

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 Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 10 March 2023 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor A Reed (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Cosslett, M Currah, S Deinali, P Jopling, L Mavin, K Rooney, M Simmons, C Varty, E Waldock and M Walton

Also Present:

Councillor V Andrews

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, the Chair announced with regret the sad passing of the Chair of the Council, Councillor B Bainbridge. Members stood for a minute's silence out of respect to Councillor B Bainbridge.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors I Cochrane, O Gunn, C Hunt, C Martin, A Sterling, S Townsend, Ms Evans and Mrs Gunn.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor P Jopling substituted for Councillor C Hunt and Councillor M Simmons substituted for Councillor C Martin.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

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 read out the following questions that had been received from Ms Evans:

1. Any data Durham County Council has on pupil's swimming ability gathered through schools.
2. Any information Durham County Council has on how schools plan swimming lessons, and how much time a pupil might expect to spend on this activity through school. She would also be interested to know if there are any national guidelines.
3. Information on access to swimming pools by area of the County - from living in the south-west of the County, she understands that there is a plan to rebuild the Woodhouse Close pool and upgrade the Barnard Castle pool. She thinks this is part of a County-wide plan, and understands, for instance, that Peterlee pool is currently closed. She would like to know about the timetable for works, and also about any pool closures and what impact that is likely to have on children's access to school and leisure swimming – and what mitigation is in the Council's plans.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised that the questions had been sent to the appropriate service grouping for a response and added that question 3 falls within the remit of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee who will be considering Leisure Transformation at a future meeting. She would ensure that Ms Evans was invited to the meeting when the Leisure Transformation was considered.

6 Home to School Transport Services - Consultation

The Committee considered a Joint report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services and Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth which provided an opportunity for Members to provide views as part of the public consultation on proposals to transform Durham County Council's Home to School Transport Service for Children and Young People.

The Service Manager, Children and Young People's Services was in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation that outlined the background to the consultation and set out the proposals for the consultation and the timeframe (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

In response to a question from Councillor Walton the Service Manager indicated that they were not aware which council had indicated that expenditure on SEND home to school transport was manageable as it was an anonymous survey.

Councillor Walton then asked if the eleven maintained schools were widespread, which the Service Manager confirmed was the case.

Councillor Walton referred to the increase in the charge for the spare seat and maintained capacity schemes and indicated that it cost £13.00 per week for a Go North East ticket for St Bede's Catholic School, Lanchester and asked if there was scope to offer this to other services around the county.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager responded that this was a private arrangement between St Bede's Catholic School and Go North East and indicated that this was a consultation exercise that proposes £2.80, and they welcomed feedback if Members thought that this was too high. Councillor Walton indicated that she knew that a service could be carried out for £13.00 at Lanchester.

Councillor Walton then referred to Priority 3 – Developing independence skills of young people and indicated that this could go wider and there may be opportunities within other services. She asked if there was an opportunity to have a passenger assistant taking a group of young people onto public transport. She then asked if the unsafe routes were in rural areas.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager responded that unsafe routes were across the county for a variety of reasons.

Councillor Walton indicated that capital improvements would be expensive, and those children would leave school in a few years so money would be invested, and she was not sure if this would be cost effective.

Councillor Walton then referred to Priority 5 - procurement approach and asked if there was an option to engage with schools to provide their own school transport or approach community groups to use their minibuses that would also support local groups.

The Head of Education and Skills indicated that he had spoken to Head Teachers at schools and some schools did run their own transport, but a number of schools were not big enough to offer this facility, but he would explore it further.

Councillor Walton indicated that paying parents mileage to transport their children to school could also be an option to be considered.

Councillor Mavin indicated that some special schools in other authorities use their own minibuses for school transport and asked if this happened in Durham.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that this was very limited in Durham, and this could be looked at as part of the consultation.

Councillor Mavin then referred to the single person transport and asked if parents felt that their child requires their own transport and escort due to challenging behaviour.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that they had this as a priority as they felt different authorities had different approaches to this and they knew other authorities their priority was group travel. There were aspects of the provision in terms of SEN places and offer where it may have to be a solution as children have to travel past their closest special school to achieve a place somewhere else.

Councillor Mavin commented that you get a lot of pressure from parents who feel their child needs single transport but if you used school mini-buses and staff were familiar with the child that would make a difference.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that it was logistically driven and also parental preferences.

In response for a further question from Councillor Mavin, Members were advised that transport would be provided for children to attend Special Schools that were outside the authority, if that school provided the child's needs but transport would not be provided if it was parental choice.

Councillor Varty commented that parents were having to pay for their own transport to keep their child in a particular school. She then referred to children using public transport that often gets cancelled. She indicated that she did not agree with the increase in the cost of travel.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that some families in a small village one family would be entitled to concessionary travel and another family would not be entitled so you would always have people saying that the scheme was not fair.

Councillor Deinali referred to the development of independence skills for young people with SEND and asked if children would be reviewed on a child-by-child basis. She also referred to the maintained scheme and asked if any research had been carried out on the impact upon the working poor. She then asked if parents wish to transport their own children who live in rural areas had any research been carried out on how this may impact on working parents in those areas. In terms of identifying unsafe routes for walking was there a particular distance that they were looking at.

The Head of Education and Skills responded on the independent travel and training and indicated that the authority was not as far ahead as other authorities and provided an example of one school who planned and built as part of their playground area crossings and road signs etc. to put children through independent travel experience. This was not necessarily about saving money it was a commitment to prepare young people for adult life.

The Service Manager referred to the question around needs and indicated that this would be the drive around anything they do around individual transport for children. They would look at each child talking to the school and parent and make the decision. With regard to transport in rural areas he was not aware of any research around the question raised but once the consultation had been completed, they would carry out a lot of detailed work.

The Head of Education and Skills indicated that the current scheme was a mileage scheme which was to the school and return but some authorities paid for both return journeys and they were trying to explore some of these inequalities.

The Service Manager responded that the scheme that the Head of Education and Skills alluded to was used where they did not have capacity to provide transport or there were high costs. The personal transport budget had a low uptake due to parents having to procure transport the same way as the authority and have the relevant insurance in place etc. and this must be cheaper than what the authority could provide.

Members were advised that if a route was over three miles, then transport would be provided and any unsafe walking routes transport would be provided.

In response to a further question from Councillor Deinali regarding consultation with children, Members were provided with details of the groups that had been consulted and the work done to get the message out.

Councillor Currah made some comments on the online consultation in particular that people naturally think of cuts and asked about the availability of taxis and if there was less competition.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager responded that they did not have problems procuring transport it was the increase in costs due to fuel, wages, costs of spares etc. which was having a compound effect and problems with recruitment which increases wages.

In response to a further question from Councillor Currah on maintaining capacity and the alternatives the Head of Education and Skills indicated that the consultation was to obtain views and part of the work would be to look at alternatives.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager stated that if the proposal were to go ahead, they would encourage commercial operators.

Councillor Currah asked if the personal budget was voluntary and was advised that this was not imposed and was up to parents to make the decision.

Councillor Jopling asked if the costs associated with implementing contracts was included within the £19.5 million.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that the £19.5 million was the available budget for 2022/23, £24.3 million was the actual spend that had taken into account contract inflation.

Councillor Jopling commented that they had 9000 children, and 1000 contracts so there must be something that could be done to streamline this to try and save money. She commended the use of community transport which already have all the regulations in place to transport children. She asked if they were using independent taxi companies or large taxi companies.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager advised that they used a mix of bus companies, independent and larger taxi companies.

Councillor Jopling suggested that this be looked at and if you had more than one taxi company in an area to use the one taxi company or the same bus provider as you would get a better deal if using a smaller number of companies as processing less contracts would save money.

The Head of Education and Skills advised that all points would be looked at as part of the work on the home to school transport programme and they had a work stream looking at the procurement for transport and looking at routes.

Councillor Mavin referred to personal budgets and that other authorities only charge for the time the child is in the vehicle so only pay for two journeys and not four and presumed Durham County Council did the same. Members were advised that this was the case, however there were a small number who were paid for all four journeys due to the costs associated with alternative transport.

Councillor Walton referred to the personal budgets and that parents needed to go through the same process of insurance etc. and asked if this could be streamlined to encourage more parents to take up this option. Members were advised that this was being looked at as part of the consultation.

The Chair referred to the use of community buses which was good and was aware of a scheme where the school raised money to purchase the minibuses, but the council maintained the buses and paid for the training. A member of staff would pick up the children, so the only costs were fuel. The minibus would then be used for activities during the day and would be back to take children home in the afternoon and asked if this could be considered.

The Head of Education and Skills indicated that they could look at all the options and commented that some children travelled to school on their own with an escort and then those children would then go to an activity in the minibus with other

children and an escort and that would be fine. They needed to look at the ability of the children and the interaction of the children.

The Chair referred to voluntary drivers who were only paid a mileage which would be less than using current transport and asked if this could also be considered as an option.

The Head of Education and Skills advised that they would look at all these options as part of the consultation.

The Chair then referred to the increase in the cost of a seat to £2.80 and commented that this may be too much for some parents, due to the current cost of living.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager responded that it was a consultation exercise, and this was the proposal put forward and would look at the feedback. The increase to £2.80 was seen as a benchmark and a typical fare offered by a commercial firm, the current rate was extremely low in particular when benchmarked against other local authorities' fares, but they could look at other fares.

The Head of Education and Skills advised that the £2.80 fare was not related to recovering the £0.5 million cost it was about a fair charge and that £2.80 would not cover costs.

Resolved: That the contents of the report and presentation be noted and the comments raised by the Committee be formulated into a formal response to the consultation.

7 Early Years - Overview

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services which provided an overview of the Early Year's Service.

The Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare was in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation that provided details of the Local Authority statutory duties; Covid-19 and Children's Experience in Lockdown; Current Challenges in Early Years Sector; Covid Recovery Programme; Early Years Sector Support and National Challenges in the Early Years Sector Enquiry (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

During the presentation, the Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare referred to the early years provision free of charge which was the funded entitlement and clarified that Durham was one of the lowest payments which was due to the area cost adjustment. There was some disadvantage metrics within the cost adjustment for disadvantage children or early years pupil premium.

She also advised Members of the tax-free childcare scheme where working parents could receive a payment from the government to help with childcare costs. They had carried out a lot of work to ensure that parents were aware of this scheme that gave parents £2.00 back for every £8.00 spent on childcare costs, this replaced the child-care vouchers linked to salary sacrifice.

Councillor Deinali referred to child care statutory provision issues and how a nursery had closed which resulted in an influx of children at an alternative nursery that caused issues with child ratios and asked if buildings were fit for purpose in terms of allowing children the amount of space, they needed to develop skills and the impact on their development.

The Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare responded that as well as a staff ratio there was also a space ratio and they used indoor and outdoor spaces.

The Head of Education and Skills commented that they needed a better solution for nurseries, and they would love to find more space and were looking at this.

Councillor Varty commended one point family centres and hubs in particular staff and commented that unfortunately retention of staff does not happen in this area.

Councillor Walton commended the presentation and referred to the tax-free childcare scheme where there used to be barriers if there were not enough employees wishing to take up the scheme due to costs to the employer and asked if this was still the case.

The Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare responded that the only difficulty was going onto the government website to see if you were eligible and commented that Nationally the take up was low for the scheme.

Councillor Walton asked if there was an opportunity to engage with employers to say this will not cost you anything.

The Chair asked the Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare if she could share the links to the childcare map and parliamentlive.tv with members together with the Facebook page and library.

Councillor Currah referred to the impact on COVID 19 lockdowns on children and asked if a national report had been produced on this.

The Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare responded that some reports had been produced that she could share with Members but indicated that they were not national reports.

Councillor Deinali referred to the challenges around staff retention and staff wellbeing and that staff are expected to do more in their role and a number of these they were not necessarily qualified to carry out which put more pressure on their workload and work life balance and wellbeing. She asked how they were supporting staff and looking at how they could provide additional resources so that staff can focus on supporting the children.

The Lead Officer Early Years and Childcare responded that they have 'let's start the conversation' where providers got together and what they were saying was that they were having to step in where it would normally be a Health Visitor. She was listening to them and making links with Health Visitor colleagues to say how the system could be changed to support them. With regard to wellbeing, they were still a team who could go out and visit nurseries and be that person at the end of a phone and come up with solutions.

Resolved: That the contents of the report and presentation be noted.

8 Reducing Parental Conflict in County Durham (Relationships Matter)

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director Children and Young People's Services which provided Members with an update on Durham's progress on the national Reducing Parental Conflict Programme.

The Operations Manager, One Point Service was in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation that provided the Definition; Overview; Impact on Children and Young People; Durham's Journey; Durham's Graduated Approach; Parent Peer Support and Next Steps (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Chair asked if the links to the 'Relationships Matter' and 'Me You and Baby Too' websites could be circulated to Members.

Councillor Walton thanked the Officer for her presentation and asked about the perception that this was for families who were at risk of domestic abuse but what about the families who thought that this did not apply to them but there was still arguing in the household. She then referred to established parents but were new to teenagers and it would not occur to her to go onto a website but would talk to other parents. She referred to the comment that they attend as it was parents teaching and not professionals and stated that the parents were the professionals and would talk if the badge was not there, so there was an opportunity to network and say you are not at risk, but parenting is hard. She then indicated that it was great engaging with dads but what about other parents in the community such as aunties, uncles and grandparents. She commented that the feedback was brilliant and the fact that people were not connecting parents as professionals they needed to embrace this as parents are the professionals.

The Operations Manager, One Point and Think Family Service responded that parents are the experts and the difference about the programme was the way in which it was perceived that it was not about professionals preaching teaching but was about parents facilitating other parents to come together and provide that peer support so was not seen as a talking shop programme, the parent led work was having an impact. Their challenge was that arguments happen in everyday life and was about landing it as early as possible and hoped that the family hub agenda would help to achieve this and normalise it. She also commented that it was not just dads it was around the wider social network.

Councillor Jopling commented that disagreements take place in every home, and she did not know how many people knew about the service. She asked how they overcome parents who did not engage. She then referred to the video shown and how you could easily pick out the two children who were affected the most.

The Operations Manager, One Point and Think Family Service responded that they needed to get the word out to educate at the earliest opportunity that this was a thing. Domestic abuse was well known but conflict was everywhere, and they needed to manage it constructively so by training the likes of GPs, Health Visitors, Family Hub staff etc., around having those ongoing conversations and not going in heavy, so parents do not have to look for support it is in front of them.

Cllr Jopling asked if they were engaging with charities who do this type of work.

The Operations Manager, One Point and Think Family Service indicated that part of their multi-agency working group they had voluntary community sector organisations representation. They use their alliance programme to get the word out. If one parent did not want to engage that was fine, they would try to get the partner engaged but this was a voluntary engagement if one parent were keen this was better to have some impact and they would work with the one parent.

The Chair thanked the Officer for her presentation and commented that this would help reduce domestic abuse.

Resolved: That the report and presentation be noted and the progress of the development and implementation of Reducing Parental Conflict support in County Durham supported.

9 Schools Ofsted Update and Educational Attainment

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services which provided Members with an update of recent Ofsted Inspection of County Durham's maintained schools and educational outcomes in County Durham in 2022.

The Head of Education and Skills was in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation that provided Members with details of how inspections had changed over the years; details of Ofsted Inspections from September 2022; Ofsted Inspection Outcomes for different School Categories; Summary Outcome data for children in Durham Schools by Key Stage (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Councillor Walton referred to Ofsted inspections and agreed with the Officer that parents were not putting as much emphasis on this, and parents were focusing more on what the school could offer and she thought this would continue. She then referred to those schools that had not been inspected by Ofsted and what impact did this have on the Council and moving forward where would it leave the Council as the trend is that parents are not looking at Ofsted reports would priorities shift.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that schools were still anxious of Ofsted inspections. They were currently struggling to attract leaders for Primary and Secondary schools and people to teach maths and science. Parents are looking at the provision in the school as a priority. If maintained schools had not been inspected for some time, they have a levelling system that they operated called 'monitoring and intervention level,' it was tougher with academies and academy trusts, but they did have a good dialogue with these, and some schools come to the authority to talk about issues in the school. Moving forward if Ofsted are not conducting inspections, then what is the point. In terms of special schools recruiting was difficult that impacted on supply teachers so this needed careful consideration and Ofsted would have a role in this.

Councillor Currah referred to the school he and his son attended that was like an exam passing machine, they also did not offer languages and asked what the policy was around this.

The Head of Education and Skills responded in terms of policy the EBacc are in favour of high academic standards and ensure that all children do languages and 90% by a certain date, this was fine if you had plenty of language teachers which the authority did not. He commented that a number of children were not good at languages, but they do have some schools who have a large cohort doing languages because of the expectation and were struggling. Other schools are doing less in languages due to the lack of resource.

Councillor Waldock asked how many schools were subject to Ofsted monitoring visits and if any of the Ofsted reports had contradicted how they thought the school was performing.

The Head of Education and Skills indicated that they very rarely disagree with where they think an outcome is if anything they are usually pleasantly surprised. Monitoring inspections take place on inadequate schools if not reassured then they would conduct further monitoring inspections.

Councillor Jopling indicated that good schools were made up of many elements and the most important was a good head and parents that engaged. She asked if Ofsted looked at schools where children may have a number of difficulties and did, they take this into account and commented that it was easy to give a percentage to a school which resulted in parents not wanting to send their children to that school. She stated that you need a broad spectrum of children at every school as the bright children helped other children.

Councillor Simmons indicated that the problems with small schools was where a teacher has two or three year groups with all abilities and asked if there were any suggestions to help these small schools.

The Head of Education and Skills gave an example of a school who had an Ofsted inspection that was good, but they were going to come back as there was a deep dive on a subject area and they had a NQT who was the curriculum lead for the subject. He commented that the authority run a series of networks for smaller schools on subjects, but they still wanted trusts to be part of these networks and share practice, so those teachers were never isolated and had a curriculum and materials to access.

Councillor Simmons commented that she was currently a governor at four different schools and could see the difference with small schools.

The Chair referred to the figures and commented that since 2020 things had changed and her concern was if they had a previous Ofsted Inspection they had since faced COVID and now issues in Russia and Ukraine and children from these countries go to our schools and there was a language barrier and the children have been affected. She had visited some schools and saw how there was support for those children and the teachers worked extremely hard but if they were inspected again these children were not achieving as well as they could do and asked what happens in these situations.

The Head of Education and Skills responded when inspections were driven by progress this would impact on figures but now, they do not look at this and there was more allowance. In this example he would expect Ofsted to praise the school for the work been done with the refugees. He advised Members that the most successful children in County Durham were those whose first language was not English.

Resolved: That the contents of the report and presentation be noted.