

## **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 **Friday 20 September 2024 at 9.30 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor C Hunt (in the Chair)**

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

Councillors J Clark (substitute for S Townsend), C Hunt, R Crute, S Deinali, J Griffiths, L Mavin, D Mulholland, K Rooney, C Varty, E Waldock, J Clark (substitute for S Townsend) and P Heaviside (substitute for A Reed)

#### **Parent Governor Representative:**

Professor Gosia M Ciesielska

#### **Apologies:**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Bell, C Lines, M Simmons, M Walton and Ms A Gunn

#### **1 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

#### **2 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

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

#### **4 Support for School Energy Management and Carbon Reduction**

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services which presented an overview of the support available for schools to help them reduce their energy usage, associated costs and carbon emissions. (for copy see file of minutes).

The Committee received a presentation of the Sustainability Education Development Adviser who outlined details of the ECO2 Smart School Programme. The programme had successfully gained engagement from over 90% of the County's schools which offered support delivering the Schools Energy Management Service Level Agreement.

Examples were given of the various retrofit work that had been undertaken in schools which included LED lighting, Solar PV panels and air source heat pumps. Some of this work was challenging due to complications such as asbestos or the structural integrity of the buildings, Solar PV panels have also been being ground based in some schools. Schools had an opportunity to take out a loan to pay for these improvements over a 12 year term.

Members learned of partnership working taking place, especially the work with Durham University and the charity Outdoor and Sustainability Education Specialists (OASES) to deliver the ECO2COP. In 2023 the ECO2COP involved 50 schools across county Durham and a further 50 schools from 16 other countries, 123 teachers and engaged with 6000 pupils from county Durham and from 16 countries across the world. A similar conference will take place in November 2024 to coincide with COP29 in Azerbaijan.

Information was given on the involvement of young people in the development of CERP3 through the Youth Council and ECO2 schools that provided 550 responses to the consultation. Schools and academies are an important part of the Council's carbon footprint. However, for CERP3 which covered the period from 2024 to 2027 it was agreed that academies would not be included in DCC's carbon targets but would be included in the countywide emissions targets.

Councillor C Varty enquired about the age range of Young People who had influenced the development of the latest Climate Emergency Response Plan through the Youth Council and ECO2 Smart Schools Programme. The Sustainability Education Development Adviser confirmed that he would provide the requested age information following the meeting.

In relation to Solar PV Generation systems Councillor P Heaviside noted that some positive examples had been shared of self-generation of electricity however he enquired if retrofitted battery storage systems would support non reliance on higher

tariffs. The Sustainability Education Development Adviser confirmed that batteries were on site at Morrison Busty and some corporate buildings but not in schools at present due to the initial high costs to purchase, it was being considered in future plans as battery prices decreased.

Councillor J Clark noted the success of the ECO2COP Conferences held in 2023 however despite involvement with local schools she was unaware of the event and considered that participation by all schools should be actively encouraged. The Sustainability Education Development Adviser clarified that the majority of schools involved were of primary age however he was unable to confirm the geographical split of schools that participated.

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

## **5 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Update**

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services which presented an update following the special meeting of Children and Young People's Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in January 2024. In addition to the update this report summarises the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) local area inspection of Durham which took place in June 2024 and the response to the inspection (for copy see file of minutes).

The Committee received a presentation of The Strategic Manager (SEND Strategy) which focused on an Ofsted and CQC partners inspection which aimed to provide an independent, external evaluation of the effectiveness of the local area partnership's arrangements for children and young people with SEND. The inspection highlighted many areas of good practice and identified 4 main areas for improvement. The Strategic manager went on to outline the next steps following the inspection report which will focus on producing a draft of a multi-agency partnership action plan that will be submitted to Ofsted for review in October 2024. Inspectors are expected to return in 3 years for a repeat of the inspection.

Peter Mulholland, Strategic Manager (Specialist Inclusion) shared an update on Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) - Demand and Timeliness. He stated that there had been a 144% Increase in demand for EHCP requests for the current quarter standing at 668 requests compared with 645 for the same period in 2023 and 395 in 2019. A steady improvement in timeliness could be seen with almost double the number of EHC needs assessments being completed when compared with the latter of 2023 during 2024 18% of plans were issued within 20 weeks.

The Committee heard a practice spotlight for Early Years Speech and Language Strategy 0-4 years which focused on expected levels of language development in children at school starting age. Research has indicated that language development

delays could be linked to areas of deprivation and often in cases where pupils are facing expulsion from school a significant delay in development order was evident that had not been fully addresses in early key stages.

The Strategic Manager shared an outline of a Local Government Association Peer Challenge (LGA) undertaken for Speech and Language Service on 17-20 September 2024. The peer challenge was not an inspection that produces a critical judgement but focuses on an outcome that informs integrated strategy development and self-evaluation.

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

Councillor R Crute acknowledged the need for de-escalation of the increasing demand and high complexity of EHCPs cases received. A dialogue with the new government in required outlining how we combat these demands and what we plan to do to support the needs of our children and young people.

In response to a question from Councillor D Mulholland, The Strategic Manager responded that we were in line with national trends in most areas and more complex profiling of need would be required in the next 12-18 months such as hearing screening tests for two to two and a half year olds.

Councillor C Varty noted work being undertaken to support children and young people that had missed early years assessment and intervention and recognised this as a challenge. The Strategic Manager agreed that the team were facing an anecdotal challenge, but through great partnerships and examples of good practice we are assured by self-evaluation and inspection we are on the right track.

Expressing her support Councillor S Deinali commented it was a positive step to hear there was ongoing support work with older children that were experiencing behavioural needs, and it would be useful to see further information on the focus and outcomes of these interventions.

The Strategy Manager shared that in 7 out of 10 cases when a language development delay is not identified in early years it would manifest into secondary needs at a later stage for a young person therefore early intervention is key.

Responding to a question from Councillor L Mavin regarding the increased demand for EHCPs and the process by which assessments are progressed or rejected, The Strategic Manager (Send Strategy) stated that assessments are a statutory duty that must be completed once a request is submitted. He added we are looking at other swift methods that we can offer through SEND planning work, confidence building and access to services at local level as assessments take up to 20 weeks to complete and it results in a delay for the young people.

The Strategic Manager (SEND Strategy) responded to a concern raised by Councillor R Crute in relation to the increasing demand and timeliness completing EHCPs. He stated that we are caught in a loop of increasing demand and have made a good case but currently we are doing what we can with what we are given.

Councillor R Crute added that we needed to use this opportunity to open an early dialogue with the incoming government as there had been movement in filling some Educational Psychologist's posts as early intervention was important. However, a position statement was needed from senior leaders with the support of scrutiny on where we are going.

The Chair added that she will ensure the question goes to cabinet.

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

## **6 Home to School Transport Update**

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director for Children, Young people's Services and Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth and Corporate Director of Resources which presented an update on the Home to School Transport Programme (for copy see file of minutes).

Keith Foster, Corporate Data and Insight Manager shared an update in relation to the Home to School Transport (H2ST) programme highlighting priority areas. The report included progress on Durham County Council's (DCC) concessionary Scheme, a simplified process for providing travel budgets for pupils with SEN and procurement updates.

The Corporate Data and Insight Manager also updated the committee on the budget position which had seen expenditure double since 2019/20. Increases in costs were expected to continue due to the impact of inflation on contract costs and growing demand from pupils with SEND. There was no other direct government support for the increasing costs of H2ST and no funding was received for SEN transport which accounted for approx. 70% of the budget.

Jim Murray, Head of Education and Skills was in attendance and spoke to members regarding supporting the service with questions from parents about changes to journeys and support staff such as drivers or passenger support assistants. He highlighted that changes were often necessary due to increased cost and changing needs of the child.

*Councillor E Waldock left the meeting.*

Councillor C Varty noted that she had spoken with a family within her division which reported that they had worked closely with H2ST and developed a plan for pick up

of an SEN pupil from an alternative location. This partnership working had resulted in a significant improvement in the family's life and stability of the young person. The Corporate Data and Insight Manager added that where viable, the Council would maintain continuity of transport provision as this gave stability for families and the young person. However, on occasion the Council needed to change the transport provider due to circumstances such as availability and cost.

In response to a question from Professor G Ciesielska, Officers responded that decisions on transport for young people with complex needs were taken with input from the school, parents, and professionals such as child psychologists. Further work was also being undertaken with a small number of schools to progress reviews of transport where a SEN pupils' needs have changed over time. These reviews worked closely with families around key milestones for example during transition from primary to secondary school or progression into year 10.

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

## **7 Quarter 4 2023/24 Revenue and Capital Outturn and Quarter 1 2024/25 Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn**

The Committee received reports of the Corporate Director of Resources, the first provided details of the final outturn position for Children and Young People's Services (CYPS), highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget for the year. The second report provided details of the forecast outturn budget position for Children and Young People's Services highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget for the year, based on the position at the end of quarter one June 2024 (for copy of reports, see file of minutes).

David Watchman, Finance Manager Children and Young People's Services presented the report detailing revenue outturn for 2023/24. The report outlined a cash limit overspend of £8.390 million for the year, representing circa 4.9% of the total net revenue budget for CYPS. This compared to a forecasted cash limit overspend at quarter three of £8.104 million (4.7%). The dedicated schools grant had an overspend of £1.196m with the high needs block continuing to require high provision. This was further impacted by a pay agreement of 5.5% for teachers that had been announced but was not reflected in the report as School 2025/26 funding was not expected to be announced until the October budget.

Officers responded to a question from Councillor J Clark regarding a deficit noted in the report of the dedicated school's grant. In 2024 no schools had a licenced deficit but this may not continue into 2025. It was noted that maintained schools were reflected in the table of the report as a negative figure which represents a surplus. The text relating to two specific schools related to data covering 2 financial years. The Officer added that those schools which had voluntarily converted to academics

would take any deficits with them as these were not picked up by Durham County Council.

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

## **8 Quarter 1 2024/25 Performance Management Report**

The Committee received a report of the Chief Executive which provided details of progress towards achieving the strategic ambitions and objectives set out in The 2024-28 Council Plan (for copy see file of minutes).

Stephen Tracey, Corporate Performance Manager outlined the performance up to 30 June against the priorities set out in the Council Plan 2024-28. He updated members on the changing complexity that had impacted on higher numbers of children requiring care. There was on-going work to provide cost effective homes for children and expanding work with children at risk of coming into care. There had been progress and reductions in the overall numbers of children coming in to care however, the final forecast was not reflecting this reduction as the cost of complex care was included in the forecast.

*Councillor S Deinali left the meeting*

Though recruiting experienced social workers remains challenging for the first time in 2 years our social worker vacancy rate had reduced, and our Independent Reviewing Officer team was fully staffed. They had seen positive signs since the pandemic of attracting Educational Psychologists through national and overseas recruitment however we would not see an immediate impact of this work as it was slow process.

Councillor R Crute referred to the other items members had received at the meeting and the pressures placed on DCC. He suggested that the committee should receive an update on SEND Inspection Action Plan once it was agreed by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission, he added that the committee should also receive an update on the SEND Speech and Language Strategy too.

The Chair noted that this would be investigated.

The Corporate Performance Manager responded to questions from elected members stating that Social Worker caseloads were being actively managed with the support of Assessed and Supported Year in Employment social workers (ASYE) who had been placed in areas with the highest caseloads. Retention of experienced staff and retaining ASYEs into employment with The Council was harder in a competitive market especially when we are competing against recruitment agencies who can link to higher pay rates. There was no Government legislation to cap agency pay to Social Workers and Educational Psychologists. The

salary was enhanced in 2021 under the retention strategy but this uplift was not applied to all areas of Children & Young People's service just the areas experiencing recruitment challenges.

*Councillor J Clark Left the meeting*

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

## **9 Such Other Business**

The Chair reminded members that a Special Meeting focusing on the National Children's Care Review – Working Together to Safeguard Children would be taking place on 3 October at 1.30pm and an informal information session would be held via Teams on 15 October focusing on Fun with Food.