

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 in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Thursday, 10 November 2016 at 10.00am.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Gallacher
(Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Cartie, E.
Dale, P.A.M
Foster, A.H.

Homer, C.
Murray, A.H
Smith, J.E.

PARENT GOVERNOR REPRESENTATIVES

Bickmore, A.

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Lennox, Rev. D.

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Dyson, C.
Payne, S.

Woolhouse, R

ALSO PRESENT

1 observer

OFFICERS PRESENT

Bowers, H. A.

Democratic Services Officer
Team Leader (Scrutiny/Regulatory),
LSCB Business Manager,
Safeguarding & Looked After
Children

Harper-Coulson, R.

Johnson, A.
McEvoy, C.

Director of Education and Skills
Service Director, Children's Social

Ch.'s Initials.....

Mead, P.	Care Independent Chair, Northumberland Safeguarding Children's Board
Roll, J.	Democratic Services Manager
Spaven, L.	Family Placement Service Manager

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E. Burt and L. Rickerby. Apologies for absence were also received from L. Atkin and P. Cunningham (church representative) and S. Payne (teacher union representative).

30. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2016, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

31. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

Members received the latest Forward Plan of key decisions for December to March 2017. (Forward Plan attached to the official minutes as Appendix A).

A member queried why St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Middle School, Ashington was not on the Forward Plan.

The Democratic Services Manager advised that consultation took place from 30 June until 28 July 2016. Due to the summer break, the earliest the final report could be presented to the committee was 15 September, therefore the next available Cabinet meeting for the final decision was 11 October. However, Legal Services had advised that 11 October fell outside of the 2 month period during which Cabinet would be able to make the decision. After taking legal advice, it was decided that the final decision could no longer be made by the Cabinet and must be referred to the Schools Adjudicator for consideration. All the relevant papers had been sent to the Schools Adjudicator on 17 October requesting that it be considered as quickly as possible and a decision was awaited whether not it would be approved. A date had not been given by the Schools Adjudicator, but as this was not controversial it was hoped that a decision would be made within weeks rather than months. Members would be informed of the outcome.

A document from the Centre for Public Scrutiny was circulated for members' information.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY THE CABINET

32. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Proposed Closure of St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School, Ashington

The Cabinet, at their meeting on 1 October 2016 considered a report of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee (attached to the official minutes as Appendix B). An extract from the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet was also presented for the committee's information (attached to the official minutes as Appendix B).

A member raised a query regarding the first and middle school sites and the costs to vacate.

Andy Johnson, Director of Education and Skills advised that he was unaware of the change in plans for the sites of the first and middle schools and could request further details. He had been assured by the Schools Adjudicator that a decision would be made in a matter of weeks however, it had taken slightly longer than at first thought. Apologies had been given to the diocese and he assured members that the delay had not held back any of the processes.

RESOLVED that the decision made at Cabinet be noted.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY SCRUTINY

33. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

33.1 Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board - Annual Report

The report provided an overview of the work carried out under the multi-agency arrangements for safeguarding children in 2015/16 and updated on issues identified (report enclosed as Appendix C).

Paula Mead, Independent Chair, Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board introduced the report which was presented to the committee annually. The annual report analysed and referred to priorities for 2015/16 and recommendations made for the previous year. Ms Mead referred to the key objectives and impacts as outlined in the report and added that during the Ofsted inspection earlier this year the board had been graded as good.

Members discussed the report, of which the key details and responses were:

- a member congratulated the board on the report and expressed that his thanks be conveyed which was endorsed by another member;
- concern that the Safeguarding Board would be abolished and replaced with partnership arrangements which was the proposed plan currently going through the legislative process following the Wood Review
- in response to a query, it was advised that the Board relied on a bi annual Section 11 audit undertaken so that the board could be assured that safeguarding arrangements within both statutory and voluntary organisations were compliant with guidance and statutory requirements. Within schools, Section 175 of the Education Act required governing bodies to ensure that safeguarding processes and information were kept up to date and accurate,
- the increase in numbers of children and young people who were 'looked after' on page 45; Northumberland had low figures in the last 2 -3 years but there had been a rise in national figures. The increase was for a number of reasons including those children placed at home with parents subject to a court order, children looked after with family and friends as well as a general demand trend.
- Could the current statutory responsibilities of the board be continued to be kept in place to meet the new Government regulations for 2019 and was the current policy being abandoned as the old system had failed to work ? the exact format or proposals was not yet known and changes were not expected until post 2018, but it was advised that discussions had been held with the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive who were happy for the arrangements to continue in the same way as before at this stage until the guidance was published.

Councillor Dale made a recommendation to ensure that a budget would still be available which was agreed by Councillor Cartie.

Some further discussion took place regarding the annual report in relation to future improvements, challenges, the capture of evidence and the sharing of information. In response to a query regarding the graph on page 46, Robin Harper-Coulson advised that information came from the board's scorecard and part of the Independent Reviewing Services Annual Report. All the appendices including the Independent Reviewing Service report would be posted on the Council's website which include the information regarding educational improvements.

Mr Harper-Coulson also referred to a recent development in relation to dealing with child sexual exploitation where a group of young people had devised a way of passing information through secure channels called the Pass it on campaign. This idea had been taken forward to NHS England and leaflets produced and recognised nationally. A member stated that she worked with young people and youth projects and was advised that info cards would be forwarded on to her. Mr Harper-Coulson also confirmed that leaflets had been circulated in a number of locations and also been promoted on the Look North programme.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report which had been very well presented and stated that a lot of excellent work had been delivered in Northumberland.

RESOLVED that the reported be noted and accepted with the committee's recommendations put forward.

33.2 Fostering Service Annual Report 2015/16

The report provided outcomes of the Fostering Service for 2015/16 in line with statutory guidance and regulation.

Liz Spaven, Family Placement Service Manager introduced the report which highlighted the outcome from the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection which judged that Children's Services required improvement to be good across the whole of children's services. Ofsted Inspectors spoke to foster carers during the inspection who had, however gave positive feedback about the service

She explained the fostering panel activity and number of panels; the number of foster carers approved and the number of children matched. The importance of increasing the number of foster carers is key to the service and links to the fostering marketing campaign.

Information was provided on data for the last 3 years for the total number of looked after children, number of children placed with NCC foster carers and the number of children placed with approved NCC family and friends carers.

Foster carers were provided with a high level of support from their allocated social worker. All foster carers were reviewed annually by an independent foster carer reviewing officer.

Members discussed the report, of which the key details and responses were:

- The number of panel members and training; All members had annual appraisals any training needs would be identified from this process;
- How successful was the recent recruitment drive? Attendance had not been particularly good in Hexham that took place at the request of the local MP but a good turnout in other Information Sessions on the annual plan;
- Recruitment of foster carers was on-going together with on-going promotional activity to raise the profile of fostering for Northumberland;
- The difference between the financial position in Northumberland as opposed to other LA's, for example, Newcastle; Patterns and trends had been examined in relation to the levels of allowances with a review to take place;
- The responsibility of the Agency Decision Maker;
- If there was a conflict of interest as both the Fostering and Adoption Panel had the same Chair; It was advised that as the Chair was independent, there was no conflict of interest;

- Fostering Changes and the refresher courses; courses were run by 2 staff over a 12 week period with the course being a weekly 3 hour session. It was mandatory for all foster carers to attend

RESOLVED that:

- 1) The report be noted;
- 2) The report and performance information in regarding to the period April 2015 - March 2016 be acknowledged.

33.3 Adoption Agency Annual Report

The report provided outcomes of the adoption service in line with statutory guidance and regulation.

Liz Spaven, Family Placement Service Manager introduced the report which outlined the outcome from the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers' from earlier this year. Adoption was a key judgement within the single inspection framework and Northumberland were rated as good by Ofsted.

Information was provided on the Adoption Scorecard and the explanation of the three indicators was explained to members.

The role of the Adoption Panels was explained and the on-going recruitment of prospective adopters. It was advised that the comprehensive adoption support plan for all children in adoptive placements and of NCC's Adoption Passport had been re-launched in October 2015, which had received good feedback.

Members discussed the report, of which the key details and responses were:

- National targets;
- How the adopter was monitored; it was advised that it was not necessary to monitor the adopter post adoption order. The LA had a duty of care to provide life long support in line with the regulations. Any families that live in Northumberland, that have adopted children can access the adoption support service. All children that are placed for adoption by NCC have a comprehensive adoption support plan.

The officer was thanked for the very informative reports.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) The report be noted;
- 2) The report and performance information in regarding to the period April 2015 - March 2016 be acknowledged.

33.4 Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression

The report provided members of Children's Services' performance within care proceedings 2015/16.

Cath McEvoy, Service Director, Children's Social Care introduced the report and outlined the performance issues regarding care proceedings and planning processes which had been highlighted by Ofsted.

The numbers of children in Northumberland dealt with by the courts in care proceedings had increased and a number of cases delayed beyond the national target of 26 weeks is a challenge for Northumberland..

The Public Law Outline (2014) had introduced a 26 week time limit for the completion of care and supervision proceedings in accordance with both the recommendations of the Family Justice Review and Children and Families Act.

Concerns had been raised regarding the delays in Northumberland, which were on an average, 33 weeks.

Plans were in place to ensure that all cases presented to court were well prepared with assessments completed. Measures were also in place to improve communication with the parties who worked in the family justice system and also the Lead Family High Court Judge HRH Judge Hudson. Regular meetings were now in place to facilitate and improve communication .

Members discussed the report, of which the key details and responses were:

- Further information regarding paragraph 5.22; A system had been developed to track and monitor cases to ensure that they are completed in a timely way.
- Better clarity on the graphs in future

Councillor Dale referred to paragraph 5.9 of the report and recommended of the benefit of undertaking further scrutiny in relation to the identified national issues affecting the rise in the number of care proceedings being issued. It was recommended that those indicators should be looked at and identified which ones were relevant to Northumberland and what was being done to address that, and ch was agreed by Councillor Smith.

RESOLVED that the issues identified be noted and a report be brought back to the Committee on 23 March 2017.

34. THEMED SCRUTINY

The Chair advised that a task and finish group was proposed to undertake themed scrutiny of the implementation of the Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs. The first meeting would commence on 8 December.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

35. Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Members considered the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme. (Work programme enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix G).

Members were advised of the following additions to the work plan:

January 2017

Director of Children's Services - Review of Test of Assurance
Determination of Admission Arrangements
Finance Report in relation to Educational issues

March 2017

Care proceedings and Public Law - issues identified by Scrutiny
Safeguarding Activity Trends Update - issues identified by Scrutiny

RESOLVED that the work programme be agreed.

36. INFORMATION REPORTS

36.1 Safeguarding Activity Trends Report

The report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix H) provided an analysis of social work activity trends and case allocation as well as highlighting national developments regarding the Department for Education safeguarding indicators.

Discussion took place in relation to risk assessment; prevention and early intervention.

A member queried whether there was a single point of access for referrals and information was given on the SPA programme which currently served Cramlington, Hexham, Ashington and Bedlington and offered a single access point for referrals. This will be rolled out across the whole of Northumberland by April 2017

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

36.2 Policy Digest

This report, available on the Council's website, provided details of the latest policy briefings, government announcements and ministerial speeches which might be of interest to members.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR

DATE