

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a virtual meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday, 3 December 2020** at **10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor M Swinburn
(Chair in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Cessford T
Daley W
Dickinson S
Dunn L

Lang J
Stow K
Wallace R

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A
Lennox D

Rickeard P

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Houghton L

OFFICERS

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

Reiter G
Richardson E

Street D

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Adult Social Care and
Children's Services
Service Director - Children's Social Care
Senior Manager Specialist Services - Poverty
Lead
Deputy Director of Education

ALSO PRESENT

Mead P

Chair of the Northumberland Strategic
Safeguarding Partnerships

101. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Campbell and G Renner-Thompson along with J Sanderson.

102. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 5 November 2020 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

103. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Scrutiny Officer advised that a few things would be coming onto the Forward Plan for this Committee in due course.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for December 2020 to March 2021 attached as **Appendix A** to the signed minutes be noted.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

104. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression

The report (attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes) was introduced by G Reiter, Service Director - Children's Social Care. The Committee was informed of the impact the Covid restrictions had and challenges faced on the public law system and the significant delays in decision making for some children not being able to move into adoptive placements or into family placements. The high number of cases already before the Court as the Country went into lockdown was highlighted, however Members were advised that this Local Authority had the second lowest rate of looked after children in the region and performance was still solid.

It was clarified that Courts were hearing cases where the child was at risk and every child would be in a safe place during this time, the severe impact on children was in relation to delays in them moving on to a long term or their permanent placement.

An Officer Task and Finish Group had been set up to look at the learning and methods being used for assessments during this time to ascertain what worked well and could be used in the future. The way in which the service had maintained contact with families was outlined and it was confirmed that a mix of virtual and face to face contact had been used. Throughout the pandemic social workers had continued to have face to face contact with full risk assessments undertaken to maintain social distancing and with the use of PPE, with this contact also being supplemented by virtual meetings.

Face to face contact had been reintroduced for families in Court proceedings and when children were in the final stage of the adoption process, to allow a last face to face meeting with their birth family prioritised as this was a very sensitive and emotional time for the families. The use of larger venues and settings had been utilised to allow face to face contact following risk assessments.

C McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services took the opportunity to sincerely thank all the social workers and front line staff who had remained at work and who had continued to do a very difficult job in extremely challenging circumstances supporting vulnerable children in the County. All their work was very much appreciated.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

105. REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT CHAIR OF NSSP, PAULA MEAD

Northumberland Strategic Safeguarding Partnership (NSSP) Annual Report April 2019 - September 2020

The report (attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes) provided an overview of the work completed by the NSSP from April 2019 to September 2020. A comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by Paula Mead, the Independent Chair who highlighted the transition into the Partnership, the learning being taken forward from the Reviews which had been carried out and the work undertaken during the current pandemic.

In response to the Committee's request for assurance that nothing was being missed during the pandemic, especially when children had been out of school and more was being done remotely, that the best care possible was being provided, the Independent Chair advised that was the question the Safeguarding Partnership asked their partners to explain and demonstrate how it was being achieved. They worked to get these assurances and a risk register which was compiled was owned by the different agencies with each agency outlining the risks and controls that had been put in place to overcome any issues. As an example she advised that there had been concerns about babies under one year old nationally with regard to the support being provided for new mothers where health visitors had been moved back into hospitals, however in Northumberland this had not happened and face to face primary birth visits were still being undertaken. Whilst it could not be said that everything had been perfect during lockdown, she considered that the responses received from the relevant agencies had been satisfactory and had been robustly challenged, which was the role of the Safeguarding Partnership.

Members were pleased to note that the Signs of Safety (SoS) model and the work being done in relation to fathers had been implemented, and the impact of domestic violence on children was being recognised. They found the report easy to read and contained the information required. In relation to mental health issues for children with regard to cyber abuse, grooming and the impact of this, the Independent Chair advised this was a top priority going forward

with work being done around the prevention of suicide and which involved a multi-agency approach. She highlighted the trailblazer programme and advised that she now felt quite positive about the work going on which also involved training for school staff which would help to support the endeavour programme. She would ask if the paper being presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board on this subject could be shared with this Committee. The waiting times for children to receive help had come down and an audit had been undertaken to ensure that this was being managed appropriately.

Councillor Daley highlighted the feedback from the Ofsted Inspectors in relation to the ILAC report and he thanked all the staff in Children's Services who had done an exemplary job in achieving a Good outcome in the inspection. The Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services advised that there were a number of programmes and support offers in schools for staff and students and a report detailing the mental health offers in schools and communities would be brought to a future meeting.

The Service Director – Children's Social Care advised of the work undertaken in relation to MSET and in identifying and disruption at an early stage and the prevention of young people getting to the formal MSET stage. There was continuing work on how this could be improved across the region. The JTAI had looked at exploitation and the possibility that data could be included in the action plan in the future would be explored.

RESOLVED that:

1. The contents of the report be noted;
2. A report on the mental health programmes and support offers in schools and the wider community be brought to a future meeting; and
3. A report to include data on the numbers of MSET children would be brought to a future meeting.

106. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Presentation on the Winter Support Grant and the provision of Free School Meals

The Chair advised that following his request for a report on the options for Free School Meals (FSM), the Government had now awarded funding to deliver FSM and a joint presentation was to be provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources and E Richardson, Senior Manager Specialist Services - Poverty Lead on the Winter Support Grant including support to families eligible for FSM. A report would now be produced in February to provide an evaluation of the FSM delivered from this funding. The presentation included the following information:-

Additional government financial support had been provided for families who were eligible for FSM during the first lockdown which included Easter, half term and summer breaks, however no additional commitment had been made for October half term. A high profile national campaign led to the Winter Support Fund being issued in November 2020 to support families and individuals up until 31 March 2021. The fund was not only to support eligible families who accessed FSM but was open to support the wider community. Northumberland's allocation of the grant was over £992k which would cover Christmas, February half term and Easter Holidays up to 31 March. Unlike the majority of the Country, the Easter holidays within Northumberland fell with one week at the end of March and one week in April, so this would require guidance from DWP so that there could be consistency across the country.

The grant had two criteria that the Council needed to deliver against:

- Household - 80% of the funding targeted at Children and Young People and their families and 20 % to others, i.e. individuals
- Provision - 80% targeted for food, fuel, water and utilities, the remaining 20% for other emergency assistance. In addition, the local authority would be required to monitor and report the spend and repay any underspend.

Based on projections of the numbers on FSM, the grant allocated to Northumberland would fully fund FSM during the holidays and would allow further wrap around services to be provided by Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) Team to reach households in need.

Three methods of delivering support to families was being proposed:-

- Where a school or academy already had an appropriate response in place, whether this was hot meals, vouchers, or food delivery, School Organisation and Resources Team would complete the simple transfer of funds to these schools to cover this cost to a maximum of £3 per day per eligible child.
- For all other schools and academies the local authority would offer a centrally funded vouchers system that would require cooperation from schools to administer.
- For rural communities where it was more difficult to access larger supermarkets physical gift cards for the local Co-op would be used as the Co-op did not have the infrastructure at present to provide electronic voucher.

The voucher system to be used was an existing vouchering platform already being used by schools which offered a choice direct to parents and carers of 9 supermarkets. It was free to use with 100% of funding going directly to parents and carers and which provided a refund to the Council on unclaimed vouchers. It was also proposed that the voucher scheme be offered to Northumberland care leavers, pupils that had been permanently excluded from school and students attending the Council's Post 16 adult learning provision.

To ensure all qualifying families were informed of the proposals and how to get their supermarket vouchers and the additional support available from the NCT Team for the Christmas holidays, a communication plan was being prepared which would start on Monday 7 December.

Using NCT would ensure the Council would be able to offer the wider supports required by the grant which was focused on household poverty "those who need" rather than just FSM. The Council would also look to provide discretionary funding for families claiming Universal Credit who might not satisfy FSM entitlement and would also include outreach work with partners to identify and reach those most at need. Further funding and support would be issued to existing local pathways for food, fuel, hardship and digital connectivity and isolation. These pathways had already helped thousands of families throughout the pandemic and had helped reduce stress and uncertainty during an already difficult time.

NCT would provide support to parents and carers throughout the Christmas period, through the work of the Hub and would ensure the most effective and appropriate pathway for residents at the point of contact. Residents could call throughout holiday to be connected to local support such as food provision (including hot food); utilities support via Citizens Advice; rights support; family support and for community activity and social contact. Calls outside of the NCT hours were handled by OneCall.

Members welcomed the proposals which were felt to be more structured and would cater for all residents within Northumberland including those in rural areas. Flexibility was required to allow support to be provided in the second week of the Easter holidays as whilst the £30 vouchers would have been issued, they might not have been spent by the 31 March 2021, as Government were requesting.

The Chair thanked the officers and their teams for both the presentation and the work undertaken and asked that Members also helped to communicate to their communities the help available. In respect of the extra work to be undertaken by schools in relation to the roll out of the voucher schemes, it was commented that this would be to provide contact details to the voucher company via a spreadsheet with some schools having changed to this scheme as it was less work than the local offers that they had previously had in place.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

107. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2019/20

The work programme and monitoring report was attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix D**. The Scrutiny Officer advised that the Winter Support Grant would be added to the programme for February and a report on

the mental health support for schools and data on MSET would also be added to the work programme.

CHAIR _____.

DATE _____