs and triggers to identify abuse and this information be publicised. Members were advised that this report was going to a range of Committees and discussions would be held with the Portfolio Holder to see what could be organised.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and the request for a presentation at Local Area Councils and publicity be actioned.

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**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 that Northumberland College would be attending in March and in April the School Transport Review report would be presented.

Councillor Fairless-Aitken asked if a report could be provided on the procedures and policy for children accessing counselling and support services. Councillor Swinburn questioned when the report on school uniforms which was on the items to be listed would be put before the Committee and was advised that this would be raised with S Aviston and A Kingham.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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