

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 27 September 2021 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Hood (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Cosslett, C Bell, M Currah, J Griffiths, C Hunt, L Kennedy, C Martin, K Rooney, S Townsend, C Varty, E Waldock and M Walton

Also Present:

Councillors M Simmons

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gunn, Mavin, Mullholland Reed and R Evans.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Coult was present as substitute for Councillor Mavin.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising

In response to a suggestion from Co-opted Member, R Evans following the discussion at the previous meeting, it had been agreed that all Members would be sent details of the previous Review of Elective Home Education that had taken place by the Committee.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

6 Overview of Child Protection Process

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services which provided an overview of the Child Protection Process in County Durham and the Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice gave a detailed presentation (for copies see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised members of the need for timely discussions when there were suspicions of a child suffering. Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) were held with 15 days and DCC were above the national average in the timeframe. This was a multi-agency conference that was chaired by an Independent reviewing Officer.

Members were provided with statistical information regarding DCC's performance in a number of areas in comparison with statistical neighbours and national figures. This statistical information related to the number of section 47 enquiries; ICPCs held within the year and ICPCs held within 15 days of a strategy discussion. Information was also provided in relation to Child Protection Plans (CPPs) reviewed in timescale and the number of CPPs open.

The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice provided the committee with information with regard to child protection plans by category which indicated that neglect was by far the most common primary reason for a CPP and was ahead of statistical neighbours in this category too.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice for his presentation.

Councillor Walton asked whether children on a Child Protection Plan (CPP) stayed with their own families or elsewhere and if they were monitored when the CPP had ended.

The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised that the vast majority of children on a CPP were with families and there may be a very small number living with an extended family member and there may be a plan to support the families. If a child was in care, they would not require a CPP as this action removed the risk and created a level of safety.

When a young person was no longer subject to a CPP, there would be a period of support which would be monitored with a Child in Need Plan which would include a social worker would be involved to work with the family. Once the needs had been reduced, they would be then supported by One Point, with offer a lower level of advice and support. The ultimate aim was that the family would be able to sustain the changes made under the plan.

Councillor Coult referred to the reasons outlined in the report for CPP's in place and asked what the Council could do to improve the area around neglect and although there was local comparison data, she would be interested to know what the situation was nationally. In addition, she asked what the Council could do to reduce the figures for open CPP's and the percentage open for one year but less than two years.

The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised that in terms of neglect, there were often multiple factors involved, however only the primary factor was recorded. He explained that there was subjective judgment involved in categorising cases and the service needed to explore this, as although there was a problem with Neglect and there was a Strategy to deal with this, the way in which cases were categorised could explain some of the difference between Durham and other Local Authorities.

In terms of what more the service could do to combat neglect, he was unable to go into any detail on the Neglect Strategy, however the Strategic Manager of One Point and Think Family Services would be able to provide further information.

With regards to reducing the length of time a child was subject to a CPP, the Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised that it was difficult to suggest any particular action that that could be taken to reduce the time a child was subject to a CPP as it was dependent on the level of concern, however the Council were in line with the national average. The child needed to be on a CPP for a period of time to effect sustainable change and the quality of the social worker and relationship building were factors in the success of a plan but the reasons children came to harm were multifaceted.

Councillor Martin advised that the data alluded to an issue in 2017-2018 where performance was not quite as good and then there was a steady improvement and he queried the reasons behind this and what improvement had been made. The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised that in 2016 the Council had received an Ofsted inspection rating of required improvement and there were multiple actions taken to continue to improve on that rating. One of the key areas of the Ofsted framework was to know where strengths and weaknesses were and the service now had a good audit process and combining good practice with this knowledge improved the overall picture of practice, which had been reflected in the more recent inspections.

The Chair queried whether there was a particular reason for less than half of the number of section 47 enquiries leading to a Child Protection Conference. The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised that at the point of the initial strategy discussion very little was known in relation to assessment work with the family and there were 15 crucial days of investigation that could lead to reassurance that the level of risk indicated at the point of the initial strategy meeting was not needed. There may still be a level of support and intervention, such as a Child in Need Plan but it may be that the case did not meet the threshold for a CPP.

Resolved

That the report and presentation be noted.

7 Relationship Based Social Work Practice

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director Children and Young People's Services Purpose which provided an overview of the progress being made within Children's Social Care to embed high quality relationship based social work. Practice and the Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice gave a detailed presentation (for copies see file of minutes).

Members were informed that children and families were at the centre of their practice as the quality of the relationship had a significant impact on achieving good outcomes for children and young people. Embedding a good relationship was of critical importance in creating good outcomes. This practice allowed trusting relationships to be built that facilitated honest clear assessments which therefore allowed plans to be aligned to concerns.

The Strategic Manager Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised of the key to ensuring that social workers have the time to build effective relationships was manageable caseloads and that caseloads are regularly audited. This practice had led to a reduction in complaints and an increase of compliments of the service. Ofsted too provided a positive summary in their recent inspection.

Councillor Hunt asked whether schools had any qualified support for early intervention and whether any teachers were trained to spot signs of neglect, or social workers were going in to do assessments. The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice confirmed that the service had a positive relationship with schools which assisted with early help and preventative work. There were strong locality meetings taking place with One Point who ensured that early conversations took place and if the statutory intervention threshold was reached, the case would be escalated.

There was also a Virtual headteacher, who had always supported Children in Care, but the remit has broadened to include children in need and children subject to a

CPP and this was a significant change to support and ensure that all vulnerable children had the support needed in school and were progressing educationally. In addition COVID-19 had strengthened the process for sharing of information between schools and social care.

In response to a further question from Councillor Hunt the Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice confirmed that the School Nursing Service was still in place and there was a requirement for all schools to have safeguarding leads within schools to ensure there was a good awareness and that signs were being identified.

He confirmed that the recruitment and retention allowance related to hard to fill posts and despite doing well in the recruitment of new qualified social workers, the service struggled to recruit experienced social work staff and therefore an allowance had been agreed and he would provide further details following the meeting.

Councillor Walton referred to the number of complaints and although it was good to see they were of a lower level she asked whether there was a common theme of complaints and whether any examples could be given. The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice confirmed that often the theme was regarding communication and the way decisions were communicated which ultimately came down to the relationship that a family had with their social worker. If the relationship was more trusting, the communication was better.

The Chair referred to the report which stated that at time of writing 85% had less than 25 cases and the average caseload was 19 however it had been noted in the previous minutes that the Head of Social Care had advised that council policy restricted caseloads to around 22 at any one time. He assumed numbers fluctuated due to the complexity of each case but asked if the service had the ability to examine the numbers and provide any further detail. In addition he asked how the Council were embedding the relationship based and trauma, whether it was through practice or training.

The Strategic Manager of Safeguarding and Professional Practice advised that Signs of Safety was an international organisation and there were tools and resources that could be accessed and a significant investment was in training. There were two day courses or five day advanced courses and although training was a core part of the implementation, it ran alongside government framework within the service to ensure that each part of child's journey through the service was as child and family focused as it should be. In addition, there were over 100 practice leads who had been identified to support colleagues and ensure people were supported and able to work to towards expectations.

Resolved

That the report and presentation be noted.

8 Developing a New County Durham SEND Strategy

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director Children and Young People's Services which provided an update on the development of the new County Durham Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy and invited Members to comment and provide a contribution to the new County Durham SEND Strategy Vision and Aims (for copy see file of minutes).

The development of the new strategy's vision and aims were based around six questions that were put to service users and stakeholders across County Durham. Members were advised of a summary of response that were received so far and of the emerging headlines from specific groups.

Councillor Townsend was grateful to see the positive value of neurodiversity being mentioned - as a mother of three children, two of who were Autistic, she dreamed that they would be valued for what they brought to the world rather than as a drain on resources, which it sometimes felt like. She praised Timothy Hackworth School in Shildon for their rights respecting agenda which fostered a great nurturing environment for children with or without SEN.

Councillor Townsend advised that people should not just value neurodiverse people who learned to mask and behave in a way that was acceptable to the neurotypical status quo and to put support in where it was needed and allow people to comfortably be themselves. This required a huge culture shift and to move away from telling children to have quiet hands or requiring eye contact and the stigma surrounding fiddling which were prevalent in all areas of society, yet none of those things meant that people were not listening or interested in what was being said.

Training was needed for teachers, governing bodies and teaching assistants. Councillor Townsend acknowledged that the strategy sounded brilliant like the world she wanted to live in, but did not live in at the moment and she was concerned that the Council did not have the facilities to put it in place. There were so many other issues such as the NHS, CAMHS funding and the legal framework that underpinned how children got SEND plans and EHCP's, which was a huge obstacle. There were also families excluded from help through not having a diagnosis and many of the plans including SENDIASS, which was a specialist help service for parents with children who had SEN, could not be accessed without a diagnosis.

In addition, Councillor Townsend believed there was an additional problem of off-rolling, where children were forced out of schools. She had been told her child did not have autism and that she was neglecting him, which was why he was unable to

communicate with his peers. This was happening in County Durham and sadly the reasons were based on fear of funding and how Ofsted ratings were affected by having children with SEND. She was happy to discuss her personal situation further, after five years of trying, he had finally been given an EHCP just as he was about to leave primary school, but she could not help but wonder what situation he would have been in if he got the support that he needed five years before.

The Strategic Manager, SEND Strategy and Assessment, advised that the SEN Strategy was deliberately ambitious and there were variations in provision, but the service wanted to ensure that it was right and stable. There were 11500 young people in County Durham with a SEN support plan and generally all of the services were able to be accessed through the support plan. For those with more complex needs, there was EHCP, 3600 and rising, the rate of plans going out of the system is higher than ever, the service were committed to increase casework capacity within SEN and had recently appointed 12 new support staff.

With regards to neuro-diversity, the Strategic Manager, SEND Strategy and Assessment, advised that this was an overarching strategy and there was already an established Autism Strategy which had been running for a number of years. He advised that Council services were not based on diagnosis, but rather the presenting needs of a child. He was aware that there were some services that required a diagnosis however that was not within schools and support services, or resources provided as a Council. Councillor Townsend offered to speak to the Strategic Manager, SEND Strategy and Assessment, with regards to the experience, following the meeting.

Councillor Coult was familiar with SEND as her son was in receipt of an EHCP and she welcomed the SEND Strategy as it was well overdue. It was extremely ambitious but SEN covered such a wide range of needs and it was crucial that these children were able to have a normal life, not labelled or stigmatised. It was important that these children went to local schools with friends where they lived and she alluded to the importance of having plans in a timely manner as the longer it took, the harder it was for families. She welcomed this and was more than willing to speak to the Strategic Manager, SEND Strategy and Assessment, to give more information from her perspective.

Councillor Walton advised that with regards to the aims of the strategy, there had been feedback indicating that families wanted improved communication and she suggested that this should be included in the aims.

The Strategic Manager, SEND Strategy and Assessment, advised that there had been a slight adjustment to the vision statement, however it could be made clearer as it was good practice and to be expected across all services.

The Chair commented on the statistics for EHCP's and acknowledged the difficulty for all local authorities since the Children and Families Bill had been introduced. Not

all SEND children needed an EHCP, however he was interested to know what are response rates were like for social care and health advice.

The Strategic Manager, SEND Strategy and Assessment, confirmed that not every young person would need the health and the care part of the plan, the systems in place for health care were picked up in Ofsted and Quality Care Council visits and found to be very strong in County Durham. Any health and care needs that were identified would then be considered with regards to their impact on learning and development. This was an area that the service wanted to continue to improve and there had been good quality assurance. A self-evaluation of all services in the County was being undertaken and the Strategic Manager, SEND and Assessment offered to return and confirm outcome and any plans for improvement.

In response to a question from the Chair with regards to children who were waiting for special school provision, the Strategic Manager, SEND and Assessment, advised that there was not a waiting list for provision but that did not mean there were not children who would benefit from a specialist place. In those instances the Council supported their provision, through funding through the High Needs Block, which ensured schools could make adaptations in order to create the correct environment in a mainstream offer. That did not mean there was not a pressure for special provision but he would return with more detail if required.

Councillor Varty advised that having ran a hub in a secondary school, it was nice to see friends supporting young people with SEN and although she agreed it was better if they were in mainstream schools, there was also a case for some to be in a special school.

Councillor Varty had been assisting a number of parents to fill in Disability Living Allowance forms, who were confused at having to deal with a diagnosis and then having to deal with filling in forms whilst trying to communicate with school. There were a few where communication had broken down with the school and she suggested that improved communication between parents and schools should be a priority.

The Strategic Manager, SEND and Assessment, acknowledged the challenges when it came to being diagnosed but highlighted that in school there was no need for a clinical diagnosis to access services. When considering young people with SEN, this tended to focus on social communication and interaction or neuro-diversity. There may be a clinical diagnosis at some stage and with regards to DLA that did carry some weight and similarly CAMHS could only be accessed with such.

Resolved

That the report and presentation be noted.

9 Quarter 4 2020/2021 Budget and Revenue Outturn and Budget and Revenue Forecast Quarter 1 2021/2022

The Committee considered reports of the Corporate Director of Resources (Interim), the first provided details of the outturn budget position and the second provided details of the forecast outturn budget position for Children and Young People's Services (for copies see file of minutes).

Resolved

That the reports be noted.