

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Special Meeting of **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 1A , County Hall, Durham on **Wednesday 20 March 2024 at 1.30 pm**

Present:

Councillor A Reed (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Cosslett, R Crute, S Deinali, L Mavin, K Rooney, J Scurfield, C Varty, E Waldock and J Cairns (substitute for Councillor C Lines)

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Griffiths, C Hunt, C Lines, M McGaun, M Simmons, M Walton and Mrs L Vollans.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor J Cairns was substitute for Councillor C Lines.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or interested parties.

5 Children's Social Care Demand

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services that provided Members with information on demand for Children's Social Care. Members also received a presentation from the Practice Lead for Safeguarding (for copy of report and presentation slides, see file of minutes).

The Practice Lead for Safeguarding provided a detailed presentation focusing on the composition of social care demand, recruitment and retention activity, the practice model and signs of safety, the Vision and actions achieved.

The Practice Lead for Safeguarding highlighted that referral rates continued to be below benchmarks however the number of open cases had increased due to an increased number of care leavers and a change in the complexity of support children and families required meaning cases were open longer. An improved early offer in Durham that worked with children to offer intervention at the earliest opportunity had also impacted the figures.

The children in need rates were stable in Durham and were lower compared to regional statistics, however the rates for children with a protection plan had increased in recent years.

Since 2019 staffing levels had increased and in 2023 Durham had their highest level of social workers employed. The benchmarking snapshot regarding caseloads were slightly higher than regional averages but lower than the national averages.

With regards to vacancies and recruitment, the vacancy rates in Durham were below the national average but above the regional levels. Recruitment remained a priority and there was a dedicated workstream that focused on recruitment and retention activity and various initiatives including annual allowances and welcome payments to attract people into vacant roles. It was noted that 68% of posts were now eligible for an annual recruitment and retention allowance.

There was an annual recruitment of newly qualified social workers to fill vacancies that were supported by a range of qualifying programmes. It was highlighted that 77% of newly qualified and 70% of experienced social workers recruited in the last 4 years and 46% of Families First Services recruited in the last 6 years remained in Durham which was a huge achievement and indicated that the improvement strategy had made an impact.

With regards to Social Worker feedback and why they stay in Durham was due to flexible working that fitted around family life, support and nurturing from senior management and training and progression opportunities.

The Practice Model and Vision for Durham was based on good strong working relationships with children and their families and to provide a consistent practice model to help support children and young people to remain with their families and networks where they had the potential to care for them safely, and when this was not possible, to provide a secure and stable home and help them to achieve their full potential.

The Practice Lead for Safeguarding provided details of actions achieved with regards to leadership, learning and case studies showing the importance of children connecting with their birth family, repairing relationships and children in care returning home.

Responding to a comment from the Chair regarding the difficult decisions young children in care face with regards to contact with family members, the Practice Lead for Safeguarding explained there had been an evolution in practice and with regards to adoption and there was a drive to ensure there was an opportunity for children to connect with their birth family. From a practice model point of view, she advised that they looked at how to do things creatively within the perimeters of law and difficult decision would have to be made around managing family time safely. She highlighted the importance of understanding family situations and ensuring assessment of family situations were undertaken annually to look at whether there was an opportunity to re-establish relationships and re-connecting to keep networks active moving forward.

Councillor R Crute commented on the three sources of evidence within the presentation that showed the right approach and attitude can provide positive outcomes. He referred to the increase in unaccompanied asylum seekers and queried whether there was a disproportionate impact on the demand for children's social care. The Head of Children's Social Care explained the post pandemic figures had increased with 70% of the increase due to unaccompanied children seeking asylum and there was a 30% increase in new social care demand for children in Durham. Local authorities were mandated through the national transfer scheme and Durham had taken a third of the unaccompanied children quota for the North East creating new demand for placements. It was noted that once the quota had been reached, there would be no more unaccompanied children, unless government revised the scheme. In terms of overall numbers, there were 1123 looked after children and 84 unaccompanied asylum seekers.

The Head of Children's Social Care added that the service had established an unaccompanied asylum seekers team to develop expertise which had enriched the service. Ofsted visited the unaccompanied asylum seeker service as part of the inspection in November 2023 and considered the practice to be excellent. The service continued to look at ways to help unaccompanied asylum seekers feel more settled and part of the community. It was noted that Durham County Cricket foundation had set up a team for asylum seekers who would be coached by Durham County Cricket club at the Riverside and volunteer as part of the T20 series.

Councillor J Scurfield was delighted to see the unaccompanied asylum seeker scheme embedded in the service. She referred to the referral rates and asked how they ensured children were provided with early access to the right level of specialist support. The Practice Lead Safeguarding advised that early help and statutory practices were embedded in the service and dedicated focused audit work was carried out to streamline children's movement, with strong communication lines between both services. Regular early help discussions with partner agencies take place to determine a child needs with regards to early help, statutory services or universal services that schools could lead on. There was a formalised escalation process if any concerns were identified, and the Community Team work to ensure there was a measured understanding around family activity. At each point of a

child's movement within the system, there would be step-up meetings to discuss the needs of the family.

The Practice Lead Safeguarding highlighted that there would be changes nationally around family support and working with different groups of professionals and explained the importance for the same person to remain with the child as they move through the different services. The Head of Social Care added that there had been an increase in SEND diversity nationally. Durham had invested in robust early help services for many years and they were starting to see investment benefits with the introduction of a family hub offer which was effectively working to keep children out of social care system. A more intensive early help offer was being considered to target a cohort of families with complex needs.

Responding to comments from Councillor C Varty regarding a family she was involved with, the Head of Social Care explained that the core business of social care was to create a positive change and provide better opportunities for children and families. She highlighted that training videos of case studies showed families reflections, detailing what had worked well and the changes that the help and support they had received had made on their lives which was very powerful.

Councillor S Deinali referred to budget pressures and queried the plans that were in place to counteract the impact on early help provision. The Head of Social Care advised that she did not have service budget details and would feedback query to the Head of Service.

The Chair noted that 68% of posts were eligible for an annual recruitment and retention allowance, however was concerned that 32% of posts would not receive the allowance. The Head of Social Care explained that the policy allowed them to present business cases for the posts that they were unable to fill which proved to have a direct impact on the function of the service and the areas of the service that had more movement were not eligible.

The Chair thanked the Head of Children's Social Care and the Practice Lead Safeguarding for the presentation and congratulated them on the successful work in attracting and retaining social workers in Durham.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

6 Any Other Business

The Chair reminded Members that there were still a couple of places available to attend the visit to the MASH on 9 April 2024. Any Members wishing to attend should contact the Overview and Scrutiny Team.