

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 Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 16 January 2017 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Potts (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Armstrong, O Gunn, D Hall, C Hampson, J Hart, D Hicks, K Hopper, P Lawton, S Morrison and P Stradling

Faith Community Representative:

Mrs A Swift

Co-opted Members:

Miss K Ashcroft

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors K Corrigan, M Nicholls, L Pounder, M Simmons and Mr D Kinch.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on 29 September, 27 October and 9 November 2016 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Declarations of Interest, if any

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 recent press articles relating to the remit of Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The articles were:

- More cash on the way for North East Schools – as a result of changes to the funding system (Members had received an update in September and a further update would be given in February)
- Children ‘left at risk by government reform delay’ – Public Accounts Committee had called for the urgent publication of Child Protection Plans
- Transformed school in Sedgefield makes top 50 UK rankings – Sedgefield Community College made the Sunday Times top 50 list of schools in the UK

7 Role of the Children's Social Worker - Overview

The Committee considered a joint report of the Director of Transformation and Partnerships and the Interim Director of Children and Young People’s Services which purposed to raise awareness and understanding of the role of a social worker in County Durham. Members also received a presentation from the Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability (for copies see file of minutes).

Members were informed that since 1987 there had been numerous legislation, associated statutory guidance and initiatives that impacted on children and young people. The primary legislation in relation to children’s care were the Children Acts 1989 and 2004 which set out the duties of the Local Authority to promote and safeguard the welfare of children.

Members were advised that as well as a National increase in Court proceedings, the Northern Region of family courts, which served 12 of the regions Local Authorities, had seen a significant increase in cases. The pressures faced by social workers were exacerbated by the increase in casework which was now more complex and challenging.

The Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability confirmed that there was a national problem with regards to the recruitment of social workers. Durham County Council had no problem in recruiting newly qualified staff, however there were some issues with inconsistent standards of teaching. There was a diminishing pool of experienced staff and sometimes problems retaining them. The use of Agency staff was not ideal as they tended to leave if offered a higher rate of pay elsewhere and in addition, there were staff who were not retained due to inability.

The government had announced that from 2020 all social workers would need to be accredited and Durham had recently started a programme to ensure this with a 1-2 year timetable.

Councillor Hart referred to the Children and Social Workers Bill which would allow Local Authorities to opt-out of procedures which were not appropriate to them and queried whether there were any outdated procedures which were still adhered to and deemed to be burdensome. The Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability referred to the Children Act 1989 which had been introduced with the rights of all children at heart, however it was built on working practices of the time and it could be argued that there were potentially better ways of doing things which were less regulated but just as thorough. He was not keen for Durham to set aside statutory guidance and lead the way on a change in working practices, it was more preferable to await new guidelines and consider new procedures from there.

Councillor Gunn was concerned about the National increase in the number of cases, acknowledging the pressures and stress that social workers were under and presuming that the increase would be affected by austerity. The Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability confirmed that there was no doubt that the growth in caseloads was linked to austerity and reductions in Adult Mental Health Services, domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse. In addition to socio-economic factors, partnership working had improved, for example, the Police reported all domestic violence incidents where a child was present to Social Services. He referred to a national increased focus on child sexual exploitation, which was another contributor. Councillor Gunn asked if some comparisons with regional and national figures could be provided to help Members understand of the size of the problem in Durham. The Strategic Manager confirmed that he would circulate statistics to members after the meeting.

Councillor Armstrong reminded Members of their responsibility as Corporate Parents and offered the opportunity for the Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability to advise how the Committee could support the service in future. He confirmed that the service welcomed the input of Scrutiny and hoped for the continuing support of Members through challenges arising. The Strategic Manager, Looked after Children and Permanence, confirmed that one of the biggest costs to the service was placement of looked after children and requested that consideration be given to the effect on services as a result of any future budget restrictions, should there be any potential savings identified.

Councillor Armstrong confirmed that he would be interested to see what the social care system was like from a child's point of view. He also reminded the Strategic Managers to consider how to present their service to new members at the induction programmes following the election in May 2017.

The Chairman confirmed that she had once heard from a child within the Newcastle care system that it was critical for them to have stability and continuity and to have changes in social workers could be detrimental to their progression. The Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability referred to a recent complaint from a service user who had been assigned to too many different social workers, however this had been due to the heavy reliance on agency workers, which was one of the criticisms of Ofsted.

Councillor Armstrong referred to the Ofsted rating as harsh, however he was satisfied that plans in place would guarantee the improvements they had required. He queried when a social worker could be considered no longer 'newly qualified'. The Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability confirmed that a graduate would commence employment but their first year in practice would be working on a reduced caseload, under an employer led programme known as the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment. Further experience was gathered following on from this, and a gradual progression to a tier 3 social worker would take 2-3 years, but this could only be obtained by demonstrating experience to a panel.

In response to a query from Mrs Swift regarding the reporting system in place for schools, the Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability confirmed that there was a first contact hub to request referrals and there was a 24-hour period to respond. He confirmed that should a Head Teacher have a concern that needed addressing urgently, Strategic Managers were willing to become involved in such cases.

Councillor Hart queried whether on occasions, concerns had not been given sufficient urgency, due to the pressure on social workers. The Strategic Manager, Child Protection and Disability confirmed that audits had confirmed the opposite; there was not a sense that people were not satisfied with the level of service received, nor was there any indication that people were downgrading a concern. He confirmed that there were escalation routes if people were not satisfied, however since the introduction of One Point, there was huge support available and the levels of referrals had reduced. First contact referrals had increased, however this was the service which determined the level of intervention required and there could often be tension with a person reporting an incident and the level of action deemed appropriate by a social worker.

Councillor Gunn wanted to relay a positive experience and in her role as a school governor she had referred an issue to the Head of Children's Services which had been dealt with immediately and satisfactorily.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted. A focused piece of work on this topic would be considered by the Committee at a future meeting when considering the future work programme.

8 Performance Management Q2

The Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Management Team which presented progress against the council's corporate performance framework for the Altogether Better for Children and Young People priority theme for the second quarter of the 2016/17 financial year, covering the period July to September 2016 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager confirmed that officers were engaged on a project to reduce the burden of planning and performance management. One element of this was to reduce the size of performance reports to senior managers and Members. A new style of report was being introduced which involved a more pictorial, at a glance, dashboard-style of presentation to replace the pages of narrative that Members were familiar with. This page contained the highlights for this quarter reporting performance on an exception basis. A tabular presentation of all performance indicators that each Committee was responsible for monitoring was still provided in the interests of transparency.

Councillor Hart referred to KS4 gap points between disadvantaged pupils in Durham and non-disadvantaged pupils in England and the confirmation in the report that comparable data would be available in January 2017. The Strategic Manager, Performance and Information Management confirmed that the information would be shared with Councillor Hart.

In addition, Councillor Hart queried the increase in first time entrants to the criminal justice system, although he acknowledged that performance was still on target. The Strategic Manager, Performance and Information Management confirmed that he would seek a response from the Head of the Youth Offending Service.

In response to a query from Councillor Armstrong regarding the changes to school funding, Mrs Swift confirmed that although it had been reported that some schools would benefit from the changes, her school would not.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

9 Quarter 2 Forecast and Revenue and Capital Outturn 2016/2017

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Financial & HR Services which provided the Committee with details of the forecast outturn budget position for the CAS service grouping, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget for the year, based on the position to the end of September 2016 as reported to Cabinet in November (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.