

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 in the Council Chamber - County Hall on Thursday, 2 March 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
R Dodd
S Fairless-Aitken
M Swinburn
A Watson

A Dale
C Dunbar
M Richardson
T Thorne

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson
P Rickeard

D Lennox

OFFICERS

C Angus
A Hartwell

A Kingham

L Little
G Reiter
B Smeaton

D Street

Scrutiny Officer
Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support
Executive Director - Children, Young People and Education
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Children's Improvement and Development Manager
Deputy Director of Education

ALSO PRESENT

G Renner-Thompson

Cabinet Member

1 Member of the press and public was present.

Ch.'s Initials.....

74 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Meeting held on Thursday 2 February 2023 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair with the following amendment noted:

D Lennox, P Rickeard and J Sanderson were in attendance.

75 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

76 **CABINET REPORT - ANNUAL EDUCATION REPORT 2021/22**

The annual report detailed the Education and Skills performance for Northumberland in the 2021/22 academic year and informed of the detailed work supporting schools and skills undertaken by the Education and Skills team along with wider services. A detailed introduction and presentation was provided by A Kingham, Executive Director – Children, Young People and Education. Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Children's Services was in attendance and commended the report to the Committee.

Members welcomed the report and in response asked a number of questions. In relation to the increased number of fixed term exclusions the Committee was advised that this was due in part to an increase in the number of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and a covid legacy of more challenging behaviour. A great deal of work was being undertaken by various services engaging with schools and headteachers along with pupils and their families to get pupils back into education quickly and provide the help required in order to achieve this.

Information on the number of families who had benefitted from the use of the HUGGG voucher scheme would be provided outside of the meeting along with information on the range of grades for 'A' Level students.

It was clarified that the lower than national average performance due to Covid at KS2 was across the whole of the North East and not just within Northumberland. The legacy of missing two years of schooling due to Covid could clearly be seen in the stats at KS2. Collectively the region was doing a lot of work together and in particular the excellent Early Years Passport Scheme which had been developed in Northumberland was being shared with North Tyneside and Newcastle and with the creation of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA) it was hoped that this would provide additional funding for education which could be used to drive improvements similar to those which had been achieved in London. The Blyth Welding & Fabrication Training Centre would be the blue print to deliver this type of training across the County enabling young people to access skills training and jobs closer to home. In relation to young people accessing alternative educational provision, it was clarified that the challenges were the sufficiency of places and finding provision in the locality of the young person.

Ch.'s Initials.....

A Kingham and D Street were to meet with Headteachers the following week in relation to exclusions and it was hoped that the new inclusion dashboard would be owned and understood assisting in increasing the rate of change in bringing down the level of exclusions. As there were increasing numbers of learners with EHCP it was probable that there was a corresponding increase in fixed term exclusions for that cohort of pupils. When it was flagged that a disadvantaged pupil had received a fixed term exclusion then additional resources and support could be provided to meet the needs of the pupil therefore preventing repeat occurrences with schools being encouraged to come forward to ask for assistance for pupils before it got to the stage of considering an exclusion.

P Rickeard stated that the report made good reading especially when compared to North Tyneside and Newcastle, and a suggestion was put forward that additional information be provided to the Committee on the activity undertaken to support inequality and recovery etc rather than just the results being reported. He commented that there was a lot of good work going on in Northumberland which he had observed in the many schools he visited. The Chair agreed that this should be a substantive item for a future agenda and A Kingham recommended that the report should be across services to bring together the inequalities and show referrals etc including the work undertaken by the Fire and Rescue Service. It was further highlighted that the closer working relationship recently between officers had been observed to result in a more joined up approach between social care, education and other services.

There were 9 skill sites around the County which were about teaching skills, knowledge and behaviours to ensure young people were work ready. Schools no longer had a duty to provide work placements, however they did have a statutory duty to provide careers guidance and all secondary schools had specialists working closely with the schools to provide this. Closer working relationships were also being built with industries in the County. All skills providers had a student support fund as part of their funding grant and it should be made really clear to any post 16 student in any setting that there was access to funding to provide for any travel expenses or work clothing or equipment required and if it was related to health and safety this should be provided.

In relation to school staff infrastructure, the roles of staff within schools were changing to be more supportive and a different focus with more support staff. Staff from the Early Years team within the Council were based in schools working alongside school staff with social workers also part of the partnership working and these changes would continue to develop. The biggest influence on academic outcomes was the leadership and culture within a setting and evidence within schools which demonstrated improvement all pointed to a change in the leadership, possibly at multiple levels. This also included changes in curriculum being delivered to learners, reasonable adjustments put in place to meet individual needs so that barriers to learning were overcome, including health and social care staff all working together to improve outcomes going forwards. The poorer results in the North East, not just Northumberland in relation to KS2 and Progress 8 had stood out against the rest of the Country last year. It was known which areas needed to improve and School Action Plans developed to address these. Individual schools tracked the progress of pupils and analysis provided with the School Improvement Team involved in the majority, but not all schools.

In relation to the differing roles within schools, Members wished to have assurance that this was not just smoke and mirrors and that meaningful support was being provided for pupils and it would not just be a change of a title.

The Chair highlighted the recommendations contained in the report for Cabinet and in light of the concerns expressed by Members about the impact of the financial disparity between schools in London and schools in the North East on key stage 2 and Progress 8, requested Members to agree to include a further recommendation from this Committee in relation to this. As a result, the Committee

RESOLVED to advise the Cabinet they supported the recommendations as outlined in the report with the addition of a 4th recommendation. The Committee requests Cabinet to:

Work with the North East Combined Authority to develop an Education Challenge and seek additional investment and funding to target regional educational challenges.

77 **PERFORMANCE & FINANCE REPORT (CHILDREN'S SERVICES)**

An introduction to the report which provided details of the current performance and budgetary position as at December 2022 for services within the Committee's remit was provided by A Hartwell, Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support.

In response to questions from Members it was stated that the Ofsted framework was becoming quicker with a direct effort for legacy outstanding schools to be reinspected. In the intervening time when Officers were aware that there had been a significant time lapse for an Ofsted reinspection, they then relied upon other data and referred to school improvement reports or information gathered by working with schools. Following this, if there was any indication that the school was travelling in the wrong direction then support would be offered. Ofsted had stated that no school should be beyond a 5 year reinspection and inspections would be brought forward if concerns were raised. Meetings were held termly between the Council and Ofsted. Ofsted visits to schools would be announced by a pre-preparation phone call between 12.00 pm – 1.00 pm the day before a visit and a conversation held at 2.00 pm that day between the Inspector and the School. Five days' notice was provided by Ofsted to local authorities for a Children's Social Care inspection with a lot of information requested to be provided prior to the visit. Focussed visits were also undertaken between full inspections.

The use of diagnostic software was being explored in relation to the provision of EHCPs and a Green Paper was exploring the use of a national digital system which would greatly assist in the time taken to provide EHCP, however the biggest challenge at the current time was the availability of Educational Psychologists to undertake the statutory review required as part of the process.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

Ch.'s Initials.....

78 **SAFEGUARDING ACTIVITY TRENDS AND BENCHMARKING REPORT**

The purpose of the report was to provide an analysis of trends within social work activity in responding to safeguarding concerns regarding Northumberland’s children and young people. An introduction to the report was provided by B Smeaton, Children’s Improvement and Development Manager.

In response to questions from Members it was stated that contact was usually made with care leavers at least every 3 months and this was usually in the form of a visit with staff or telephone call, and workers were very tenacious in maintaining contact to check the wellbeing of the young people leaving care. With regards to social care activity data, it could be extracted in different ways such as geographical area, educational establishment etc depending on what was being looked at.

It was clarified that work was being undertaken in conjunction with the Health Service in relation to improving the numbers of looked after children accessing dental services, however no private treatment had been provided as it had always been possible to secure checks through contacts with NHS Dentists.

The Chair reminded Members of the invitation to attend the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Meeting on Tuesday 14 March for the Director of Public Health report at 2.00 pm advising that the first item on the agenda was an update from NHS England on dentistry provision which would start at 1.00 pm.

Confirmation was provided that the health of looked after children was very important and detailed breakdowns of the findings and trends of the health checks undertaken were provided to the Corporate Parenting Group who would take action to address any health issues identified.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

79 **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 work programme for 2023/24 would be provided at the next meeting.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.’s Initials.....