

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 Conference Room 2 - County Hall on Thursday, 1 June 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
M Murphy
M Swinburn

R Dodd
C Seymour
H Waddell

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

D Lennox

OFFICERS

C Angus
N Dorward

S Kaur
A Kingham

L Little
G Reiter

Scrutiny Officer
Senior Manager - Education Development &
Collaborative Projects
Principal Social Worker
Executive Director - Children, Young People
and Education
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Director of Children, Young People and
Families

There was 1 member of the press/public present.

1 MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

RESOLVED that the Membership and Terms of Reference for the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee as agreed by Council at the meeting on 17 May 2023 were noted.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Fairless-Aitken, Watson and Renner-Thompson along with Co-opted Members A Hodgson, L Houghton and P Rikeard.

Ch.'s Initials.....

3 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 4 May 2023, as circulated, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a true record.

4 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

The Forward Plan of Key Decisions for June to September 2023 was provided.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

5 **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHILDREN'S PRINCIPAL SOCIAL WORKER**

The report provided information on the input and work of the Principal Social Worker in 2022 and gave an overview of the quality of practice and development needs of frontline social workers. S Kaur, Principal Social Worker was in attendance and provided a comprehensive introduction to the report highlighting the key issues of recruitment and retention of children's social workers, manageable caseloads, practice improvement and the impact post pandemic on practice and service delivery.

Members expressed concern at the large reduction in social workers nationally whilst recognising the challenging work undertaken. They welcomed the proactive approach taken by Northumberland with its successful Academy, noting that fewer applications were also being received to join this due to that model also being rolled out across other local authorities. Information about social work as a career was now starting to be rolled out to schools from year 7 to encourage students to consider this from an earlier age and as a unisex sector. Whilst a university degree was required to be a Social Worker, wider roles within the sector were available for those without a degree providing a lot of valuable support to ensure the safeguarding of children, young people and vulnerable adults. The Council's first cohort of BA Social Work Apprentices were in their final year and would join the Academy in September 2023.

It was clarified that a whole framework of evaluation was used to measure the success and impact of the signs of safety practice approach and identify any improvements required. Management did look at flexible/hybrid working arrangements for staff and whilst there was some merit this was limited due to the nature of the work. It had been found that staff working from home during covid had missed the informal support of their colleagues and therefore they had been brought back into the office.

Members were advised that only one region had tried to set up their own Agency, however this was a very complex process and they were still working on it. National Direction was needed on the challenge of pay rates and lack of sufficiency and agencies were all the in the scope of the Care Review.

Ch.'s Initials.....

Members welcomed the fantastic report and thanked all staff for their work.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report and work completed over the year be acknowledged and the priorities identified be agreed. Information was requested to be included in next year's report on the progress in raising the profile of becoming a social worker within schools and how the sector could be more welcoming for men.

6 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT REVIEW BRIEFING.

A briefing note had been prepared advising of the recommendations emerging from the home to school transport review and the progress to date in commencing initiatives in response to the recommendations. A Kingham, Executive Director of Children, Young People and Education advised that a lot of work had been undertaken over the past 18 months since the review had been requested and she thanked and acknowledged the engagement by parents, carers and young people during the process along with the Home to School Transport Team who had been involved. Lindsey McLeod, who was in attendance was also thanked for her involvement. N Dorward, Senior Manager - Education Development and Collaborative Projects provided an introduction to the report advising that this had been a deep dive into the whole system involving all stakeholders with 7,000 users participating in the process online. 30 of the 36 recommendations were actively being implemented however some were contingent on structure changes.

It was clarified that at the current time whilst Local Services delivered the services for home to school and SEN transport, the policies sat within the SEN Team and Education. The review coincided with a restructure at Senior Management Level and whilst changes were considered it was thought that Management were minded to maintain the Integrated Transport Team. It had however been clear from feedback that there were ways in which work could be done differently with the child at the centre of the process, giving parents/carers a single point of contact and this was what would drive the direction of improvements to services. The need to build in review points, milestones and checks was highlighted to ensure that there was no negative impact on pupils going forward.

In relation to the recommendation regarding schools having a devolved budget for transport, Members were advised that it would be likely that two schools would trial this providing feedback on their experiences. This would assist other schools going forward with as least a risk as possible, providing a framework to use. Communications surrounding this proposal would be very important.

It was clarified that there was a Compliance Officer who audited operators with safeguarding measures also undertaken by Local Services, however the capacity for this work at present was not sufficient. New ways of working would establish how this would work going forward with a framework to which operators must conform and consequences outlined if these were not met. Unannounced spot checks would also be carried out. It was advised there had been significant enhancements in digital tracking technology over the last couple of years and adoption of these technologies features as a strong recommendation in the review.

Ch.'s Initials.....

Members were advised that this was a starting point and it was agreed that an update would be provided to a future meeting on what the service would look like going forward and the commissioning framework. It was noted that the evidence that children’s views had been heard as part of the service user consultation could be shared if Members wished. The use of parental cooperatives had not come out of any discussions with other local authorities, but could be worth exploring.

Members welcomed the update and thanked Officers for their work.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

7 FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT 2023/24

The work programme had been circulated for information and the Scrutiny Officer would meet with the Chair and Executive Director to discuss further timetabling of items. 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 Task and Finish Working Group would be started shortly with a revised membership due to changes to the committee membership.

The date of the next meeting was Tuesday 18 July 2023 at 10.00 am.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.’s Initials.....