

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 Remotely on Thursday, 4 March 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

M Swinburn (Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

T Cessford
S Dickinson
J Lang
R Wallace

W Daley
L Dunn
K Stow

OTHER COUNCILLORS

G Renner-Thompson

Cabinet Member

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
L Dixon
A Kingham
L Little
C McEvoy-Carr

G Reiter
D Street
S Wintringham

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Democratic Services Apprentice
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Adults and Children's Services
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Deputy Director of Education
Principal Education Welfare Officer

129 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr D Campbell, A Hodgson and P Rickeard.

130 MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 4 February 2021 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair with the following amendment noted:

D. Lennox, Church Representative was present.

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131 FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for March to June 2021 be noted.

132 ANNUAL REPORT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS SERVICE 2019/20

The annual report overview for the Education and Skills Service was provided to Members to review the education performance in Northumberland, as known, in 2019/20; present the work of the central Education and Skills team and review the impact of the work to support continued engagement in education throughout the Covid 19 global pandemic; and review the digital annual report attached to the report. The Education and Skills Service lead a number of specialist areas and supported Early Years settings, all key phases of education, virtual school, special educational needs; provided training for young people aged 16 – 19, adults and apprentices across eight campuses in Northumberland, as well as training in the workplace and the underpinning infrastructures to support the work through the school organisation and resources and the performance teams.

A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by A Kingham, Service Director, Education and Skills highlighting that the resilient and determined approach by early years settings, schools, skills and education support services to support children, their families and carers throughout the Covid 19 pandemic had been outstanding and commendable. The annual report had been enhanced for digital reading with many hyperlinks provided to more detailed reports and information.

Councillor G Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member reiterated that the year had been a challenge with schools continuing to open through lockdown for all children of key workers and some children with EHCPs with digital learning for other pupils quickly accelerated, and highlighted the results which had continued to improve.

J Sanderson stated that the previous year had shown the value of schools and the Council working together. Members were advised that there had been a greater interest by Schools in utilising the Local Authority HR team and the good working relationships between the Local Authority and the Trades Union throughout the year was recognised.

In response to a question in relation to the percentage of adults achieving a Level 2 qualification in English and maths being lower than the national average, it was highlighted that this was an extremely challenging area, working with young people who had been through school and not being able to achieve a 'C' or 4/5 grade. A key priority was to move people into jobs and a new supportive framework had been developed to provide more support for both Post 16 and care leavers. It was commented that the performance had improved over the previous four years, but there was still more to do to. Opportunity North East had provided targeted intervention for four schools and this was to be rolled out across the County. There was a need to recognise and re-emphasise the need for practical skills to meet the needs of current and future employers within the County.

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It was commented that it was hoped that the Government recognised the vital and intrinsic role the Local Authority played in delivering education for all pupils no matter what school they attended and the impact this could have on the future life of pupils.

The work being undertaken by the Local Authority and the North of Tyne Combined Authority with the School Improvement Strategy across the three Local Authorities was noted and the need to get Education Challenge funding highlighted to continue to drive improvements and reduce the North/South divide.

Members offered their sincere thanks to all those involved in continuing the education and providing help and support to all children and young people in the County during the last year in very difficult circumstances.

RESOLVED that :

1. The content of the headline report be noted;
2. The digital annual report be received and the performance, given the significant challenges of the global pandemic against operating circumstances, and the valuable support provided to all learners by the following be recognised:
 - Early Years Settings and Schools
 - Special Education Needs support and service
 - Virtual School
 - Learning and Skills Service including Careers Guidance Team and Employability and Skills Service
 - School Organisation and Resources
 - Performance monitoring Team
 - Schools Human Resources and Health and Safety team contributions
3. The key areas for improvement in the Education and Skills priorities which inform how we reviewed, revisit and shape future improvements and work programmes be noted;
4. The development of a Skills Strategy for Northumberland which supported our schools to build career pathways, develops the skills of our young people and adults to be able to have successful and sustainable jobs underpinning the economic priorities of the County be supported; and
5. The development of a coherent approach working with businesses, building relationships which benefit industry, skills, schools and our residents be supported.

133 UPDATE OF SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN 2018-2021

The School Organisation Plan 2018-20 for Northumberland was approved for publication by Cabinet in June 2018. It was agreed that the plan would be subject to an update on an annual basis in order to include the latest data and information

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on schools relevant to school place planning. This would be the final iteration of the current School Organisation Plan before a new version for 2021-24 was produced ready for Cabinet approval and subsequent publication in September 2021. A comprehensive introduction of the report was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources who advised that this update had been delayed due in order to prioritise the more urgent work required as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic.

The Chair asked that as the information contained in the Plan would be of benefit to all Members in understanding the complexities of place planning and the calculations used regarding school places required in connection with planning applications for housing developments that a link be provided to all Members. This would allow Members to respond to residents directly rather than taking up officer time. It was clarified that copies of the Plan were automatically provided to Headteachers and Governing Bodies when it was published.

RESOLVED that it was noted:

1. The School Organisation Plan 2018-2021 had had a final update with the latest data and information on schools since the previous version from June 2019. This reflected changed data and school circumstances over the last 18 months and known changes in the near future;
2. The latest update to the School Organisation Plan had been delayed in order to prioritise the more urgent work with schools and academies that had arisen for the School Organisation and Resources Team as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic; and
3. A new School Organisation Plan for 2021-2024 would be produced in the summer term 2021 and would be brought to Cabinet for approval in September for subsequent publication.

134 **SCHOOL CAPITAL PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The report, which was introduced by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources provided a comprehensive update on the progress and delivery of the School Capital Investment Programme, which had been undertaken during the very challenging circumstances of the global pandemic. A Power Point presentation showing photographs of some of the different schemes undertaken was also provided.

C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director stated that a significant amount of construction work continued through the Covid pandemic to ensure that all schools were fit for purpose. She praised the phenomenal achievement of the Team in delivering the schemes . She highlighted the efficiencies and costings of the work undertaken had allowed much more to be achieved from the funding provided.

Councillor Renner-Thompson advised that he had been fortunate to be able to visit the new school and leisure development in Ponteland which was a stunning piece of engineering and a fantastic building.

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The Chair thanked the Head of School Organisation and Resources and her Team for their efforts on behalf of the Committee.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

135 SCHOOLS EXCLUSIONS

The report provided an update to Members on the number of permanent and fixed term exclusions within Northumberland schools and academies and provided an update on the actions taken to reduce the numbers in light of the recommendations of this Committee's Exclusions Task and Finish Working Group. A detailed introduction to the report was provided by S Aviston.

The Chair reminded the Committee that exclusion could have a significant long term effect on a young person and providing support to ensure their inclusion was paramount. The Covid pandemic had impacted on the results and had also meant that some streams of work had not progressed as had been envisaged. However, the excerpts included in the report had shown the positive impact of the work being undertaken on the young people. He thanked all those who had been involved in achieving the reduction in the numbers of exclusions and hoped that the decline would continue.

RESOLVED that:

1. The content of the reported be noted with particular attention paid to the impact of the work undertaken within Children's Services and Schools has had on the lives of Northumberland children; and
2. The actions taken to reduce the number of fixed and permanently excluded children and young people and the next steps being taken to improve the support to keep children in education be noted.

136 CHILDREN WHO ARE ELECTIVELY HOME EDUCATED

The report provided information on the increase in the number of children who were being electively home educated (EHE) and the multi-agency support that was in place for families. The Executive Director advised that there had been an increase in the number of parents who had chosen to home educate their children since the start of the Covid Pandemic across the Country which had encouraged scrutiny from both Ofsted and the Department for Education. Numbers of EHE children had increased in Northumberland over the last year, however there had not been a further significant increase since the announcement that schools were to return on 8 March.

S Wintringham, Principal Educational Welfare Officer provided an introduction to the report, highlighting the key issues outlined. Currently there were 297 children being home educated in Northumberland with 146 new cases since September 2020 and 57 children having returned to school. Overall there had been positive engagement with parents of children who were home educated with very few cases of annual evidence of suitable education not being submitted. 28 School Attendance Orders had been issued, however following this 20 parents had submitted evidence with a further child now returned to school. Resources had

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been put in place to help children struggling to return to school providing reintegration support.

J Sanderson complimented the team on the work which had been undertaken over the past three to four years to ensure that children being home educated received an appropriate education and were well supported, with the Executive Director highlighting that this had also been recognised by Ofsted.

RESOLVED that:

1. The impact of Covid 19 on the number of families choosing to electively home educate their children be noted; and
2. The national recognition of the need for changes to legislation relating to elective home education be noted.

137 FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT 2019/20.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

138 URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that the Executive Director would comment on the return to school for all pupils the following week. C McEvoy-Carr started by stating that she was proud of the Team and what had been achieved over the previous year including a seamless transition in leadership and she thanked all the Team. She also wished to say a huge thank you to schools who had worked tirelessly through the pandemic to make sure that children and young people had received a quality educational input across the last year. Most schools had not closed and they had managed effectively every challenge put to them within very short timescales. This was testament to the leadership and support provided by Headteachers and Governing Bodies and the work of all staff within schools. She highlighted that a much larger proportion of children had remained in school within the current lockdown than the first one within the County and Northumberland had highest proportion of attendance on occasions across the Country. This had allowed vulnerable children and children of key workers being able to maintain some kind of routine.

Schools have had very little need of intervention in their preparing for the wider opening the following week with home testing for early years, first and primary schools continuing. The Council had also continued to lobby for testing to be made available for Childminders. Secondary schools had begun lateral flow testing in order to be able to open to children from the following week and positive responses to this had been seen on social media with the expectation that all secondary schools being fully opened on 11 March after a staggered return. A number of staff from Special Schools had been offered vaccinations where personal care duties had to be undertaken. School transport had continued throughout and had been well managed and transport providers would be supported with lateral flow testing. PPE had been provided where needed or requested and all schools had access to their own suppliers for this. Input and

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information sessions had been held for schools for HR, health and safety and any public health questions. Post 16 skills service would also open fully from 8 March with their testing processes up and running.

The Chair advised that he was confident in the preparations made and thanked all those involved.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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