

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, 24 November 2016 at 10.00am.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Gallacher
(Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Burt, E.
Cartie, E.
Dale, P.A.M.
Homer, C.

Murray, A.H.
Smith, J.E.
Thorne, T.N.

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Cunningham, P.

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Payne, S

Woolhouse, R

CABINET MEMBER

Arckless, G.R.

Children's Services

OFFICERS PRESENT

Bird, M.

Team Leader (Scrutiny/Regulatory),
Democratic Services

Connor, M.

Senior Manager, Early Intervention
and Prevention

Hartwell, A.

Senior Manager, Performance -
Education & Safeguarding

Johnson, A.

Director of Education and Skills

MacDonald, K

Children's Senior Manager
(Residential Services and
Safeguarding Service IRO)

McEvoy, C.

Service Director, Children's Social
Care

Malone, C

Communications Business Partner

Purvis, A

Commissioning Support Officer

Roll, J.

Democratic Services Manager

Sanderson, J - Observer (Teacher Union)

37. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J.D. Foster and L. Rickerby, A. Bickmore (parent governor representative), L. Atkin (church representative) and C. Dyson (teacher union representative).

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Homer declared an interest in relation to the educational outcomes as her children attended schools in Hexham.

39. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

Members received the latest Forward Plan of key decisions for December 2016 to March 2017. (Forward Plan attached to the official minutes as Appendix A.)

At this point in the meeting, reference was made to copies of a letter about the future of St Benedict's Middle School, Ashington, which had been circulated at the meeting for members' information, following the committee's pre-scrutiny of proposals for the school at their last meeting in September 2016.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORT FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

40. REPORTS OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

40.1 Educational Outcomes for 2016

Mr A Johnson, Director of Education and Skills provided a detailed presentation about academic outcomes in the 2015/16 term. It included Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 as well as sixth form and post-16 outcomes. It also included outcomes for pupils with Special Educational Needs and vulnerable pupils. (Copy of presentation attached to the signed minutes of the meeting.)

The key headlines of the presentation were:

- Northumberland's good level of development (GLD) average score in 2016 had increased to 73.4%, above the national emerging average of 69.3% for the first time ever
- 83.7% of children sitting the phonics tests at Year 1 were working at the required standard, above the national average of 81%
- results in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 1 had all improved over the past three years
- the disadvantaged gap had closed over the past three years in all subjects but not significantly at Key Stage 1, and at was up 1.7% at Key Stage 2
- looked after children did worse at Key Stage 2 than their peers, but Northumberland performed better when compared to other areas
- there was a large variation in performance school by school, with a significant number not doing as well as they should
- 87.79% of Primary and First Schools were rated as good or better
- there was a varying range of attainment of 5 or more A* to C GCSEs across the county, with individual schools ranging from 29% to 76%. Some schools were in special measures
- the percentage achieving a Grade C or above in both English and maths had increased from 59.5% (validated) in 2015 to 61.0% (unvalidated) in 2016
- Northumberland was in the bottom 20% of the social mobility index and an identified 'cold spot'
- Northumberland was roughly in line with its neighbours, statistical neighbours and the national average in terms of attendance and also broadly average for exclusions
- details of outcomes of pupils receiving special educational needs support
- the scorecard for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- post 16 outcomes: student numbers had increased by 143 since 2015.

Detailed discussion followed, of which the key details of members' questions and the responses from the Director of Education and Skills were as follows:

A member queried why some schools were underperforming in EYFS years and that some underperforming schools were not in areas of high deprivation. Members were advised that the quality of leadership by both headteachers and governing bodies and the level of teaching at individual schools were all essential.

Northumberland had a number of small schools, which received considerably less funding as a result of their lower pupil numbers. This often resulted in a key barrier to school improvement. It was important to also note that there was not a simple pattern to this, as some small schools in Northumberland were successful. School performance had increased since 2013 but the Council had fewer powers to intervene due to an increasing number of schools becoming autonomous.

The portfolio holder added that the information provided was open and honest and much work was undertaken to identify and work on issues needing attention. Big changes had taken place in how schools were supported. Academisation resulted in fewer resources for the Local Authority to support schools and further fractured the school system. Work took place with other Local Education Authorities to address

concerns about the level of resources available. It was suggested that concerns about the level of resources available could be raised with local MPs.

A member stressed the importance of working with headteachers and governing bodies and making difficult choices when required. The disadvantaged gap was concerning and it was essential that all children benefitted from their education. It was essential to demonstrate to schools the benefits resulting from being judged as good or excellent. Members were advised of how much work had taken place in recent years to address concerns. Many headteachers and governors attended meetings at County Hall to discuss their school's performance and what they were doing to make improvements.

A member questioned what could be done to seek support from the Regional Academies Commissioner when academies under performed. Members were reminded that the responsibility for academies lay with the Secretary of State who delegated this to the Commissioner, who monitored the academies. The Council was limited to raising its concerns with them both. The Commissioner could either seek a new sponsor or close an academy, but didn't micromanage schools. The capacity to challenge and hold to account were strong but schools could not be micromanaged. The Government's strategy for establishing multi-academy trusts might result in further changes.

In response to a question it was noted that the social mobility index had been published two weeks previously and details could be circulated to members. As Northumberland was in the bottom 20% and defined as a 'cold spot' it would receive additional funding, although it was also noted that the Autumn budget statement confirmed that schools in deprived areas would not receive additional funding.

Replying to another query, it was clarified that the educational attainment of looked after children was below their peers in Northumberland but was higher than the national rate.

Regarding what else could be done to help, the Director of Education and Skills referred to the five key action points from the last year: developing real partnership work; recruiting good new teachers and supporting existing teachers; attracting more headteacher applications to small rural schools; being unafraid to be open about issues and work closely with schools; and safeguarding children, particularly the most vulnerable.

A member expressed concern that over 10,000 children were not receiving the best education and stressed the importance of working together and helping schools in areas with less resource and parental support. Members were advised that more schools needed to set aside any differences and work together in partnership.

A member commented that the curriculum did not suit many students. As the careers service had gone and vocational opportunities reduced, many students could not see the relevance for them. Members were advised that several schools in the North East were working with Shotton Hall Academy in Stockton, which had a high proportion of students on free school meals. The headteacher did not have a

specific reason for the school's success, just a focus on high standards of behaviour and well managed staff. Northumberland's focus should thus be on leading schools well, high standards of teaching and student behaviour.

Reference was made to the 'London Challenge' initiative, school competition and having more vocational avenues for students to pursue. In response to a question about the impact of transition arrangements, members were advised that this was an essential phase and it was important for schools to adopt a partnership working approach.

A member referred to issues with academisation of schools in the west area of the county and concerns about the level of education in some. Challenges faced in the west area were acknowledged and members were advised that Haltwhistle High was currently in the process of recruiting a new sponsor, Bright Tribe. Work was taking place to ensure ensure a smooth process and discussions about how to get the best education. Meetings involving senior Council management were taking place about Haydon Bridge High School's situation.

A member drew attention to the varying levels of parents' engagement in their children's school work and whether there was any kind of correlation in results as a result? Members were advised that there were demographic factors involved and parental involvement did have an impact, but some schools in more deprived areas did succeed.

To conclude, the Chair thanked the Director of Education and Skills for his presentation and very professional answers to members' questions. He noted that the annual education report would be presented to the committee's next meeting in January.

RESOLVED that the information and the committee's comments be noted.

40.2 Inspection of Services for Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers (Ofsted SIF Inspection)

The report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix B) informed members of progress with the recommendations following the recent Ofsted SIF (Single Inspection Framework). The Service Director, Children's Social Care introduced the report with reference to details of areas identified as requiring improvements and monthly staff meetings to monitor action plans so that the requirements progressed. Of the 15 recommendations arising from the inspection, 10 were on track and five were showing some slight delay.

A member queried if staff at children's homes were understanding of members' visits and asked if the reports were scrutinised by officers and also made available for the next round of visitors? Members were informed that a robust reporting system was in place and senior officers received the reports. Arrangements were made to try to have young people available to speak to the visitors where possible.

Responding to a query on the rate of progress, 10 of the 15 actions were on track; one issue required an ICT reprogramme so officers could amend templates. A number of new ways of working adopted had created efficiencies.

A member referred to the recent safeguarding training for members and if arrangements would be in place for new members elected in May 2017. Members were advised that preparations were in place to ensure that newly elected members would have the information they needed as well as reinforcing all the work which had been undertaken already with current members. The portfolio holder highlighted some of the issues being addressed including social worker caseloads and drew attention to the Service Director's experience in other local authorities and Ofsted inspections and work taking this forward and challenging some procedures.

A member considered that the reports presented provided a good level of information in a good format to support this work going forward. The Chair added that it was essential how these reports were open and honest.

In response to a further query it was confirmed that the current inspection regime was different to that prior to 2012. The current inspection regime would end in 2017.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the work being undertaken to deliver improvements be acknowledged; and
- (2) it be agreed that the report provides sufficient detail to support the scrutiny process.

41. THEMED SCRUTINY

The Vice-chair referred to the new themed scrutiny's terms of reference to examine the way in which the Local Authority responds to the new Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and to report its outcomes to the Family and Children's Services OSC. The work would be undertaken over a programme of three meetings by a group comprising some members of this committee, beginning with a session on 8 December at 2pm. The group would then report back to the Family and Children's Services OSC meeting on 23 March 2016. If any more elected members wished to join the group they would be welcome.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

42. 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 attached to the official minutes as Appendix C.)

The Democratic Services Manager reported that there was just one change to make, as the 'Delivery and Commissioning of Children's Centres' report would now be considered under urgent business at this meeting, instead of at January's meeting.

RESOLVED that the work programme be agreed.

43. INFORMATION REPORTS

43.1 Performance and Finance Quarterly Report

The report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix D) presented Children's Services' performance and financial position for quarter 2, 2016-17. Copies of a larger A3 print of the performance information were circulated at the meeting, to provide clarity and updated information (copy appended to official minutes). The Senior Manager, Performance - Education & Safeguarding advised that the 'trend' category was not to be taken into account as it was going to be removed from the corporate system. The traffic light colour system enabled a comparison between the latest available results, the 2015-16 performance and current targets.

Discussion followed of which the key points from members and officers' responses were:

- in response to a query about whether the target of 80% for the number of young offenders in suitable education, employment or training (ETE) was too high, members were advised that this was a national target previously set which had been retained as it had been deemed appropriate at the time of setting targets in March 2016
- the number of indicators categorised as 'red' on current performance had remained consistent recently
- responding to concerns about the figure of the number of children living in poverty, members were advised of the link between social worker caseloads and levels of neglect and poverty. The Council had a sophisticated means for mapping area based data, and rates varied across the county. The adult learning service tailored courses to parents and young people and considered local levels of poverty and the need to support employment opportunities
- consideration was also being given to including a 'amber' category in the indicators in addition to the red/green ones, as this would be more reflective of categories for which the latest available data was very close to the target for example the safeguarding referrals level was only 0.2% from its target. This was to be discussed with the lead officer in Corporate Resources.

Discussion also took place about the frequency of reporting and whether the issues could be referred to the portfolio holder more often. Members noted that the Cabinet portfolio holder was regularly briefed on the key indicators and the Deputy Chief Executive and other officers discussed the information on a monthly basis. The

Service Director, Children's Social Care would highlight for the committee any issues requiring attention.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and issues identified for further scrutiny be noted.

43.2 Regulation 43 Summary Reports (Regulation 44 Summary Reports, Children's Homes October 2015 - September 2016)

The report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix E) presented an overview of Regulation 44 Children's Home Regulations and Quality Standards April 2015 reports/independent visits. It also monitored Regulation 4 reports of visits by the Independent Regulation 43 Visitor to Northumberland children's homes completed during the reporting period. The Children's Senior Manager (Residential Services and Safeguarding Service IRO) further introduced the report and provided details of the ratings of and activities at individual children's homes.

Key points from members included:

- it was requested that copies of reports about individual visits should be provided for members further in advance than on this occasion. Members were advised that the format for the provision of this information was currently being considered. These particular reports were confidential so could not be publicly accessible but would continue to be circulated to members
- staff involved were congratulated for their work. It was an excellent and very positive report and demonstrated the staff's good working practices
- members' visits to the homes were not statutory but were very important
- improvements made to some of the homes were praised, especially at Kylee House.

Members were also advised of several approaches used to manage any challenging behaviour from young people in the homes and the strong relationships built between the young people and staff. There was a strong ethos about valuing people. The Chair concluded by congratulating all the staff involved and welcomed such a good news story.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted and issues identified for further scrutiny be noted; and
- (2) consideration be given to arrangements for the provision of reports about individual visits to children's homes.

43.3 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.

44. URGENT BUSINESS (IF ANY)

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

Delivery and Commissioning of Children's Centres 2017-21

With the agreement of the Chair, the report (attached to the official minutes) had been circulated to the committee to be considered under urgent business as it needed to be pre-scrutinised before a decision was taken by Cabinet in December. Members were advised that the report had not been included on the agenda due to an administrative error.

The report and associated equality impact assessment were introduced by the Senior Manager: Early Intervention and Prevention, who provided members with an overview of the proposed plan for the delivery of children's centre services, set out how this aligned with the wider transformation of early help services within children's social care, and provided a recommendation for the future commissioning of children's centre services in the south east and central localities.

Members welcomed the significant work undertaken over the past year to make services more streamlined by removing activities which did not directly contribute to the core activities of the centres or were provided through other services, allowing resources to be targeted to those in greatest need. They welcomed a clear performance framework against which outcomes could be measured.

The following points were clarified:

- the age range for family support had been extended which enabled a whole family approach that provided support for children and parents. Evidence from elsewhere in the country had been considered as part of this process.
- one of the service providers, Barnardos, had received an inadequate rating in 2014 but had formulated an action plan and were due a re-inspection within 12 months. However the inspection framework had been suspended shortly before the 12 month period was due to end. Barnardos were disappointed that they had not had the opportunity to demonstrate the improvements they had made, however under the provisions of the contract this will not preclude them from submitting a tender but any potential provider will be expected to demonstrate how they can deliver a 'good' service.
- members were informed that early help assessment work could identify any ongoing significant issues and support informing what education funding was required for the future. This was integral to supporting children between the different stages.
- a member welcomed the changes and how they would save funding but queried whether there was still duplication with the role of health workers. It was confirmed that in some rural areas there was further work to be done to make sure services were organised as one plan, but this would take place with full communication with other services.

The committee welcomed the report and the proposals and thus:

RESOLVED that Cabinet be recommended to:

- (1) make note of the recommendations; and
- (2) approve the proposals in relation to the delivery and commissioning of children's centres for the period April 2017 to March 2021.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....