

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 1, Floor 2 - County Hall on Thursday, 2 September 2021 at 9.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
D Ferguson
M Swinburn
T Thorne

L Dunn
G Stewart
C Taylor

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson

D Lennox

OFFICERS

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

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Head of SEND Strategies
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Adults and Children's Services
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Complaints Manager - Children and Education

G Reiter
K Willis

ALSO PRESENT

G Renner-Thompson

Cabinet Member

Around 1 member of the press and public were present.

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from L Houghton and J Sanderson.

9 MINUTES

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The following people had been marked as present on the website version of the minutes however their names had not been pulled through onto the paper copy:

Reverend D Lennox, P Rickeard and J Sanderson

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 17 June 2021, as circulated, were agreed and signed by the Chair with the above amendment noted.

10 FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Scrutiny Officer highlighted that there were 2 items for pre-scrutiny by this Committee for the October meeting.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for September to December 2021 be noted.

11 SCHOOLS FORUM ROLE AND DECISION MAKING POWERS

S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources introduced the report which provided further information to the Committee on the role of the Schools Forum, including its powers, consultative role and the impact of this in relation to School Funding in Northumberland for 2021/22. Members were advised that the ESFA had now adopted road distance rather than "as the crow flies" distances to calculate pupil distances when calculating sparsity element following lobbying from the Schools Forum.

In response to questions from Members the following information was provided:

- Members of the Forum was made up from representatives from both maintained Schools and Academies, the Diocese, Post 16, Early Years and Trade Unions with a mix of Chairs of Governors and Head Teachers.
- The overall school funding had increased last year, however where the funding had dropped within 6 schools this was due to the drop in pupil numbers as the National Funding Formula had introduced pupil led funding rather than generic factors as had previously been the case.
- The Cabinet Member for Children attended the Schools Forum as an observer.
- The difference between the values for Low Attainment Primary between NFF Values and NCC Values in Appendix 1 of the report was due to the precedent previously set by this Council. The Council paid over the national target for deprivation for Free School Meals. This year part of the process would be to change the balance however it was stressed that both were targeted at the same pupils.
- School finance figures could be provided to the Committee for information on an annual basis.
- A report to Schools Forum regarding school balances was provided on an annual basis and this had shown that more schools had more funding in their balances. A number of schools which had been in

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deficit had significantly reduced their deficit over the last few years and these were monitored, assisted and supported by the Council to do so. Additional funding had also been provided to schools to assist them through the very difficult last few months.

Members welcomed the report and congratulated the Forum on its success with the sparsity funding. The Chair highlighted that within Northumberland the Schools Improvement Team worked closely with all schools, including Academies to improve performance.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

12 **SEND REVISIT MAY 2021**

C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services provided a brief introduction to the report and a presentation was provided by S Barron, Strategic Lead for SEND & Designated Clinical Officer. A copy of the presentation would be filed with the signed minutes. The Executive Director advised that she had been very pleased with the outcome of the visit. She also took the opportunity to thank all involved, which included parents/carers, children/young people, schools and health colleagues and local authority representatives who had strived to improve the services offered to children and young people with SEND and advised that this work would continue.

Members were advised that the visit had focussed on the three areas of weakness previously identified and it had been found that sufficient progress had been made and as such would no longer be subject to the formal quarterly support and challenge visits from the DfE and NHS England. Inspectors had found there had been a seismic change in the leadership and culture since the 2018 Inspection and details of the strengths and how these had been achieved were outlined along with the SEND priorities to take forward.

A Kingham, Service Director – Education and Skills advised that a copy of the letter from Ofsted would be circulated after the meeting to members of the Committee. Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member stated that this was an excellent report with the visit being undertaken during a pandemic and also in the lead up to an Election and was a massive achievement and thanked C McEvoy-Carr and her team.

In response to questions from Members the following information was provided:

- The biggest factor to continue to drive improvements to the service would be to listen to the children, young people and their families to assist in understanding their needs and how these can be supported, embedding these in service delivery in order to achieve a service which met their needs.
- There were a number of ways to measure progress however the key one would be through the Whole Education Programme which provided schools with a self-evaluation tool which would allow the service to track and monitor progress. On an annual basis there would be a set of priorities and targets identified and a number of officer sub-groups would continue to operate with the aim of improving the service to

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children and young people with SEND. A lot of work was being undertaken at the current time in relation to those with ADHD and SEMH to help mainstream schools to become more inclusive. The Executive Director advised that there was also a SEND Strategic Board which met on a regular basis and held each of the partner agencies and the Council to account, and at which they needed to demonstrate the progress that had been made.

- Increasing inclusive education did not necessarily mean that there would be a cost increase as it was about doing things differently and opportunities to invest to save would be looked at which would hopefully reduce costs in the longer term.
- Grants from Central Government had been used to expand capacity for SEND pupils with the development of the Ashdale Centre and increased capacity at Hexham Priory along with the trial of ARPS within the Seaton Valley partnership. The Local Authority had also allocated £17m within the Medium Term Financial Plan to invest over the next three years to grow capacity and provide special schools, with £1m of that already allocated for the SEND Free School. There was a substantial amount of funding available to support growing capacity.

Members welcomed the report and the progress that had been made and offered their thanks and congratulations to those involved.

RESOLVED that:

1. the information be noted;
2. a regular update be provided to allow the Committee to provide advice and support.

13 **PEER REVIEW FOR CARE LEAVERS SERVICE-UPDATE REPORT**

G Reiter, Service Director – Children’s Social Care provided an introduction to the report which updated the Committee on the actions to be undertaken following the Peer Challenge undertaken in September 2018 including a current view of the offer for care leavers in Northumberland. Details of the recommendations made by Mark Riddell, had been reported to the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group which provided detailed oversight of the service.

Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member advised that he had taken part in the inspection by Mark Riddell, who had commented that the leadership and political leadership was driving forward improvements. The Cabinet Member had requested additional training be provided to members of the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group on their responsibilities as corporate parents. He also stated that he had asked that HR policies within the Council, Advance Northumberland and Active Northumberland be looked at to explore what could be done to assist care leavers into jobs and apprenticeships within these entities.

Mr Reiter advised of the work undertaken by the Fire and Rescue Service in mentoring and preparing care leavers for adulthood and it was hoped that this could be replicated across other areas of the Council. It was clarified that whilst information provided had been very useful, some of the recommendations made by Mark Riddell, which had been based on his past experience, had not been

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taken forward as they were not thought appropriate for where the Council was at the current time.

A continuous improvement plan was monitored on a monthly basis and more detailed scrutiny was undertaken by the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group. Details of the training to be provided would be shared once this had been finalised.

Mr Reiter was thanked for the report.

RESOLVED that:

1. Members were assured that there was an action plan to take forward improvements to services for care leavers as part of continuous improvement planning in children's social care; and
2. Members would continue to have an overview of the Northumberland offer for care leavers and understand their role as corporate parents for care leavers.

14 **COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021 - ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE, AND CONTINUING HEALTH CARE SERVICES**

K Willis, Children's Social Care Complaints Manager provided an introduction to the second part of the report which was a statutory requirement under the Children's Representation Regulations on how the Council deals with complaints from young people. She advised that it had been found that more adults used the complaints process with not so many young people as there were lots of ways in which the young people could bring forward their issues which in turn led to them being resolved at an earlier stage within front line services.

Councillor Daley, Chair and C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director advised that complaints were now always seen as an opportunity to learn and ensured that the messages they provided were used to improve practices for the future. Where compliments were received the Executive Director and Service Director always tried to celebrate and recognise these and provide positive feedback to the staff involved.

It was confirmed that separate reports would be provided in future in respect of Adult and Children's social care complaints.

All information was dealt with as an enquiry at first and passed to front line services for resolution. If it could not be resolved by front line services, it would then be referred back and it would be recorded as a complaint either under the Children's Social Care Regulations or if it did not fall within this remit then it would be dealt with under the Council's Corporate Complaints System. The stages of the complaints were outlined and if a complaint was not resolved during the process then the complaint could be referred to the Ombudsman.

It was clarified that a comparison with Durham had been provided as this was a similar authority and was dealt with by the Ombudsman under the same category, it had not just been chosen as it was a neighbouring authority.

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Members welcomed the report and thanked the Officers.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

15 **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT 2021/22**

The Scrutiny Officer advised of changes for the October and November meetings in that there would be pre-scrutiny of the Education Infrastructure Contribution Policy in October and therefore the report on the Children's Home Placement Sufficiency would be moved to November.

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 Chair also invited suggestions for themed scrutiny, and advised that it was hoped that the meetings could be held in alternative locations around the County.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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