

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a virtual meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday, 7 January 2021** at **10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor M Swinburn
(Chair in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D	Dunn L
Cessford T	Lang J
Daley W	Stow K
Dickinson S	Wallace R

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A	Lennox D
-----------	----------

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Houghton L	Sanderson J
------------	-------------

OFFICERS

Angus C	Scrutiny Officer
Aviston S	Head of School Organisation and Resources
Dixon L	Democratic Services Assistant
Hartwell A	Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support
Kaur S	Principal Social Worker
Kingham A	Service Director - Education and Skills
Little L	Senior Democratic Services Officer
McEvoy-Carr C	Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services
Reiter G	Service Director - Children's Social Care
Street D	Deputy Director of Education

ALSO PRESENT

Renner-Thompson G	Cabinet Member
-------------------	----------------

114. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair, on the first meeting of the year, took the opportunity to thank everyone for their work over the last twelve months. He highlighted especially the amount of work undertaken over Christmas by Council officers, teachers and support staff within schools, when they should have been on holiday, and offered the Committee's thanks for their massive efforts.

115. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from P Rickeard.

116. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 3 December 2020 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

117. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Scrutiny Officer advised that the National Funding Formula and 2020/21 School Funding Report was on today's agenda and that the annual report on School Admission Arrangements would be considered at the meeting in February. The Budget 2021-22 and Medium Term Financial Plan would be reported to the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee for pre-scrutiny on 8 February 2021 with all Scrutiny Committee Members invited to attend.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for January to April 2021 attached as **Appendix A** to the signed minutes be noted.

CABINET REPORT PRE-SCRUTINY

118. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

National Funding Formula and 2021/22 School Funding

The Cabinet report attached as **Appendix B** provided an update to Cabinet regarding the National Funding Formula (NFF) and the implications for 2021/22 School Funding in Northumberland. A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources with Councillor G Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member in attendance. In drawing attention to the support of the Schools Forum and Schools for the 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block, Members were advised that this support was due in some part to the success of the Inclusive Education Team and a report would be provided to Schools Forum on the impact the Team was having. The details of the final Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) had now been received and it was confirmed that this was an increase on the estimated figure with just over £203m to be made available to Northumberland. The implications and details of this were

currently being looked at and details would be available in the middle of February. It was highlighted in paragraph 9 the estimated DSG figure should read £202,622,277.

The Committee welcomed the increase in funding and were pleased to see the involvement and recommendations of the Schools' Forum.

A discussion was held on the 0.5% transfer from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block which questioned if this figure would be sufficient given the current Covid situation. The Committee received assurance that this value remained appropriate.

A further report would be provided to this Committee once the final figures had been allocated to allow the Committee to maintain an overview on funding to schools during the coming year.

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

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

119. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

119.1 Annual Report of the Principal Social Worker

The report attached as **Appendix C** advised and updated the Committee about the input and work of the Principal Social Worker in 2019/20 and provided an overview of the quality of practice and development needs of frontline social workers. S Kaur, Principal Social Worker provided an introduction to the report highlighting the key issues. In referencing the outcome of the Ofsted inspection of Statutory Children's Services undertaken in January 2020 where Northumberland received a "Good" rating she advised she was proud that the workforce had been recognised for their work. She outlined the challenges faced during Covid but advised that closer working with other agencies and the sharing of information had resulted in improved practices enabling children to be kept safe. Recruitment and retention of experienced Social Workers remained an issue. The Academy had been scaled up with 17 newly qualified Social Workers joining in September 2020 however there would be no spring intake in 2021 due to Covid, but it was hoped a double intake would be able to join in August 2021. There had been a higher turnover in Social Workers which was also reflected in other local authority areas in the North East, but was still lower than the national picture.

Councillor Daley highlighted the transformation of Children's Social Care under the leadership of Cath McEvoy-Carr, Graham Reiter and Su Kaur and the excellent work of the Academy in mentoring and the guidance provided to the newly qualified Social Workers who were part of this. In response to his question regarding the possibility of encouraging those who had retired or left social work to return to work or the transfer of experienced staff to assist, Members were advised that this had been tried, however there had been very

little take up with those coming forward not necessarily having the relevant skills.

Councillor Campbell in recognising the tremendous work undertaken by Social Workers in their efforts to keep children and families safe, secure and together, felt that public perception needed to change to recognise this rather than just thinking that the involvement of Social Services meant removing children from their families. In response to a question regarding the impact of Covid, the Committee was informed that whilst this was a difficult period, staff sickness had dropped and staff had been very resourceful in addressing the challenges of visiting homes and having direct contact with children which needed to be balanced against their own safety. Some of these flexible and creative solutions could be embedded in future service delivery.

In terms of the sickness levels, as queried by Councillor Dickinson, it was clarified that the figures provided were up to September 2020 which covered part of the pandemic. In response to a questions related to parents blocking contact with children during the pandemic and reassurance that children were being protected, the Committee was advised that whilst some contact with vulnerable children was being carried out virtually, the most at risk had been prioritised and face to face contact maintained. The appropriate steps and risk assessments had been put in place to ensure the protection and safety for all staff involved in providing this face to face contact. A range of quality assurance was in place to ensure that children were seen in the most appropriate way. Staff accessing the office environment were carefully monitored to minimise any impact of Covid on service delivery.

Councillor Dickinson also highlighted the review of Adopt North East which had been mentioned at Council the previous day and asked that this Committee be kept updated on this and he advised that it was imperative that appropriate officers from this Council were involved in this review.

The Members of the Committee along with the Executive Director thanked all staff, both front line Social Workers and those in supporting roles, along with residential staff, foster carers and all those involved in the care of some of the most vulnerable children, who had worked tirelessly to provide a service children and families in the County during this Pandemic. The Executive Director reiterated her thanks to staff and highlighted that Children's Social Workers were visiting family homes on a daily basis, taking children to appointments etc and whilst robust risk assessments were in place, they carried out their role without any hesitation and this should be recognised in line with the efforts of other front-line staff frequently highlighted in the media.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report and the work completed over the last year be acknowledged.

119.2 Education Strategy Board Update, December 2020

The report attached as **Appendix D** informed the committee of the development of the Northumberland Education Strategy Board which included the terms of reference, role of the Board, work programme and suggested membership. A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by D Street, Deputy Director of Education who advised that the Board would build on the foundations of the work already undertaken to improve outcomes for children and young people within Northumberland.

It was thought that the way in which young people would be represented would be an early decision taken by the initial Members of the Board with younger children possibly being represented by an advocate to work with groups and bring their views forward, but older or more mature young people actually attending the Board to bring forward the views of their peers. In terms of Governing Body representation, it could be that the Chairs of the Governors Briefings could be asked to put suggestions forward, but it would be expected that they were based either on geographical areas of types of schools and would represent the views of and report directly back to the Chairs of Governors Briefings.

Members welcomed the report and the formation of the Education Strategy Board and recognised the work undertaken by the Officers in raising the performance in Early Years, Primary and to some extent in Secondary education settings, which this would build on. A holistic approach was required with sharing good practice and learning across the whole County. Members were advised that problem areas and issues had been identified and the terms of reference designed to reflect and address these. A suggestion to include and engage with Private Schools was welcomed and this would be investigated. Mr Sanderson put forward a suggestion that the Board should also include a trade union representative and highlighted that there was an excellent representative at the private school Longridge in Berwick who could possibly be approached in connection with this. Mr Hodgson also advised that he had a connection with another private school which did outreach work.

In terms of schools which had not shown improvement, the quality of leadership had often been seen as a barrier and schools even within challenging areas had improved with the right leadership in place. It was hoped that the best leaders could be encouraged to join the Board to share their experience with those who had struggled.

G Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member advised that this had been a priority of the Administration which he had been happy to carry forward, however he would request that a Cabinet Member or appropriate Councillor be appointed to the Board. Councillor Daley also suggested that, as the development of the Board was linked into the North of Tyne School Improvement Strategy it would also be relevant to add a North of Tyne representative to the Board.

The Chair asked the items discussed, especially surrounding membership be taken forward.

RESOLVED that:

1. The development of the Northumberland Education Strategy Board be agreed;
2. The initial priorities of the Board be agreed; and
3. The plans for the Board to convene as soon as possible be agreed taking into account the comments made about membership.

119.3 Tootoot Briefing December 2020

The report attached as **Appendix E** informed the committee about Tootoot, a safeguarding app for use in educational settings. The report was introduced by D Street, Deputy Director of Education who provided the background to the development of the app and advised of the importance of allowing young people to have their voice heard. Some young people found it difficult to speak out and the use of the app provided them a safe way to do this. It was recognised that this was not the only app to do this with some schools choosing to use different systems, which could be partly based on the cost of the app and the strains on schools budget.

Members welcomed the report with the Chair advising that he had previously been advised that there could possibly be some negotiation in respect of the cost. He highlighted that not only did some young people feel unable to speak to an adult about issues effecting them, not all adults felt comfortable discussing these problems and this offered a way of reporting issues anonymously, although it was recognised that not all young people had access to a mobile phone or device on which to use the app. This offered an opportunity to address bullying along with other problems in a positive way.

The Chair also proposed an additional recommendation as follows:-

“How can the Local Authority assist more schools in adjusting their ways of working and to support schools and children in a more effective and modern way of working to respond to issues.”

Councillor Renner-Thompson advised that as Cabinet Member he welcomed the report and would support the inclusion of the additional recommendation. He had been aware of the app, which was now one of the leading anti-bullying apps in the Country, for a number of years and should be used as much as possible.

It was thought that cost was a factor in schools not utilising the app, as the majority were supportive when it was shown to them, however there were also other apps which were being used. It was considered that the most appropriate way going forward was to ensure that all schools had access to a digital solution and the use of any app to do this would be a great outcome for Northumberland.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The strengths and weaknesses of the app were noted;
2. The use and impact of the app by the Skills team were noted;
3. The future use of the app in Northumberland Schools be welcomed; and
4. The Local Authority assist more schools in adjusting their ways of working and support schools and children in a more effective and modern way of working to respond to issues

119.4 Current Performance

The report attached as **Appendix F** requested the Committee to consider current performance and the budgetary position for services within the Committee's terms of reference. The report was introduced by A Hartwell, Senior Manager - Performance and Systems Support who advised that this was the usual six monthly report and highlighted the key issues as outlined in the report. Members were informed that since the report had been published the number of children subject to Child Protection Plans had decreased and the figure was now closer to the national average. The level of exclusions had reduced and the numbers getting places at their first choice of school had also increased and was above the national average.

Members welcomed the report and Councillor Daley highlighted that the dedication, commitment, professionalism and experience of the Senior Leadership Team had resulted in this improved performance which had also been recognised by Ofsted.

RESOLVED that the current performance be noted.

120. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2019/20

The work programme and monitoring report was attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix G**. The Scrutiny Officer advised that as requested the updated figures in relation to the National Funding Formula would be provided at a future meeting. In response to a request for an update information report on the Joint School Improvement Strategy for the North of Tyne (NOT), the Executive Director advised that an update on all aspects of education for the NOT could be brought to Committee for information. Any requests for items to be added to the work programme should be forwarded to the Chair or Scrutiny Officer.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR _____.

DATE _____