

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 7 January 2022 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Hood (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, J Cosslett, R Crute, O Gunn, C Hunt, B Kellett, C Martin, A Reed, K Rooney, M Simmons, S Townsend, E Waldock and M Walton

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Currah, S Deinali, J Griffiths, L Mavin, D Mulholland C Varty and Ms R Evans.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor V Andrews substituted for Councillor S Denali, Councillor R Crute substituted for Councillor C Varty, Councillor B Kellett substituted for Councillor D Mulholland and Councillor M Simmons substituted for Councillor L Mavin.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2021 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised Members that all but one of the actions had been followed up. The outstanding action related to the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing, specifically a question from Ms Evans regarding the impact of long covid on children and young people.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

5 Any Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised Members that a question had been received from Ms Evans regarding completion of the climate change category on the implications sheet. A response to the question had been sent to Ms Evans.

6 Child Poverty in County Durham

The Committee considered the presentation and report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services that addressed child poverty in County Durham since the last update in October 2020 (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager One Point and Think Family Services and Chair of the Child Poverty Working Group and the Research and Consultation Officer, Research Public Health Intelligence Team, were in attendance to deliver the presentation.

Members were provided with details of the vision and priorities of the Child Poverty Working Group.

Members were then provided with a demonstration of the information held within the child poverty section of the Durham Insight website that included a dashboard that was interacted and held the latest public data that was updated as soon as new information was released. There was however a time lag with the data and some data such as the Index and Deprivation was 6 years out of date but other data such as Universal Credit was at the most a month out of date.

The Strategic Manager indicated that the data received from the Research and Consultation Officer enabled the Child Poverty Group to target the resources in areas where they knew there were higher levels of deprivation and the highest number of children on free school meals.

Members were provided with details of progress made in the last two years including free laptops for school children. The Household Support Fund was £4.6 million from central government, 50% of this fund needed to be focused and targeted on families with children. Two support grants had been set up, one for Practitioners to identify vulnerable families to ensure they had essential household items and one grant for schools for cutting the cost of the school day, additional help and support was made available through referrals via the Advice in County Durham portal. They had also supported feeding families and delivered 1300 food hampers over the Christmas period to vulnerable families, kinship carers and care leavers. Additional support for vulnerable children and families was available on the Advice in County Durham (AiCD) portal, the development of 'Helping families manage their money' website and the School Benevolent Fund which they had recently taken over and was currently under review. There was also the Stronger Families Grant to support families with essential household items.

Members were then provided with details of the Healthy Start Programme that provided £4.25 per week until the child was four. A new digital application was shortly being launched for this programme. Details had also been provided of the 'Cutting the cost of the school day' programme raising the awareness of child poverty and the Department of Further Education Holiday Activities with Health Food and Fun that received £2.3 million of funding this year from the Department of Education. Funding had also been secured from Public Health and the Area Action Partnerships to ensure that all holiday periods were covered.

Details were provided of the County Durham Delivery Model and the Summer Programme activities that was accessed by 19,127 children over the summer, 48% of who were eligible for free school meals.

The Next steps were to conclude the review of the School Benevolent Fund, continue to develop and deliver comprehensive holiday activities with healthy food programme, refresh the cutting cost of school/pre-school day and develop and implement an inclusive offer to children, young people and parents/carers promoting accessible leisure services across County Durham.

Councillor Walton referred to the Advice in the County Durham Portal and asked what was happening for those people who were unable to access the portal.

The Strategic Manager responded that there were family centres in County Durham which provided families access to the portal. There were also leaflets available that provided advice that could be given to families who were unable to access the portal.

Councillor Walton then congratulated the team on the Enriching Holiday Activities with Healthy Food that had been a success in her division, and they had seen a huge uptake. They had also linked this by engaging with a sport provider to target the older children.

In response to a question from Councillor Walton the Research and Consultation Officer confirmed that some of the data on the Durham Insight website was historic.

Councillor Gunn asked if a report could be brought back to the Committee on the School Benevolent Fund on how it was going to be developed. She then referred to cutting the cost of the school day programme and that 106 schools had undertaken the training programme and asked if the Thrive Model could be placed on governing body agendas so that governors were aware of the programme and what it meant. She commented that poverty proofing leisure centres was excellent and indicated that culture was often missing and asked how families could access culture. She then suggested that it may be interesting to get the views of the youth Council which was a valuable resource for the Council. She then referred to Holiday Activities with Food which had come a long way, but she had some concerns

regarding the monitoring process that provided a heavy burden on small organisations who had no staff and asked if this could be looked at unless it was Department for Education (DfE) regulations in which case all they could do was lobby DfE. She then asked for further information on the vision for network family hubs.

The Strategic Manager confirmed that it was DfE requirements that was attached to the funding and two community workers had been recruited to work with small voluntary organisations as the information that the DfE required was extensive. They were currently looking into establishing a digital system that might help streamline the returns and would keep members updated on the progress. She then referred to the question around culture and indicated that they had recently taken a number of children to a pantomime, her thoughts around progressing culture were the opportunities around the City of Culture Bid and children would be involved in culture activities over the next two years. With regard to family hubs the government had appointed the Anna Freud National Centre to support local authorities to develop their family hubs and more information would be provided at a later date on the development of the council's family centres.

In response to a question from Councillor Gunn, the Strategic Manager confirmed that there would not be an increase in the number of family centres as it was about accessibility and integrated working across the partnership.

Councillor Martin referred to the holiday activities and welcomed the inclusivity of inviting everyone in and commented around the stigma of poverty and unintentionally segregating people in poverty. He asked about cutting the cost of the school day in particular uniforms and the amount of branded clothing schools opted for, that was forcing parents to go to a sole supplier. He referred to the national push to stop this and asked what the national push was and how this was different to the council's push and if there was any way to enforce or encourage schools to comply. Councillor Martin commented that while there was support for families in poverty, he was worried for families just above the threshold.

The Strategic Manager responded that there was a new law and guidance around school uniforms and a requirement for schools not to use sole suppliers.

The Health and Wellbeing Lead Officer indicated that they were producing a report for school governors and the item would be included on school governor meeting agendas that would be distributed in the Spring term highlighting the new legislation and the requirements, and seek that schools review their uniform policies where necessary. The Strategic Manager advised that they were trying to change the culture about the use of recycled school uniforms.

Councillor Reed echoed Councillor Martin in relation to people just above the threshold to receive support but who were really struggling. She then referred to the funding for vulnerable families and asked how these families were selected and

would this scheme take into consideration families who were just over the threshold.

The Strategic Manager responded that the families were identified through front-line practice, but they could apply through Feeding Families directly.

Councillor Crute indicated that it was reassuring to see that as a Council everything had been done on limited resources to address the problems highlighted in the report, but the council could not continue to do this on its own. He asked for further information on the external partners particularly those that could put pressure on government to tackle the inequalities.

The Strategic Manager indicated that the Child Poverty Working Group consisted of a number of Durham County Council departments including schools, and also health colleagues, colleges, police, housing, voluntary sector and Councillor Shield as Portfolio Holder. With regard to lobbying government this was carried out in regard to holiday activities with food.

Councillor Crute responded that this could be something that they could refer to Cabinet or Full Council as it was impacting on residents in County Durham, and something needed to be done.

The Strategic Manager advised Members that the council were a member of the 'Northeast Child Poverty Commission that was an organisation that lobbied government on issues.

Councillor Hunt indicated that the holiday activities with food in her area had been a huge success and they had included everyone which had brought a lot of the community together.

Councillor Kellett stated that the figures in relation child poverty in County Durham were shocking that continued to be on the rise.

Councillor Gunn referred to front line staff and the additional pressures on staff due to the pandemic and asked if some assurances could be given that plans were in place to ensure that the services would continue.

The Strategic Manager indicated that contingency plans were developed and in place and that staffing was reviewed daily. Statutory visits were prioritised, and child protection conferences were able to go ahead in children's centres. There were safe working practices in place and the service worked in collaboration to ensure children were seen and welfare checks were taking place to look at barriers to attending school.

Resolved: That the report and presentation that provided an oversight of the work undertaken during 2020-21 and outlined the priorities for the year ahead be noted.

7 Free School Meals

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services that provided Members with information relating to eligibility and take up of free school meals in County Durham. The report also provided information on the steps taken to encourage families to apply for free school meals, what the impact on schools where families don't apply for free school meals in relation to pupil premium and what support was given to families who were claiming free school meals when their children were not in school such as during school holidays or periods of absence (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Health and Wellbeing Lead and Head of Education and Skills were in attendance to present the report and advised Members that the National School Census 2021 indicated that 20.8% of pupils were eligible for free school meals. The most recent data October 2021 indicated that 29.6% of pupils in Durham were eligible for free school meals compared to the national figure for eligibility for free school meals which was around 21%.

The Department for Education for Spring/Summer 2021 indicated that 27.4% (20,316) of pupils aged 4-18 were eligible for free school meals. In County Durham 76% of eligible children took a free school meal. Nationally and regionally this figure was 82%, these figures matched the take up of food vouchers.

Members were advised there were a variety of reasons why a child may not take a free school meal, this could be down to food preference, preferring packed lunches opposed to school lunches, some children did not like to queue, and although most schools kept children on the premises during the lunch period some were still allowed out and young people wanted to go out with their peers. Sometimes there were cultural issues or peer issues that prevented a child not claiming a free school meal.

Schools were proactive in encouraging children to take a school meal, especially in secondary schools where provision was extended to include mid-morning snacks. Schools also encourage families to come into school and see the provision they have. They worked hard to minimise barriers and perceived stigma and use Durham County Council's checking system that works to check to see if a family is eligible without the need for detailed financial information. Both schools and Durham County Council's eligibility team worked hard to encourage families to make a claim.

Councillor Gunn reminded the committee of review activity which this committee had carried out looking at the take up of free school meals, focusing on reducing stigma on accessing free school meals. She asked if voluntary organisations were being provided with information as they often worked with eligible families to ensure more take up of free school meals and suggested that Youth Council should be

contacted to contribute around stigmatisation. She then referred to school staff who had been under pressure due to COVID and the work they had carried out to ensure families had free school meals and she wished to convey her thanks to all school staff for all their amazing work.

The Health and Wellbeing Lead responded that they did provide information to the voluntary sector, but this was something that they could explore further. They worked closely with the welfare assistance team who work with various agencies across County Durham. She echoed Councillor Gunn's comments that colleagues in schools had worked extremely hard, including those staff within school kitchens and staff delivering food parcels to families during the pandemic.

Councillor Walton asked if there were any common barriers to the take up of free school meals county wide and if there were any schools that had overcome these barriers and was this information shared with other schools.

The Health and Wellbeing Lead responded that barriers were mostly seen particularly in secondary schools, where young people mirror their peers so would often not take a free school meal.

The Head of Education and Skills indicated that the biometrics system works to a certain extent, but the issue was that pupils could work out who were on free school meals by the type of foods they were choosing, their allowance and the extra cash they were adding to the system, so it was not a fool proof system. The take up across some secondary schools in some areas were up to 65% but in others were as little as 15%.

In response to a question from Councillor Walton, the Head of Education and Skills indicated that the biggest barrier to free school meals was peer pressure. Nationally there was a drop off in free school meals when the children were between 10 and 15 years old with 10% at age 10 and 25% at age 15.

The Health and Wellbeing Lead commented that at primary level the biggest barrier was often food preference of children. Schools were bound by the school food standards and usually served traditional menus and schools weren't able to provide chips every day, but they had a better uptake of free school meals on fish and chip Fridays. It was a challenge, but they were working on it.

Councillor Hunt asked if there was an option to provide a packed lunch, in particular in the summer months when peers were on packed lunches.

The Health and Wellbeing Lead responded that primary schools had two menu changes throughout the year. In the winter they provided traditional hot meals, in the summer they did see a drop off in the number of children taking a meal as they wanted to be outside. Many schools did provide a deli style lunch that could include sandwiches, but this was not available in every school as it was dependent on the

school kitchen, specifically size and facilities and what they could provide. They worked with schools on an individual basis to see what the best options for them was.

Councillor Crute referred to the previous review activity on the take up of free school meals and that one of the findings was the perceived stigma of free school meals. He highlighted that during the review it was found that till screens showed the amount of money the young person had to spend, which would be the daily amount for a free school meal and that would inadvertently identify the pupil in receipt of free school meals. He suggested as the percentage of the take up of free school meals was static and that the previous review was undertaken some time ago that members of the committee may want to review the progress made and to address some of the issues raised this morning.

The Head of Education and Skills indicated that the biometrics system should not flash anything to indicate a free school meal. The issue was that children made their decisions within their limitations and pupils could work out who was in receipt of free school meals. It was a mixed economy and 82% of secondary schools where academies so were not influencing all the menus of schools but the take up figures compared to the national figure needed to be explored more. He would ask Secondary Heads to pull together some information on the take up of free school meals over the course of a week rather than one day and get some realistic comparisons.

Councillor Crute responded that if it was easy to identify those children on free school meals by their choices and maybe the only way around this was to increase the allowance.

The Chair agreed that the take up of free school meals would be noted for the work programme.

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

8 Quarter 2 21/22 Performance Management Report

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Resources, which provided progress towards achieving the key outcomes of the Council's corporate performance framework and highlighted key messages to inform strategic priorities and work programmes. The report covered performance in and to the end of quarter two, July to September 2021 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager was in attendance to present the report.

Councillor Crute referred to the proportion of young people undertaking an apprenticeship and indicated that the council were lagging behind both regionally and the nearest statistical neighbours and asked if there was a reason for this.

The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager responded that sometimes the comparative data was on a lag and needed to catch up, but the figure was higher than the northeast and nearest statistical neighbours a year ago, however, he would look into the comparative data.

Councillor Crute responded that scrutiny had carried out some work in relation to apprenticeships and there had been an issue between how far secondary schools and colleges worked with businesses in County Durham to ensure that demand lines were met.

The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager indicated that he would initially check the figures to ensure it was a comparative comparison.

Councillor Gunn referred to young people having access to good education, training and employment and indicated that education had been a huge problem in terms of access due to COVID. The issues which concerned her were children and young people's access to good quality education and that schools were providing a hybrid model when children cannot attend school. She highlighted particular concerns relating to children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) which were considerable in terms of their access to a good education and including medical support. She asked about schools remaining open in terms of staff absences and asked the Head of Education and Skills to comment on the overall picture in County Durham regarding staff absences.

The Head of Education and Skills commented that he hoped schools would not go back to remote learning but he did foresee a situation where schools won't be able to accommodate all year groups due to staffing levels. Before Christmas they had one school close for one day out of the 266 schools. In terms of the quality of the remote learning offer there was a huge variation across that number of schools, but schools had embraced this really well. He gave an example that if a year group had to go home on a Monday the children at home would be able to watch the lessons that were conducted in the school with the other children at that time. The number of schools offering this had increased over time but there were still issues regarding broadband connectivity, the DfE had changed their expectations and had produced a document this week that indicated that any children sent home, there was an expectation they would take part in live learning, but this was not always possible in all locations. There were some real challenges, particularly in primary schools to conduct live learning, some of the county's secondary schools were better equipped for this. The networks for sharing practices were strong and they still had a number of maintained schools and a lot of networks in schools. They also had a good network infrastructure around academies, and all took part and shared

information. They had one school closure this week that was due to the weather and not staffing.

Councillor Gunn indicated that her concerns were around what she had heard nationally that it would be better for children to be taught together rather than remote learning.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that he had met with unions this week and some schools did not have the space to double up classes and there was impact this would have on infection transmission. Whilst all the schools were open, some schools were struggling; in March schools would be entering the third year of managing COVID and raised concerns on the impact of this on school leaders and staff as it was a significant length of time.

The Chair commented that at a meeting last year they looked at educational health care plans and referred to page 70 of the report where it could be seen that in 2021 EHCP was around the 62% mark to be completed in the 20-week time period that was below the 76% average for the Northeast and well below the 83% for England. He advised members that himself and the Vice-Chair had discussed with the Overview and Scrutiny Officer that the EHCP be maintained on the work programme.

Resolved: That the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter two performance, the impact of COVID-19 on performance, and the actions being taken to address areas of underperformance including the significant economic and well-being challenges because of the pandemic be noted.

Councillor B Kellett left the Meeting

9 Quarter 2 21/22 Revenue and Capital Outturn Report

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast outturn budget position for the Children and Young Peoples Services, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget for the year, based on the position at the end of September (for copy see file of minutes).

The Children and Young People's Finance Manager was in attendance to present the report and highlighted the major variances.

Councillor Walton complimented the report and was confident with the information provided.

Councillor Matin noted and welcomed the additional funding for Children and Young People's Services. He commented that more people were realising the struggles across young people's service areas. He went on to highlight underspends in some

of the service areas and that an underspend was not utilising funds and suggested that resources should be spent to deal with the issues facing service areas.

Councillor Gunn commented that she was aware of the pressures on the service and pointed out that funding was provided to the service to ensure that services were the best they could offer. It was hugely important that these services were funded appropriately and cuts over the years to government funding made it difficult to manage these budgets. In terms of the pressures on the high needs block issues, this was a national issue and needed some context and had been going on for many years that could not be solved by individual local authorities, it needed national funding.

Resolved: That the report be noted.