

## **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 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 2 December 2015** at **11.30 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor M Nicholls (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)**

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

Councillors D Bell, K Corrigan, O Gunn, C Hampson, D Hicks, K Hopper, J Measor, M Nicholls, M Simmons, H Smith, M Stanton and P Stradling

#### **Faith Community Representative:**

Mrs G Harrison

#### **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Armstrong, K Dearden, D Hall, J Hart, P Lawton, S Morrison, C Potts, L Pounder and Mr D Kinch.

#### **2 Substitute Members**

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

#### **3 Declarations of Interest**

There were no Declarations of Interest.

#### **4 Welfare Reform and Poverty Issues**

The Chairman introduced the Head of Policy and Communications, Assistant Chief Executives, Roger Goodes who was in attendance to give an update as regards Welfare Reform and Poverty Issues (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Policy and Communications thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak on the issue and reminded Members of the background, the recession in 2008-2009 and the Government's response with an austerity program for the period 2010-2020. The Committee noted that in addition the Government also introduced the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and brought forward the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015 which together represented a reduction of welfare spending of £30 Billion by 2018.

The Committee noted that Cabinet had approved the draft County Durham Poverty Action Plan for consultation with partners and stakeholders, with presentations at Overview and Scrutiny forming part of the consultation.

Members noted that the gap between the North East of England and the rest of the country in terms of unemployment, economic growth and gross disposable income. It was explained that the child poverty gap between County Durham and England continued to widen and that fuel poverty was an increasing issue, with some rural areas of the County having experienced increases of 30% in fuel costs. The Head of Policy and Communications referred to a map which set out which areas had lost the most as a consequence of austerity, with approximately £560 lost per working age person for County Durham. Councillors noted the unemployment trends since 2004 with the current figure for County Durham being better than the North East figure, however still worse than the national figure. Members received information in terms of the sanctions issued by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) with a graph showing an increase in sanctions from October 2012 when new rules were introduced, Members already being aware of examples affecting people within their local areas. It was added that County Durham had a greater level of sanctions compared to the average for England, albeit with a current downward trend. Members learned that a pilot scheme in the country had been looking at delaying the introduction of sanctions and if successful it would be rolled out nationally.

The Committee noted another important element was that of numbers claiming Child (CTC) and Working Tax Credits (WTC), noting since changes in 2012/2013 there had been: reduction in the second income threshold (CTC); changes in the taper rate for CTC; reduction in the income rate (CTC); new rules regarding working hours for couples with children (WTC); removal of the 50+ element (WTC); and reduction in the rise in income tolerated when finalising tax credit awards. Members were reminded that the Chancellor had noted in his recent spending review that there would be no further changes to tax credits, however, it was explained that within changes in moving from several benefits to a single Universal Credit (UC), the changes would be brought about via that method, albeit delayed.

Members were informed it was understood that Government were introducing the “living wage” in an attempt to address the reductions in welfare, with the living wage being £7.20 in 2016 and to rise to £9.30 by 2020. It was noted that studies had shown that even with changes to the living wage, the average family was still likely to be worse off due to the changes.

In the County there were approximately 71,000 claimants of UC and 42,500 claiming “out of work” benefits. Members noted that the benefit cap did not have as much of an impact in the North East as it did in areas with larger housing costs, however, there were approximately 400 households affected in County Durham, mostly those with a large number of children. Members were reminded of the impact of the under-occupancy charge affecting around 7,000 households, although this had reduced from around 8,000, and the help that had been offered in terms of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). It was added that there had also been changes to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) in moving to Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and the previously mentioned changes to tax credits would affect around 40,000 households in the County.

The Head of Policy and Communications reminded Members that the introduction of UC was taking place in stages, with the initial pilots focussing on single people, without children or mortgage costs in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). It was added that there had been no further details as regards when UC would be rolled out to included families. Councillors learned that Durham County Council (DCC) and Job Centre Plus (JCP) were working to support the most vulnerable claimants, helping them with changes from the move from weekly payments to monthly payments, budgeting advice. Members noted the full roll out of UC was not expected until 2022.

The Committee noted that Government had moved to a new measure for child poverty that looked at factors that influenced poverty such as the levels of work within a family and in education attainment. Other factors noted included: family breakdown; debt; and drug and alcohol dependency. It was added that the duty of care previously placed on Local Authorities in terms of the working to reduce child poverty in their area had been removed. It was noted that DCC would not move away from its aims in terms of tackling child poverty as it was seen as a very important issue for County Durham.

Members were reminded of several actions taken by the Council and partners in response to Welfare Reform changes, including the introduction of a Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, which only County Durham and Northumberland had introduced without changing the level of benefit previously available to residents. It was added that there was the Welfare Assistance Scheme, which replaced a number of DWP schemes, provided via the Benefits Team and through local suppliers and voluntary organisations. The Head of Policy and Communications explained that there was also help available through the DHP policy, which had been a key mitigation of the impact of welfare reform changes, and the Authority would continue to work with social housing to manage a "triage" scheme which looks to identify underlying reasons and find solutions such as: gaining employment; retraining; or debt management.

It was explained that the Council was involved in a number of initiatives to help people into employment, working with a number of partners including Area Action Partnerships (AAPs), with several AAPs have employability as one of their priorities. Members noted that the Council also assisted in terms of general information distributed via the Council's website, Durham County News, leaflets and posters. Councillors were reminded that the Council's response involved working with many partners, including: providing support and advice to the County Durham Partnership (CDP); social landlords; the voluntary sector and other third parties; providing a directory of advice and support in County Durham; and AAPs. It was noted that there had been two partnership events held, with a third event being arranged.

The Head of Policy and Communications noted that in terms of poverty action, the Council was building on the work that had been in response to welfare reform while recognising the wider issues facing County Durham residents. It was noted that the broadened scope now included issues other than welfare reform such as: financial inclusion, including Credit Unions; fuel poverty; child poverty; and employment issues. It was explained that the Council would look to engage in preventative works, for example working with young people in schools, to help them understand issues and to make them ready for employment. Members were informed that there would be targeted interventions developed in terms of supporting the poorest households demonstrating the greatest need.

The Committee noted that accordingly the Poverty Action Plan would therefore focus on the actions necessary to respond to the challenges facing the County's residents, based upon five themes: attitudes to poverty and raising its profile; focus on child poverty; credit and debt; further welfare reforms and benefit changes; and work and personal wellbeing and sense of worth. The Head of Policy and Communications explained that the next steps would be for the draft Poverty Action Plan to be shared with partners and stakeholders for comments and feedback to be captured. Members noted that a conference would be held for partners and stakeholders in early 2016, and they would be kept up to date in the future in terms of progress made against the action plan. Councillors noted that the draft action plan had been presented at meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board and the County Durham Partnership and would be presented to the next meeting of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee later in the month.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Policy and Communications and asked Members for their questions on the report and presentation.

Councillor P Stradling noted it was a very comprehensive report and presentation and that the progress made was to be commended. Councillor P Stradling asked how Overview and Scrutiny would be informed of the progress being made against the Poverty Action Plan. The Head of Policy and Communications noted that there would be updates at Cabinet regularly and accordingly there would be similar updates provided at Overview and Scrutiny. The Chairman noted that if Members had any further comments on the draft action plan they could be forwarded to the Head of Policy and Communications accordingly.

Councillor O Gunn asked how AAPs and schools would be informed of the draft action plan. The Head of Policy and Communications noted that each AAP would be asked as regards what method they would prefer, either a presentation at a meeting of their forum or at one of their task and finish groups. It was added that colleagues from Children and Adults Services (CAS) directorate would speak to schools and Head Teachers as regards how best to engage to receive feedback. Councillors and Co-opted Members noted that they thought it would be important and useful to liaise with schools via their governing bodies, with the Head of Policy and Communications noting that he would speak to colleagues in CAS as regards liaising with governing bodies.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.

## **5 Young Carers**

The Chairman introduced the Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development, Children and Adults Services, Gill Palin who was in attendance to give an update as regards Young Cares in County Durham (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak and asked Members to consider the information contained within a brief video, highlighting the work that was undertaken by The Bridge Service.

It was added that the service was commissioned by Durham County Council and provided by Family Action. Members noted that there had been a focus on young carers and it had been identified from census information released in 2013 that there were 4,201 known young carers in County Durham. It was explained that while The Bridge Service had only engaged with around 100 young carers to date, there was an element of building capacity and it was thought through the help of relevant partners, such as General Practitioners (GPs) and schools, it should be possible to help identify more young carers and to have schemes such as the Young Carer's Charter in place to help support young carers in their schools.

The Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development added that the Council helped to fund The Bridge Service and that it was a response to The Care Act 2014 and The Children and Families Act 2014. It was explained that the legislation set out the duty of Local Authorities to assess a young carer's need for support and that while there had been a great deal of promotion, to date there had not been a large number of young people coming forward. Members were referred to three cases studies, setting out how The Bridge Service, working with other services such as One Point were able to help and support young carers. It was explained that unfortunately there could be stigma attached to caring for parents or siblings and this could lead the young carers into feeling a sense of shame and therefore they avoid mentioning their caring role. Councillors noted that where Adult Services worked with parents it was not always known if there was a young person in a caring role and therefore the approach would now be to look to see if this was the case, a whole family approach.

The Committee noted that the strategic priorities of The Bridge Service were to: minimise young carers caring responsibilities; to promote the service and raise awareness within DCC and key partners; and to ensure the young people who require targeted support receive it. Members noted that statutory services were used where possible, and it was added that a federation of twelve GP practices had signed up to the Young Carers Charter. It was also noted that thirty five schools had signed up to the Charter, and that the service worked with clusters of around ten schools at a time to highlight the issues faced by young carers and explained the support that was available.

The Strategic Manager referred Members to statistics associated with young carers, including: one in twelve young carers care for more than fifteen hours per week; one in twenty young carers miss school as a result of their caring responsibilities; the average annual income for a family with a young carer was £5,000 less than a family without a young carer; there was no strong evidence that young carers were more likely than their peers to come into contact with support agencies, despite Government recognition that this needed to happen; young carers have significantly lower educational attainment at GCSE level, the equivalent to nine grades lower overall than their peers; and young carers are more likely than the national average to be Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), ages 16-19.

Members learned that there were a number of activities available in terms of resilience building to improve emotional wellbeing, including: the Carers Card Discount Scheme, Carers' breaks noting some were non-residential; the "Relax Kids" programme; Therapeutic Counselling; and a Young Carers' Forum. The Committee noted several quotes from young carers in terms of the importance and benefit of the support offered to them.

Councillors learned of the activities that had taken place over the year, in addition to those already mentioned, such as: two consultation days, two training sessions held by young carers; young carers articles now featuring in the “Carers’ Echo”; a review of the Carers’ Discount Card; 111 breaks were arranged for young carers. Members were informed that challenges that remained were: the identification of young adult carers; the transition into adulthood; capacity building with partners; continuing to raise awareness within DCC. The Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development concluded by noting that the priorities for the ensuing year included: working more closely with the Adult Carers Service and the Horizon programme; working within DCC to ensure that services are aware of the Young Carers’ Charter; and work with key partners to promote services and increase the number of young carers receiving the services they require.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development and asked Members for their questions on the report and presentation, noting that the young people involved were very special and they worked very hard and deserved to be helped as much as possible, a voice must be provided for them. Members noted that a good place to help spread information as regards the support available would be through the AAPs and that the case studies had provided a useful insight into the help available to young carers.

Mrs G Harrison, Co-opted Member and Head Teacher, noted that more schools needed to be involved and that some initial training received had been interesting though few schools seemed to have engaged further. It was added that there was a lot of work involved in terms of schools being able to achieve the Young Carers’ Charter status and that assistance in that respect would likely be useful and well-received. Mrs G Harrison added that she felt it would be beneficial to have the information as regards young carers shared with school Governing Bodies and this would allow each school to be able to see how they can help to have the best impact for their young people. The Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development noted that the Council’s Head of Education, Caroline O’Neill had visited several schools, using the cluster approach as previously mentioned, and the Head of Children’s Services explained that there were initial steps schools could take that were easy to adopt such as the use of the Young Carers’ Card to note whether a young person needs to take time off or leave early, to avoid them having to explain the reasons why and repeating their story unnecessary.

Councillor O Gunn reminded Members that several Councillors sat on the Council’s Corporate Parenting Panel and they had received an interesting and emotional presentation on the issue. Councillor O Gunn added that the issue of young people caring for siblings, rather than parents, was also important and noted she agreed that adding the issue to the agendas of School Governing Bodies would be useful. The Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development noted that around 12% of cases involved both siblings and parents being cared for by young people, however, it was noted that often older siblings move out of a family home and this then can leave the youngest sibling being the one in the caring role.

Councillor M Stanton noted that the identification of those young people that were providing care for parents and siblings was very important and added that it may be possible to try to identify those young people by looking from the perspective of the support groups that provide help to parents, such as the MS Society or Macmillan, as they may already be aware of cases where young people are supporting their parents.

The Strategic Manager, Secure Services Development noted this as a possible avenue to help identify young carers.

The Chairman thanked Members and the Officer, noting it would be useful for further updates to be provided to the Committee at future meetings.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.

## **6 Educational Attainment**

The Chairman introduced the Strategic Manager, Support and Development, Children and Adults Services, Phil Hodgson who was in attendance to give an update as regards educational attainment (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager, Support and Development thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak noting there were three elements to consider: standards of primary attainment; standards of secondary attainment; and the impact of Academies. Members noted an amendment to paragraph 13 of the report for accuracy, the paragraph to now read:

“13 In County Durham there are 27 academies

- 12 converter secondary academies
- 2 converter primary academies
- 1 converter special school academy
- 2 new academies co-sponsored by the local authority
- 2 academies operating as multi-academy trusts to sponsor other schools
- 8 sponsored academies

Additionally, in County Durham, there are 174 community schools, 68 faith schools (voluntary aided and voluntary controlled), and 2 Foundation Trust schools.”

The Committee noted that, in respect of primary attainment, there had been good progress year on year with a lot of very good work carried out in County Durham schools, with good comparison to national statistics. Members noted that “early years” attainment had improved up 7% since 2014 now at 64% close to the national statistic of 66%. Members noted that Key Stage 1 (KS1) attainment was impressive and KS2 attainment in County Durham was ahead of national levels.

The Strategic Manager, Support and Development explained that KS4 had previously been improving year on year, however, the provisional 2015 statistics had shown a slight dip in GCSE attainment, in particular with English. Accordingly, a full analysis was undertaken and it had been noted that it was thought that the dip was as a consequence of a national issue associated with the English IGCSE. It was explained that the IGCSE had been chosen by many schools as this retained a coursework element, rather than all being exam based, as it had been felt that this would benefit a number of children.

Councillors noted that some had felt that marking thresholds for the IGCSE had been altered, as there was a push to move away from coursework towards 100% exam based assessment. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development noted he felt that there would not be a repeat of the dip in future years.

The Committee noted that Government had wanted to push for all schools to become academies by 2016, although the Strategic Manager, Support and Development thought that this timescale was unlikely. It was added that those schools that had been deemed as failing by Ofsted, or identified specifically by the Department of Education (DfE), would likely be forced to become academies with little scope for negotiation by schools or Local Authorities. It was noted that there were very few primary schools in the county that had become academies, only 5.5%, and 47% of secondary schools had become academies, compared to 15% of primary schools and 60% of secondary schools nationally.

Members learned that there was national pressure for academies to become Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and to “scoop in” other schools that were struggling in terms of standards and attainment. It was added that in County Durham, most secondary schools that have become academies “buy-back” a number of services from the Local Authority and therefore the majority still have a working relationship the Council. It was noted that one consequence of moving to academy status was that of being able to push back any Ofsted inspection, with most academies in County Durham having chosen to do this. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development noted that while academies were not necessarily a panacea for poor standards, there were a good number of well-led academy schools in County Durham with good leadership from their Head Teachers and Governing Bodies.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Manager, Support and Development and asked Members for their questions on the report and presentation, noting that he wondered how standards would be assessed if academies were able to put off their Ofsted inspections. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development noted that even if a school had become an academy and was performing poorly, it may be that the school was on that trajectory pre-academy and not as a direct consequence of becoming an academy. It was added however that, in the case of Local Authority maintained schools, the Council would always be able to become involved if there were any issue in terms of standards, whereas academies could choose to shut out the Local Authority.

Councillor O Gunn noted she was delighted with the success in terms of Early Years and KS1 attainment and wished to thank those involved for their excellent work. Councillor O Gunn added that in her experience the involvement and support of the Local Authority was beneficial to schools in terms of performance, as attested by the excellent levels of attainment across the county as set out in the report. Councillor O Gunn and noted her concern that academies may be able to keep the Local Authority “frozen out”. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development thanked Councillor O Gunn and noted that there was some excellent staff working in terms of Early Years provision and the Council would always look to provide support. It was added that the appointment of a new Lead Advisor Secondary Standards was important and that, as the former Head Teacher of the Hermitage Academy, they had a level of experience and credibility that other Head Teachers would be able to appreciate.



Councillor M Stanton asked whether it was the case that mixed nursery and primary schools had lower attainment than separate nurseries and primary schools. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development noted that this was not always the case, however, it was explained that all standalone nurseries within the County had been rated as excellent/outstanding.

Councillor K Hopper asked whether there was any links with other services, such as One Point in terms of identifying vulnerable young people at the Early Years stage. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development noted that the Education Development Service worked with the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Team as well as the One Point service. The Head of Children's Service, Carole Payne added that in the course of the review of Children's Centres it was noted that there was a need to identify and target those young carers that need help, with schools, nurseries and Health Visitors working with the Council in this respect.

Mrs G Harrison noted that there was a push from Government as regards MATs and Academies, and that schools with less than 200 pupils would be looked at in terms of their future viability. The Strategic Manager, Support and Development noted that it was the intention for Government to continue push the academy agenda, however, the current position in County Durham was that there was not yet a large number of academies, however, the schools in the County were in "good shape" and ready to face future challenges.

**Resolved:**

That the report and presentation be noted.