

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OSC

REPORT TO COUNCIL

1 November 2023

INTERIM SCRUTINY REPORT

Three key roles were identified for scrutiny as part of the scrutiny review at the start of the year. These roles are about enhancing scrutiny's role in policy development, investigating matters of concern to the community, and reviewing the Council's performance. Since the adoption of the new ways of working FACS has met three times.

Copies of all the reports and the minutes of our meetings are available on the Council's website here:

<https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?Committeed=151>

1. ANNUAL REPORT OF PRINCIPAL SOCIAL WORKER

In June, the committee received the annual report of the Principal Social Worker, offering a detailed insight into the accomplishments, challenges, and endeavours of the social work sector in 2022. While the report underscored the challenging reduction in social workers at the national level, it also commended Northumberland's proactive stance, notably through the successful Academy initiative. The committee appreciated the proactive approach to encourage students to consider social work as a career from an early age, irrespective of gender. Additionally, the imminent integration of BA Social Work Apprentices into the Academy in September 2023 marks a significant milestone.

2. HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT REVIEW

Home to School Transport is an area FACS has paid particular attention to over the last 18 months. The Committee were pleased to receive the outcomes of a comprehensive review of the Home to School Transport system. The review provided an in-depth analysis of the services and strategies, emphasising the well-being and safety of students. Noteworthy recommendations are actively being implemented, with review points, milestones and checks being built in to ensure that there is no negative impact on pupils.

This item will return to the Committee at a later date when members will examine the impacts of the recommendations once they have been implemented.

3. OUTCOMES OF STATUTORY CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR THE BERWICK PARTNERSHIP

In July, we dedicated our time to scrutinise the outcomes of the statutory consultation concerning the Berwick Partnership. Members sought clarification and assurance on several areas such as:

- The protection and continuation of the ethos and standards inhabited by good and outstanding schools that would be part of the proposed reorganisation.
- The support that would be available during the transition via the implementation group and the school improvement team.
- In relation to the social value guarantees that could be included in the procurement process, including apprenticeships, it was advised that any contract awarded by the Council had social value conditions embedded, and any tendered work conducted would be no different. Officers provided their assurance that contractors would be held accountable for fulfilling these requirements.

FACS felt that the collaboration with headteachers, contingency budgets, and a dedicated Implementation Group underscored the commitment to the smooth transition of educational changes and therefore, supported the recommendations put to Cabinet.

4. REPORT OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM 2022 – 2023

In September, the committee received an extensive update on the School Improvement Team's efforts over the last 12 months. The report highlighted substantial improvements in Ofsted ratings, signalling the commitment of our education professionals. Pupil attendance and attainment remain central, with strategies in place to support learners with high anxiety and those requiring additional interventions.

Members expressed concern at the number of new headteachers but were reassured that they included headteachers moving between schools within Northumberland, acting headteachers covering short-term absences, and others transitioning as part of school reorganisations. The focus on special schools and disadvantaged learners is evident, with dedicated staff focusing on these critical areas.

The strengthened structure and support offered by the School Improvement Team are positive developments, with increasing engagement from schools within and beyond Northumberland.

The Committee strongly supports the continuation of funding for the School Improvement Team and made this an ask of the Cabinet.

5. SEND STRATEGY PROGRESS REPORT

The committee was presented with an update on the progress against the Northumberland SEND Strategy 2021-2024. This report went beyond highlighting achievements and exemplified the importance of inclusive education. The Committee wanted to see the SEND employment forum delivered on a greater scale given the value it generated for future employment and training opportunities.

As is often at the forefront of this Committee's mind when considering SEND, members explored the sufficiency of teams in place to match the growing needs of SEND pupils. The Committee will keep a close eye on SEND provisions through a dedicated Task and Finish Group which has been established. This group will report back to the Committee early in 2024.

I would like finish by expressing my gratitude to Cllr Richard Dodd, who has served as Vice Chair of this Committee since November 2021. His insight and support over the last two years has been integral to the Committee's work. I would also like to thank the officers working in the Children, Young People and Education directorate, all the headteachers, teachers and staff at all our educational establishments in Northumberland for their dedication and tenacity.

COUNCILLOR WAYNE DALEY
CHAIR