

# **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

At a meeting of the **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 11 July 2024** at **9.30 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor A Reed (in the Chair)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors C Hunt (Vice-Chair), J Clark (for Councillor S Townsend), R Crute, S Deinali, L Fenwick (for Councillor J Griffiths), C Lines, L Mavin, D Mulholland, K Rooney, J Scurfield, C Varty and E Waldock.

### **Co-opted Member:**

Angela Gunn

### **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Griffiths, K Hawley, S Townsend, M Walton, Prof G Ciesielska and Mrs L Vollans.

### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillors J Clark and L Fenwick substituted for Councillors S Townsend and J Griffiths respectively.

### **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meetings held on 20 March 2024 and 26 April 2024 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

### **4 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties**

No items from Co-opted Members or other interested parties were raised.

## **6 Annual Update of the Starting Well Partnership**

The Committee received a report of the Chair of the Starting Well Partnership, County Durham Care Partnership and Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services on the work of the Starting Well Partnership (SWP) during 2023/24 which provided an update on outstanding work from the last report (2022/23) as well as work undertaken in 2023/24 (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Alison Ayres, Commissioning Manager for Children's Services, County Durham Integrated Commissioning Team, was welcomed to the meeting to deliver the presentation. The Commission Manager introduced the presentation by providing a refresh on the structure and governance of the Starting Well Partnership and its four sub-groups namely; Best Start in Life, Prevention and Early Help, Supporting Young People into Adulthood and Service Transformation.

The Commissioning Manager provided an update on some of the matters highlighted for discussed during 2023/24. The Committee heard that work was ongoing to identify recurrent funding to continue the Pause pilot which assists families with multiple children removed from their care to break the cycle of repeated removals.

During the year, the Committee also considered mental health issues and one of the outcomes of their discussions was the inclusion of representation by the police on the Autism Steering Group.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People (UASC) were also an area of focus and the Committee discussed that UASC should be screened for their mental health as well as their physical health, on initial entry into care. The Commissioning Manager informed the Committee that this work was ongoing as initial health assessments were required to be undertaken within a statutory timeframe, however, the undertaking of mental health assessments within the same, relatively short, timescale may not be appropriate for UASC, many of whom will have suffered trauma. In addition, some UASC assigned to Durham's care, resided outside of the county and that was a factor in the work.

The Commissioning Manager introduced the partnership priorities for 2024/25 which included dental access, dental health and fluoridation. Whilst the Committee was keen to consider those issues during the current year, initiatives associated with the work had just begun and it was therefore considered prudent to delay the work until those initiatives were established. With regard to Preparing for Adulthood, the work in 2024/25 will have a broad perspective and include education, employment and training and mental health issues associated with education attendance.

Ensuring the provision of help, advice and support at the earliest opportunity will also be a priority for 2024/25. The Committee noted the Starting Well Partnership was responsible for the Growing Up in County Durham Strategy and the Operational Management Group determined the areas of focus for presentations to the partnership, considering the objectives of the Growing up in County Durham strategy and the four Starting Well Partnership sub-groups. The Commissioning Manager provided details of the workstreams for each of the sub-groups.

The Commissioning Manager concluded the presentation by commenting on the key challenges for the future including the increased demand for services, complexity of cases, limited resources and staff workloads.

The Chair thanked the Commissioning Manager for the presentation and the Commissioning Manager answered questions from the Committee.

In response to a question from the Chair as to whether any trends had been identified in relation to the number of unintentional injuries, the Commissioning Manager responded that recent data showed an increase in unintentional injuries across all age groups, however, the increase was not equal across all age groups. The unintentional injuries were predominantly fractures of the forearm, inter-cranial injuries and superficial injuries of the head, i.e. injuries consistent with trips / falls. Evidence suggested that zero-length stays, which occur when a patient attends hospital for a number of hours only, were driving the data.

Councillor Clark questioned whether, in previous years, when there may have been less pressure on services, zero-length stay patients would have been admitted to hospital overnight. The Commissioning Manager replied that pressure on services may be a factor, however, changes in clinical practices may also account for the increase in zero-length stays and she added that she would request further information on the matter.

In response to a question from the Chair as to whether some families were presenting children to hospital with unintentional injuries on a regular basis, the Commissioning Manager agreed to refer to the service for details to be provided.

Angela Gunn acknowledged the importance of monitoring data relating to unintentional injuries, however, she pointed out that children naturally engage in adventurous play which can inevitably result in accidental injuries.

Councillor Scurfield expressed concern at the increase in the number of unintentional injuries, commenting that it would be useful to have more information, particularly in relation to the number of repeat incidents and she suggested that the issue should be considered as a priority action.

The Commissioning Manager agreed to pass the comments and the request for more detailed information to the Best Start in Life Team.

The Corporate Performance Manager urged caution with respect to the data on unintentional injuries, stating that coding issues within the Trust's data may have led to Durham having a higher rate than that of neighbouring Trusts.

The Chair raised a question on the child weight management service provided by Harrogate District Foundation Trust and the Commissioning Manager explained the approach was an evidence-based, holistic approach to weight management, over a period of time. There had been issues with regard to the retention of families for the duration of the programme, however, the situation was improving and the service was now being delivered through Family Hubs.

Councillor Clark referred to the retention of families on the programme and she asked if there had been any follow-up work done with families to identify underlying reasons for their failure to complete the programme. Councillor Clark suggested that high turnover of staff and a lack of consistency in the service may be factors in the drop-off rate. The Commissioning Manager replied that engagement issues had been addressed and a text message reminder service had been implemented. She added that she would request information from the service as to what action had been taken in respect of follow-up work.

Councillor Varty commented that she was pleased to see the work undertaken to promote education attendance, highlighting its importance as a foundation for preparing young people for the responsibilities of adulthood. She spoke anecdotally of families who had taken their children out of school, reporting sickness absence when the reason for the absence was, in fact, a family holiday. Councillor Varty pointed out that there was more work to be done to educate parents.

The Children and Young People's Service Manager for Operational Support, Clare Nicholls, shared the concern and she clarified that Department for Education guidance stated that when parents report a child's illness, in general, schools should accept the parent's word and authorise the absence. However, when a child had a number of short-term absences without an underlying cause, schools may request additional information and may unauthorise the absence. The Service Manager highlighted that there had been a change to the Attendance Alliance Group to include representation from a GP and a protocol was being established, to share information between schools and GPs to address medical absences and authorisation issues. The process would help to support parents who require assistance with school refusal and it would also help to identify parents whose children miss school on a regular basis but who do not take their child to the GP, which may raise wider safeguarding concerns.

Angela Gunn highlighted that whilst she supported the principle, there were some children for whom that approach to education attendance would not be appropriate, for example those suffering from school anxiety.

Councillor Hunt gave an example of good practice taking place at a primary school which had employed a member of staff to engage with parents at the school gates, to encourage school attendance through offering incentives, which had led to improved attendance. The Service Manager confirmed that schools share examples of good practice.

Angela Gunn raised the issue of the strict criteria for accessing some social care services which may lead to high functioning autistic children who have complex needs, falling short of meeting the criteria. Jennifer Illingworth, Director of Children and Young People's Integrated Services, informed the Committee that the Preparation for Adulthood work recognised that some young people do not meet the threshold for services and work was being carried out to identify those young people and to promote a needs-led approach. The Commissioning Manager added that one of the aims of the Valuing Neurodiversity work was to remove barriers to services in the future. The Director of Children and Young People's Integrated Services replied that further information on actions would be provided during the next Valuing Neurodiversity update to the Committee.

Expressing her support for the work of the Family Hubs, Councillor Scurfield queried why there were only fifteen hubs throughout the county, in comparison with the former Sure Start Centres which had approximately forty centres spread across the county. Councillor Scurfield asked what information was available to show the hubs were reaching those most in need and she also asked if outreach work was carried out to assist families unable to access the hubs. The Director of Children and Young People's Integrated Services confirmed that outreach work was undertaken and the Commissioning Manager added that some services, such as education psychology services, visited the hubs to offer services. Officers acknowledged that the relatively low number of hubs for the size of the county was an area for improvement and they agreed to provide further information for circulation to the Committee on the work done in respect of hard to reach families.

Councillor Scurfield referred to recent media reports on the high number of children admitted to hospital due to tooth extractions and she requested information on the position in Durham and work being done to increase access to NHS dental services in the county. The Commissioning Manager responded that those issues would be discussed at a future meeting of the Starting Well Partnership, including the impact of recent interventions on the data and information would be shared with the Committee in due course. The Chair commented that the Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered oral health and levels of fluoridation in recent months.

Councillor Deinali questioned the work done on neurodiversity in children in our care and she referred to reports of families who had requested support for assessments for neurodiversity symptoms which had been considered by practitioners to be attachment disorder, without an assessment taking place. Some families had also reported frustration at decisions being made about their child, without them having had the opportunity to communicate fully about their child.

The Commissioning Manager explained that symptoms of trauma and neurodiversity may present in similar ways and many young people entering care will have suffered trauma and that trauma was required to be supported prior to an assessment for neurodiversity. The Director of Children and Young People's Integrated Services noted the comments which would be considered during the refresh of panel processes.

In response to a question from Councillor Hunt for information on the issue of bullying in schools, the Service Manager for Operational Support informed the Committee that data in relation to bullying was held at school level and she would request that data be made available for circulation to the Committee.

**Resolved:**

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the report.

**7 Performance Management Report Quarter 4 2023/2024**

The Committee received a report of the Chief Executive which presented an overview of progress towards delivery of the key priorities within the Council Plan 2023-27 in line with the Council's corporate performance framework (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Stephen Tracey, Corporate Performance Manager was welcomed to the meeting to present highlights from the report. The Committee noted that demand for children's social care remained high since the pandemic, however, re-referral rates were lower than comparators. An increasing number of young people were entering care with complex needs and the partner-led early help model had helped to strengthen capacity to deliver support to families. A steady improvement was observed in school attendance rates and work was underway with partners to develop a protocol for school attendance. Requests for education, health and care plans (EHCPs) had increased substantially since 2019 and an action plan was in place to improve performance. Improvements were expected to show in the data over the course of the coming year.

The Committee heard that the number of children in our care remained relatively high and the Placement Sufficiency Strategy aimed to expand provision of children's homes and ongoing capital investment would ensure existing homes were fit for purpose.

The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager highlighted that the number of young people electively home educated increased in quarter four however Durham's rate was in line with the national rate.

At the previous meeting of the Committee, a question was raised on the provision of free child care places in light of the previous government's extension of the national scheme and further information would be provided on the matter in the 2024-25 quarter two report.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report and questions and comments were invited.

Councillor Mulholland noted Durham's relatively high rate of social worker vacancies and asked how Durham was performing in relation to recruitment of social workers. The Performance Manager referred to challenges in recruitment, however, over recent months a number of social work apprentices had been recruited. He explained that the retention rate was measured by staff turnover, through analysing the percentage of staff leaving as a percentage of all staff and Durham's turnover was relatively low.

Angela Gunn observed that only one of the four special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) key performance indicators (KPIs) was a performance KPI i.e. the number of EHCPs completed within 20 weeks and she gave the view that the metrics did not give a full picture of performance as they did not measure aspects such as the effectiveness of decision making, the placement of children in appropriate settings, the number of placement breakdowns and the financial impact of placement breakdowns. The Corporate Performance Manager confirmed that those aspects were measured through operational performance monitoring, whilst the performance report aimed to provide an overview and he agreed to pass the comments to the service.

Councillor Scurfield expressed concern at the fall in the percentage of children meeting expected standards in maths and reading at key stage 2 and she asked whether the issue would be addressed through the Starting Well Partnership. The Corporate Performance Manager replied that he would request further details from the Head of Education on action being undertaken and he added that there were national challenges, following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councillor Scurfield also raised concern at the data relating to the number of children aged 4-5 who were of a healthy weight and the Committee noted that healthy weight in children had been the subject of a discussion at the previous meeting.

Referring to the recruitment of social workers, Councillor Varty spoke of the high demand for social workers which had led to an increasingly competitive market and she spoke of the importance of offering good employment terms and conditions in order to recruit and retain staff.

Councillor Lines had attended a number of meetings with parents, officers, local action groups and local MPs with regard to the waiting times for EHCPs and he was pleased to see the number of EHCPs finalised within 20 weeks had increased to 7%. He queried the average length of wait time for the remaining 93% and for the definition of a timely service. The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager responded the average length of time was approximately 40 weeks and he pointed out that the average time may be skewed by complex cases. He added that the current system included fast tracking priority cases. The Corporate Performance Manager highlighted that in June, 12% of EHCPs were delivered within 20 weeks and it was hoped the momentum will be maintained and a normal operational level will be achieved by September, at which point, the service would be in a better position to deliver a timely service, i.e. within the statutory 20 week timeframe.

Councillor Scurfield spoke of the unprecedented demand for EHCP services since the Covid-19 pandemic which could not have been predicted or planned for and the impact on young people had continued. She commented that it would be useful to have further information from the service as to the key issues and their views on action for improvement. The Corporate Performance Manager agreed to include national data in the next quarterly report and he referred to challenges for larger authorities in recruiting the number of education psychologists required to meet demand.

In response to a question from Councillor Hunt as to the lack of information on kinship carers, the Corporate Performance Manager agreed to bring additional information on kinship carers to the Committee within the next quarterly report, as part of the Placement Sufficiency Strategy.

### **Resolved:**

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter four performance (January to March) and the actions being taken to address areas of challenge.

## **8 Refresh of the Work Programme 2024/25 for the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services, presented by Ann Whitton, Overview and Scrutiny Officer which provided the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an updated work programme for 2024/2025 which was appended to the report (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Committee noted the work programme was informed by key strategic documents including the Council Plan and County Durham Vision 2035 and the key themes and ambitions applying to the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 'Our Economy' and 'Our People'.



Members were asked to consider the proposed work programme for 2024/25, bearing in mind the reduced timescale due to the local elections in May.

Councillor Deinali requested that non-visible disabilities be considered for inclusion in the work programme and the Chair confirmed that non-visible disabilities would be included in the work programme under the SEND update.

In reply to a question from Angela Gunn on the inclusion of neurodiversity, it was clarified that a briefing report on Valuing Neurodiversity was included in the work programme.

Referring to the inclusion of Holiday Activities with Healthy Food Programme (Fun and Food), Mrs Gunn pointed out this had previously been discussed by the Committee on several previous occasions and given the high volume of work, she asked whether its inclusion was required. Stephen Gwilym, Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained that, at a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held in April, members expressed concern at the Fun and Food programme, in particular the eligibility criteria and how organisations wishing to participate in delivery of the programme could access funding. The issues remained a concern, together with the uptake and quality of school meals, therefore the item was included in the work programme for an informal information session. Councillor Crute informed the Committee of work in progress to consider a pilot scheme for auto-enrolment for free school meals and an update on the matter would be provided to the Committee in due course.

**Resolved:**

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Received and commented on the proposed CYPOSC work programme for 2024/2025.
- b) Agreed the work programme for 2024/2025 as attached at appendix 2 and the flexibility it offers to respond to emerging issues.
- c) Agreed to identify a topic for in-depth or light touch review activity.

## **9 CAMHS Waiting Times**

The Committee received a report on the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services CAMHS Waiting Time presented by James Graham, General Manager of Durham and Tees Valley Community CAMHS (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Angela Gunn commended the good work which had led to improvements in the rate of referrals and she added that it would be useful to have details on metrics for the quality of the service.

The General Manager acknowledged there was work to be done on the quality of outcome metrics and it was hoped that the transition to a new patient record system will lead to better quality data in the future, including flow through the system. In relation to the number and type of referrals, the General Manager clarified that a number of patients classed as 'getting help' required targeted, short term interventions therefore patient turnover was high. Those with more complex needs required services for longer time periods. Some of those with complex needs were at high risk of harm and those young people with complex needs accounted for approximately 70% of capacity. Workforce challenges were an issue and work was taking place to explore all possible options to meet needs and support families waiting for services.

In reply to a question from Angela Gunn with regard to the term 'unique' patient count, the General Manager explained that some young people will be open to more than one team and in these cases, the young person was counted against the team that they were initially open to.

Angela Gunn raised the issue of barriers to accessing medication for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and she asked for information on the length of the waiting times for ADHD medication. The General Manager informed the Committee that, from the point of assessment, the current waiting time was approximately 3 to 6 months.

## **10 Such other business**

Councillor Scurfield requested that the Committee receive information on the recent Ofsted Local Area Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Inspection and the Chair confirmed an update will be provided at the September meeting of the Committee, within the SEND update.