

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 at Meeting Space - Block 2, Floor 2 - County Hall on Thursday, 17 June 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

C Ball
G Stewart
C Taylor

L Dunn
M Swinburn
T Thorne

OTHER COUNCILLORS

G Renner-Thompson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
R Grealley
A Kingham
L Little
C McEvoy-Carr

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Assistant Democratic Services Officer
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Adults and Children's Services
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Head of Inclusive Education Services

G Reiter
N Taylor

1 MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

A copy of the Membership and Terms of Reference for the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Meeting had been circulated with the agenda.

The Chair provided a welcome to the first meeting of the Committee and introductions were made by all those present.

C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services provided a presentation which gave a comprehensive overview of Children's Services.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

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Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Ferguson and A Scott along with A Hodgson and L Houghton.

3 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 1 April, 2021, as circulated, were agreed and signed by the Chair.

4 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for July to October 2021 be noted.

5 **SUMMARY OF NCC APPROACHES TO MEETING THE NEEDS OF SEND LEARNERS DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC MARCH 2020- MARCH 2021**

A comprehensive introduction to the report which provided information for the Committee on how the Council responded to the Covid pandemic in relation to children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND), was provided by N Taylor, Head of Inclusive Education Services.

G Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Children's Services commended the report advising that all staff involved had worked extremely hard to ensure the best outcomes for all children and young people. This was reiterated by the Committee.

There had been an increase in demand for services, especially around autism support and emotional wellbeing and behaviour, these services had become free at the point of delivery last year to improve equity which stood the Council in good stead during the pandemic period and also in terms of moving forward, allowing needs led delivery of support rather than relying on the availability of individual school's resources. Work continues in terms of reviewing the capacity of these support teams in particular. The number of statutory assessment requests continues to increase; this also leads to the need to keep capacity of the relevant teams under review, and to continue to work with schools to ensure consistent provision for children and young people with SEND. The Executive Director advised there was an increase in demand across all service areas within Children's Services and this would need to be looked at in a strategic manner. The Council was continuing to develop the working relationship with the CCG and there would be a better ability to predict some need and it would be a challenge but the Council would continue to try to adapt the resources available to meet the needs. Some innovative approaches had been introduced to meet immediate and medium term needs working with schools as the quickest way to meet demand. A number of colleagues from schools were being seconded to the Service to strengthen the resource in the short term, thus recognising the expertise there was in schools. Medium term plans would also add capacity. Assurance was provided that the Service understood the needs going forward, and sought regular opportunities to understand the needs of schools in support of learners with SEN.

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In response to a question regarding the learners who were not attending school, assurance was provided that monitoring was undertaken by the Education Welfare Team with comprehensive tracking and constant contact with the young people, families and schools taking place to build attendance back up with referrals to relevant services if required. Going forward the virtual offer around training in schools would remain, as attendance had been very good. A virtual support would remain for some students, on site visits to learners and schools had now been reinstated.

Concern was expressed regarding impacts the pandemic had on mental health as were outlined in the report however the Members recognised and commended the work being undertaken in respect of this. The current waiting time for primary mental health and CYPS was 4 weeks to treatment, which was radically reduced from 2 years ago, however referrals to school health took longer and work was being undertaken with the CCG to find solutions including working with the voluntary sector. Referrals to the Emotional Wellbeing and Behaviour Support Team had been kept open until the end of term with responses being provided in two to three weeks. Members were referred to the Covid parent/carer survey available online which provided some honest comments and feedback from families of children and young people with SEND about their experiences of the first national lockdown and its impact on them. The Executive Director commented there were a number of ways to access services at a lower level before being referred to CYPS with a number of services being available at the level of early intervention but advised that it was important to understand the pathway and whether there was an emotional or behavioural issue or it was a mental health issue.

The Chair echoed points made by a number of Members in relation to the huge gratitude to all staff within schools for the work they have carried out, during the pandemic. He advised that the Council would provide evidence to the Public Inquiry on Covid on the positive impact that local authorities could have.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and the support provided over this period be recognised.

6 **WINTER SUPPORT GRANT UPDATE**

The report provided updated information regarding delivery of the Winter Support Grant during Spring Term 2021, including the provision of Free School Meals (FSM) over the February half-term and Easter school holidays and the roll-out of the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) at Easter. S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources presented the report to the Committee with Councillor Renner-Thompson stating that the Council had been keen to use the voucher system following initial criticism of the quality of the food parcels in some neighbouring authorities and that the use of the HUGGG vouchers had been very successful within Northumberland. Some FSM funding had also been disseminated via local arrangements. Data was not yet available for the Summer half term as the vouchers, valued at £20 per pupil per week, were still live.

In response to a question regarding the uptake of the vouchers it was clarified that data had shown that Northumberland had the highest uptake in the Country

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of those using the voucher system however due to the way the system worked there was a lag in the data related to families moving between different benefits and there were other families whose circumstances had changed and they no longer required the vouchers. The Co-op IT systems had not been able to accept the HUGGG vouchers and therefore gift cards purchased by the Council had been provided to some families to allow them to access the support. Whilst schools had contact information for children and therefore the vouchers had been able to be provided directly to families, in some post 16 settings the vouchers had been provided directly to students and therefore it had been more of a challenge to get the same level of uptake, therefore different ways of providing funding were being looked at for these students in the future.

The holiday activities had been targeted to those receiving FSM, however they had been opened more widely but there was a challenge to manage the numbers accessing the activities. E Richardson, Senior Manager Specialist Services would be asked to provide more information to Councillor Ball on this. Information would also be requested from the Communities Together Hub on the breakdown of discretionary funding provided in respect of utility bills etc.

A campaign had been run to promote to encourage parents to apply for FSM and whilst numbers had increased, these had now plateaued. The promotion of FSM was also part of the standard consultation strategy in schools as FSM also brought in funding for the schools themselves. Work would continue to get the best uptake of FSM. Reconciliation of the Government grant was now taking place, but it was expected that this had been spent in full and no funding would be returned to the Government.

RESOLVED that:

1. The content of the report and the successful implementation of the initiatives undertaken with the funding from the Winter Support Grant be noted.
2. The strategy, roll-out and benefits of the activities for children and young people organised through the Holiday Activity Fund across Northumberland during the Easter Holiday be noted.

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

Members were reminded to contact the Chair or the Scrutiny Officer with any items that they would like to be added to the work programme.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that he was working with Human Resources and the Centre for Scrutiny to provide some training for Members on scrutiny and how to deliver effective scrutiny. Once details were known information would be provided to Members and they were encouraged to sign up for the training. The Chair stated he was keen for the Committee to be Member driven and highlighted the work undertaken by Councillor Swinburn and the Exclusions Task and Finish Working Group which had a transformation effect on the level of exclusions in the County.

In response to a question in relation to the Northumberland College and a

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potential new build by the DfE, the Executive Director advised that a report could be provided to the Committee in due course

The Chair advised that the meeting in September would start at 9 am to accommodate another meeting.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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