

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 5 October 2015 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Potts (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Armstrong, D Bell, O Gunn, C Hampson, J Hart, D Hicks, S Morrison, M Nicholls, L Pounder, H Smith, P Stradling and M Wilkes (Substitute for Councillor M Simmons)

Faith Community Representative:

Mrs G Harrison

Parent Governor Representative:

Mr R Patel

Co-opted Members:

Mr D Kinch

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors K Corrigan, K Dearden, D Hall, P Lawton, M Simmons, M Stanton and O Johnson.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor M Wilkes substituted for Councillor M Simmons.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2015 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

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

6 Media Relations - Update on Press Coverage

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer referred Members to the recent prominent articles and news stories relating to the remit of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (for copy see file of minutes). The articles were:-

- North East Teenagers Celebrate GCSE Success - The region saw the biggest year-on-year rise in the number of candidates receiving grade C or above in their GCSEs.
- Durham County Council Draw up an Action Plan to Support Refugees – The Council had announced it was to develop an action plan to support the UK response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The Durham Humanitarian Support Partnership would be led by Durham County Council and would meet as a matter of urgency to clarify and progress the part the authority would play.
- Top Marks for GCSE Pupils Who Sat Their Exams Two Years Early - More than half of the year nine pupils at Ferryhill Business and Enterprise College who sat their GCSE media studies exam in the summer achieved grades A* to B.

Councillor Armstrong asked that a letter of congratulations be sent to Ferryhill Business and Enterprise College on behalf of the Committee. The Chairman and Members agreed.

Resolved: (i) That the presentations be noted.

(ii) That a letter of congratulations be sent to Ferryhill Business and Enterprise College on behalf of the Committee.

7 Care Leavers Strategy - Consultation

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director Children and Adult Services which outlined the importance of having a Care Leavers Strategy, who would be consulted about the strategy and when this would take place (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager Looked After Children and Performance gave a presentation which set out the definition of 'Care Leavers' and the Council's promise (for copy of slides see file of minutes).

The committee was advised that Durham County Council were the first Local Authority to complete the strategy in line with government expectations detailed in the National Care Leavers Strategy one year on progress update in October 2014.

During the presentation she talked about each of the broad areas covered in the Care Leavers Strategy which were as follows:-

1. Physical Health and Mental Health.
2. Education and Attainment.
3. Employment and Training.
4. Housing and Staying On.
5. Financial Assistance.
6. In the Criminal Justice System.
7. Access to Ongoing Advice and Support.

The Strategic Manager advised that it was an intention of the strategy to maximise opportunities in education, training and employment and that the Council should be champions for care leavers, that they were our children and we should provide opportunities within “the family firm”.

Following the presentation, the Chairman thanked the Strategic Manager Looked After Children and Performance for the very informative presentation and asked Members for their questions.

Councillor Hart sought clarification if there were sufficient funds to enable them to maintain the current level of service. Officers responded that the team were stable and was sufficiently resourced. The number of children who were looked after was rising and they were keeping the budget under close review. They had a number of qualified social workers on the team and some staff who were not qualified but skilled, which maximised the budget. Members were also advised that the contact with children was above and beyond the statutory requirement but they were able to manage this and had good relationships with the children.

Councillor Gunn commented that it was relevant how Durham County Council looked after its children in house which was very different to other authorities where fostering agencies were used and this was demonstrated through the performance information received by this committee. She wished to congratulate everyone involved as it was difficult to achieve good figures and this was excellent strategy and she was pleased that they were asking for volunteering or work experience for the children.

Councillor Armstrong was interested to learn what early work had been done to keep children out of the criminal justice system and was concerned that actions taken could affect any of the children who wanted to join the armed forces.

Officers responded that the figures for children in the criminal justice system were low. They did not criminalise children for losing their temper and lashing out they worked on various methods such as restorative approaches, worked in partnership with police and other types of provision. They did not use a lot of secure accommodation. Officers gave an example of where young people had done a presentation with the police and had said Durham County Council ‘don’t give up on us.’

Councillor Hart commented on the zero tolerance towards the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and asked if this could be sustained due to financial pressures.

Officers responded that the use of bed and breakfast accommodation was expensive and ultimately the Council were corporate parents and these were the Council’s children. There were no planned financial cuts to care leaver’s service as it was essential to support care leavers and their aim was to stop young children needing the service by not coming into the care system in the first place. No other authority had residential care in house and the quality of private provider’s service was not as good as Durham’s. It was very unusual to retain this provision but children should not have to do it on their own if they felt they needed help and support. The leaving care service worked very hard to ‘grip’ the care leavers to ensure they were not alone. The Council needed to develop the attitude of a job in the family firm and the Council were happy to provide some apprenticeships, but it was

challenging for looked after children to achieve the 5 GCSE's required for apprenticeships. The Strategic Manager informed the committee that the Head of IT had been happy to provide opportunities to looked after children in his service.

Councillor Hicks sought clarification if the £2000 financial assistance to set up a home had to be paid back. Officers responded that it did not have to be paid back, but there was a cut off as to how many times they could get it.

Councillor Armstrong referred to the Ofsted inspection which would happen shortly and how would the success be measured and how did Durham compare to other local authorities. Officers responded that data would be compared regionally and nationally which would show that the Council were doing well. If you asked children how they felt about the placements if they were good the answer would be yes as young people are listened to.

The Chairman thanked Members for their questions and indicated that it was good that young people were involved in compiling the strategy. It was an encouraging report and Members were reminded of the deadline for comments.

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

(ii) That feedback be given to the Strategic Manager Looked After Children and Performance or the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

8 Review of Home to School Transport Policy

The Committee considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive and Corporate Director of Children and Adults Service to inform Members of the proposed Medium Term Financial Plan savings associated with Home to School Transport Policy proposals (for copy of report see file on minutes).

The Strategic Manager, School Places and Admissions, Children and Adult Services gave a presentation and indicated that Children and Adults Services had a Medium Term Financial Plan savings target of £17.748m for 2016/17 (for copy of slides see file of minutes).

During the presentation the Strategic Manager advised Members that the Council had continued to provide some non-statutory elements of Home to School Transport since 2012 when other changes were implemented.

Due to the continued financial pressure on the Council to make further significant savings, Children and Adults Services had reviewed the non-statutory provision on Home to School Transport.

There were three elements of non-statutory provision that could be removed to help contribute to the Medium Term Financial Plan savings identified for 2016/17 which were as follows:-

1. Automatic entitlement to free transport for pupils who move house during exam years 10 and 11.

2. Automatic entitlement to free transport for Post 16 students who do not have access to a viable public transport network.
3. Automatic entitlement to free transport for Post 16 students who cannot travel independently due to a disability or medical condition.

The presentation also highlighted that the service offers seats on transport where available at a concessionary charge of £1.50. This figure could be increased but there are no proposals to consult on an increase for 2016.

The consultation on the review would be for 6 weeks commencing 30 September 2015, and would be targeted at those most likely to be affected. The methods of consultation used would be consultation document, stakeholder meetings, Member meetings in localities, website and student forum.

The Chairman thanked the officer for the very informative presentation and asked if the AAPs would be included in the local meetings. The officer responded that information about the consultation has been sent to the AAP support team so that it can be discussed at AAP meetings.

Councillor Gunn indicated that it was important that no one slipped through the net and she appreciated all the work that had been done but discussions before they went onto further education needed to be included. She was concerned that if a child could not access transport this could impact on their whole future and she wanted to know how this would be monitored.

Officers responded that they knew who these families were and they were already working with them. They will look at each case individually and officers will be able to use existing criteria such as Free School Meals, level of working tax credit, council tax reduction as a starting point of criteria that will be used. For Children in Year 11 who received free school meals and free transport the criteria would still apply unless circumstances changed. Colleges had knowledge of who was eligible to apply for a bursary so they had a wealth of information to call upon.

D Kinch referred to page 59 of the report and indicated that 'unsafe to walk' was not included in the act of parliament so why was it included in the policy. The Officer responded that she would check the legislation but this was what was in practice.

Councillor Armstrong stressed the need to update all equality impact assessment as the consultation progressed.

Councillor H Smith indicated that 6 weeks consultation was too short and 12 weeks was fairer and would still allow time to review the responses received.

The Officer indicated that 6 weeks was the usual period and they needed a gap to look at the responses but if they felt they needed to extend the consultation after the initial 6 week period this could be done.

Councillor Armstrong reminded members that Cabinet had already approved that the consultation would be for 6 weeks and the results of the consultation had to go through the Cabinet process.

Councillor Wilkes referred to the Medium Term Financial Plan and that this policy would not be reviewed if savings did not have to be made. By reviewing the policy they were hoping to save £740,000 but a report to Cabinet on 19 September 2015 showed that Children and Adult Services had an underspend of £7.6m so was this review necessary. The Council had £9.4 million cash limit available and the inflation figures was an over estimate as debt costs were lower due to interest rates not rising. He went on to talk about reserves which were not necessary or needed and that he had suggested a dozen ways where finances could be obtained which would mean that they did not have to change the policy and that the Committee should suggest that they don't review the policy.

The Chairman responded that at this stage it was a consultation.

Councillor Armstrong indicated that the Portfolio Holder and Corporate Director of Resources would be able to give a comprehensive response. The Council had some money in reserves but not millions and they could look at this in March 2016.

Councillor Hart indicated that criticism in the press was predictable but the reality was that the changes were justifiable.

The Chairman asked Members to give their feedback to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer by 6 November, 2015.

Resolved: That the report and presentation be noted and Members feed their comments to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

9 Quarter 1 2015/16 - Performance Management Report

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director Management Team which presented Members with progress against the Councils corporate basket of performance indicators for the Altogether Better for Children and Young People theme, as well as other significant performance issues for the 2015/16 financial year (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager, Performance and Information, highlighted the key achievements and key performance improvements issues, giving a detailed analysis of the figure within the report.

D Kinch referred to page 112 of the report and asked if reference 127, proven re-offending by young people in a 12 month period could be broken down by younger and older groups. Officers responded that this figure could be broken down but patterns had not changed and the peak was around the age of 14.

Councillor Hart was alarmed at some of the national figures on the number of fostering and adoption placements that had broken down and requested information on the number of fostering and adoption breakdowns in County Durham.

Councillor Wilkes sought clarification if the changes to tax credits would affect child poverty.

Officers advised that they would take the comments back to the service and would feed responses into the group.

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

10 Revenue and Capital Outturn 2014/15

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Finance that provided Members with details of the final budget outturn position for the Children and Adults Services grouping, highlighting major variances in comparison with the revised budget for the year, based on the position to the end of March 2015, as reported to Cabinet in July 2015 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Councillor Wilkes asked that given that some of the proposed savings were unpalatable to some service users then could these not be deferred given the level of underspends that have been carried forward as reserves?

The Head of Children's Services responded by saying that the service is looking at the medium-term, the profile of expenditure over the forthcoming five years and the anticipated levels of funding from the Government. This is all taken into account in making decisions around savings proposals and how much reserves to set aside.

Councillor Nicholls advised that we did not know what was around the corner and had to be prudent.

Resolved: That the revenue and capital outturn report be noted.

11 Quarter 1: Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2015/16

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Finance that provided Members with details of the forecast outturn budget position for Children and Adult Services, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget for the year, based on the position to the end of June 2015, as reported to Cabinet in July 2015 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

12 Summary of the Minutes from the Children and Families Partnership

The Committee considered the minutes of the Children and Families Partnership on 15 June 2015 (for copies see file of minutes).

Resolved: That the minutes be noted.