

## **NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

At a meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF** on **Thursday 16 November 2017** at **2.00 pm**

#### **PRESENT**

Councillor G Renner-Thompson  
(in the Chair)

#### **COUNCILLORS**

Cessford T  
Lang J  
Stewart G

Stow K  
Wallace R

#### **CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES**

Hodgson A  
Lennox D

Warner J

#### **TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES**

Sanderson J

#### **OFFICERS**

Aviston S  
Harper Coulson R  
Little L  
McEvoy C  
Smeaton B

Head of School Organisation and Resources  
LSCB Business Manager  
Democratic Services Officer  
Service Director, Children's Social Care  
Children's Improvement & Development  
Manager  
Family Placement Service Manager

Spaven L

#### **ALSO PRESENT**

Daley W  
Dodd R  
Mead P

Deputy Leader  
Business Chair (Part)  
NSBC Independent Chair

#### **46. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from D Campbell, K Nisbet, ME Richards, M Swinburn, S Payne, R Woolhouse and A Johnson.

#### **47. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 31 October 2017, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record.

#### **48. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

The published Forward Plan for November 2017 to February 2018 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

### **REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY CABINET**

#### **49. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

##### **Proposed Closure of Acklington CE First School**

The Committee was asked to note an extract from the minutes of Cabinet on 7 November 2017 which had been circulated to Members (attached to the signed minutes). The Deputy Leader advised that Cabinet had accepted the recommendation from this Committee that the school should close from 31 August 2018.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

### **REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY CABINET**

#### **50. REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

The report (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix B**) which was before this Committee for pre-scrutiny informed Cabinet Members about the outcomes from a Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigation into a complaint against Northumberland County Council children's social care.

The Service Director, Children's Social Care introduced the report to the Committee advising that this was the outcome of an historical complaint from 2013 with all points in the subsequent action plan having been completed or expected to be completed within the very near future.

It was clarified in response to a question regarding the taking of minutes in all meetings that notes were kept in relation to all key meetings where recommendations and decisions were taken, however whilst home visits were logged this would be a synopsis of the visit with key issues highlighted..

There were now robust computer records kept which provided an audit trail. The Deputy Leader stressed that this was an historic case and that issues with staffing and procedures had now been improved and lessons had been learned. He now had confidence with the service which was undergoing a cultural transformation.

**RESOLVED** that Cabinet be advised that this Committee noted the contents of the report.

## **51. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

### **Education Infrastructure Planning Policy Contribution**

The Head of School Organisation and Resources introduced the report (attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes) to the Committee. The report requested Cabinet to approve the adoption of a policy in relation to securing housing developer funding contributions for education infrastructure, to ensure the Council continued to meet its statutory obligations in relation to pupil place planning. She advised that it was hoped the adoption of this policy would allow a more robust and consistent approach in seeking contributions from developers. The figure of 5% or less capacity had been chosen as this had previously been accepted by Government and was in line with the pupil yield national factor used to estimate numbers of pupils per development. The Deputy Leader advised that this was a wide ranging comprehensive document.

In response to a question regarding increasing the percentage figure to 10% or 15% or it being negotiable to allow smaller schools to receive a bigger percentage, Members were advised that a number of small schools already had capacity. As part of the legal agreement funds would be provided for individual schools within the catchment area of the development. The scheduling of payments would form part of the overall agreement in relation to the payment of the S106 contributions. The SEN contribution was part of the 5%.

The Business Chair urged caution in respect of raising the percentage contribution due to the effect this could have on the viability of developments.

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

## **REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY**

### **52. REPORT OF THE PAULA MEAD NSCB INDEPENDENT CHAIR**

#### **Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) Annual Report**

The report (attached to the signed minutes as Appendix D) was introduced by Paula Mead, NSCB Independent Chair and Robin Harper-Coulson, the LSCB Business Manager. The report provided an overview of the work carried out

under the multi-agency arrangements for safeguarding children in 2016/17. A number of key achievements were highlighted including:-

- The four Early Help Hubs were now well established and provided an effective line of communication between the NSCB and frontline practitioners.
- Three serious case reviews had been undertaken with learning embedded through the prompt delivery on the actions plans.
- The training of taxis drivers in identifying child sexual exploitation with safeguarding conditions now built into Licensing policies.
- The launch of Operation Encompass which was now being expanded to involve GPs.

The Deputy Leader advised that the report was very detailed and highlighted the wholistic approach taken along with the embedded good practice and learning. He commended the report to the Committee.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee the following information was noted:-

- There were representatives from the majority of schools on the Education Reference Group which then reported to the Safeguarding Board.
- It was clarified that in respect of Ofsted it was the Local Authority that had required improvement with the Board being rated as good. The role of the Board was to support, challenge and act as a critical friend in terms of improving Children's Services in all agencies within Northumberland. The Service Director, Children's Social Care advised that the service had improved and agreed that a report would be brought to the Committee on the Service Improvement Plan at a future date.
- The Board had received assurances from groups and schools that work had been undertaken in respect of transgender pupils with the Early Health and Early Intervention Sub Committee receiving a presentation from Gill Finch.
- In respect of Encompass, the Police would assess any risk to children in relation to domestic abuse and a child concern notification would be submitted to both Social Services and the child's school. Information would be accessed on any previous notifications from the address, names or previous partners and would be sent to Social Services generally within 24 hours of any serious incident. This was a Police led initiative which was now being extended to include GPs.
- In respect of cyber bullying and potential grooming activities it was stated that all internet access was logged for looked after children in residential units. Work was to commence regarding a strategy to encourage parents to consider security when purchasing devices which was being led by the Police and Crime Commissioner.
- Each individual school had a designated safeguarding lead with meetings held on a regular basis. Any information provided to Ofsted from parents would be passed to Children's Social Services. Audits

were undertaken with schools required to provide information on how any safeguarding issues were addressed with spot checks undertaken.

- The figure in relation to budget income on Appendix 2 would be amended.
- Malicious/false allegations were sometimes made against teachers and other professionals which were dealt with by the Designated Officer. J Sanderson, Teacher Union Representative advised that he was not aware of any serious allegations at the present time and J Warner, Church Representative advised that the use of safe touch policies were encouraged in order to allow children to identify what was appropriate and what was not.

The Committee welcomed and commended the Board on the work undertaken and the detailed and comprehensive report.

**RESOLVED** that:-

1. The report be accepted and noted; and
2. A report on the Children's Services Improvement Plan be provided at a future date.

### **53. REPORTS OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

#### **(a) Safeguarding Activity Trends**

The Children's Improvement & Development Manager introduced the report (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix E**). The report provided an analysis of social work activity trends and case allocation as well as highlighting national developments regarding the Department for Education safeguarding indicators. The Deputy Leader advised that this was a very detailed report which was provided quarterly for the Committee. He advised that there had recently been a celebration for a cohort of newly qualified social workers who had been in post for a year and who were really passionate about working in Northumberland. There had been a transformation with caseloads better managed and work was ongoing towards the creation of a Social Worker Academy. He commended the report to the Committee.

It was reported that work was ongoing on how caseloads could be reduced, including the identification of ways in which newly qualified social workers could assist more experienced social workers in more difficult cases. The recruitment of experienced social workers was especially challenging. Caseloads were reported to management on a weekly basis with different options explored in balancing workloads dependent on the number and complexity of cases. Members were pleased that travel/car mileage was included in the weighting matrix. Management were aware of the correlation of sickness absence and the need to manage caseloads along with the impact of changes on children and families.

The number of looked after children increased following concern raised by Ofsted that this figure did not include those children looked after by family and

friends. The Officer advised that she was confident that the Local Authority met the Laming Recommendations.

**RESOLVED** that no issues were identified and the Committee noted the report.

### **(b) Adoption Agency Annual Report**

The Adoption Agency Annual Report (attached as **Appendix F**) to the signed minutes was introduced by the Family Placement Service Manager. The Committee was advised that in line with statutory guidance and regulation, all adoption agencies had to provide a report regarding the impact and outcomes of the adoption services. The Deputy Leader commended the detailed report to the Committee.

The Committee welcomed the good performance outlined in the report and advised they had no major concerns.

**RESOLVED** that the performance information in regard to the period April 2016 - March 2017 be noted.

### **(c) Fostering Agency Annual Report**

The Fostering Service Annual Report (attached as **Appendix G** to the signed minutes) was introduced by the Family Placement Service Manager. The Committee was advised that in line with statutory guidance and regulation, all Fostering Services had to provide a report on the outcomes of the service. The Deputy Leader commended the detailed report to the Committee.

In respect of recruiting and retaining foster carers, the Committee was advised that there was a regular dropout rate with carers resigning for a variety of reasons such as age, family situations and on occasions due to challenging placements. . The number of beds was the key figure, and support would be offered to carers who increased the number of children they could take. It was especially challenging to place sibling groups together. It was sometimes necessary to move children out of their home area but this would only be done in the best interests of the children when no other placement was available.. There was a robust procedure in place for the recruitment and retention of foster carers with a need for continuous training to be undertaken.

The Committee welcomed the report and advised they had no major concerns.

**RESOLVED** that the performance information in regard to the period April 2016 - March 2017 be noted.

### **(d) Regionalising Adoption Proposals Update**

The report (attached as **Appendix H** to the signed minutes) provided an update in relation to the development of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and an overview of the work with partners under the working title of "Adopt NE". It also advised of the proposed change to the implementation date from

the 1 April 2018 to the 1 October 2018. The RAA business entity would be subject to approval by Cabinet of each of the participating local authorities: Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead, North Tyneside and South Tyneside. The Service Director, Children's Social Care introduced the report to the Committee with the Deputy Leader stressing the need to get the right model in place.

**RESOLVED** that the Committee:-

1. Noted the update provided and endorsed the delayed launch date.
2. Noted that the preferred business model option for Adopt NE in the form of a Local Authority owned Joint Venture still stands, however work was ongoing to look at whether a hosted model might be viable.
3. Noted that the full business model which had been anticipated would be presented for consideration to Cabinet in late summer/autumn would now be delayed until the new year in 2018.

#### **54. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme was attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix I**. Members were reminded that due to the workload of the Committee meetings were now to be held monthly. New dates were included on the work programme, but there still might be movement with the dates items would be put before the Committee.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

#### **INFORMATION REPORTS**

##### **55. 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. Any Member who would like a printed copy should contact the Democratic Services Officer.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**CHAIR** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_