

## **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 Remote Meeting - This meeting is being held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Thursday 2 July 2020 at 9.30 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor H Smith (Chair)**

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

Councillors C Potts, P Atkinson, B Bainbridge, A Batey, D Bell, J Charlton, B Coult, R Crute, S Durham, O Gunn, C Hampson, K Hopper, I Jewell, A Willis and M Wilkes (substitute for M Simmons)

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

Mrs J Bruton

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

#### **Co-opted Members:**

Ms R Evans

#### **Also Present:**

Councillors O Gunn and M Wilkes

#### **1 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Simmons and M Wilson.

#### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillor M Wilkes substituted for Councillor M Simmons.

#### **3 Minutes of the Meeting**

The Chair welcomed Mrs Bruton the new Faith Community Representative from St. Michael's RCVA Primary School onto the Committee.

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 March 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

#### **4 Declarations of Interest, if any**

Councillor Coult declared a personal interest in agenda item 6 regarding EHCP concerning a family member.

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

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

#### **6 Update on the Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People's Services**

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services that provided members of the Children and Young People's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee an update on the impact of Covid-19 on the Children and Young People's Services Service Grouping.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services gave a presentation to update the committee on how the children and young people's service had responded to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic specifically on vulnerable children, children in receipt of free school meals, child poverty, education, and the reduction in safeguarding referrals.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services acknowledged that the service had had to change in the way it worked and delivered services due to Covid 19 and the government's legislation around social distancing and the need for staff to work from home. He informed the committee there were risks around safeguarding as the service knew a number of vulnerable children had not attended school during the pandemic that had been required to be addressed at both a local and national level. There had been concerns too that the number of safeguarding referrals had decreased. He added that the closure of courts had delayed the plans for children in care that had added pressure to the service. He reassured the committee that measures had been put in place to ensure service continuity, which included weekly monitoring systems to ensure levels of contact with all children did not decrease. In addition, a three-hub model of working had been introduced that had reduced the amount of resources from fewer buildings and had allowed greater collaboration across the service.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services stated that there had been an increase in the use of technology across the service such as Microsoft Teams that allowed the service to adapt to a virtual way of working. He confirmed that the use of technology had allowed for greater data sharing to create a clearer

picture of what was happening in the service and allowed extra support to be provided for schools to safeguard children that were below the threshold that they were concerned about.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services recognised that technology had enabled face to face time to continue and had helped engage with children who were shielding and reached children who were reluctant to engage with the service in the past. He admitted that the impact of Covid 19 had created further challenges with the temporary closure of Park House and had created staff shortages at the Aycliffe Secure unit as staff had either self-isolated or were shielding. The Children and Young People's Service had responded to these challenges by undertaking risk assessments of attendees to Park House and made other arrangements for them. He added that there had been a huge uptake in staff training and deployment of staff from other areas of the Council into the service that had resolved staff shortages. He announced that Park House was now in the reopening phase and there was an additional provision of a new care homes, one of which was in the process of development.

Members were advised of enhanced partnership working to support safeguarding and of the data sharing that had taken place with partners such as CAMHS. New processes had been developed to support schools for children who did not yet have a social worker but were just under the threshold where there were welfare concerns. The Committee learned that target work had taken place with these families.

The Corporate Director informed the Committee that work had restarted with face to face family time for children looked after and their birth families. There had also been closer working between Early Help services and Statutory Social Care service with daily senior management meetings. Members were advised that there was a lot of learning between the services which would be taken forward.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services continued that another big issue within SEND sector of the service was that most children with SEND were not attending school and the sustainability of service providers especially those who were out of the area. He confirmed that the service had worked closely with providers to keep offers in place and the situation was being monitored on a regular basis. He added that advice and support had been offered to schools through virtual partnership meetings with SEND providers. There had been concerns with further child poverty as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic with the loss of employment and loss of employment opportunities households had lower incomes. There had been a significant increase in the number of young people aged 18-14-year-olds claiming universal credit. He notified the committee that work was ongoing to improve youth employment, adult learning continued to be strong and they worked closely with young people to also provide employment and training.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services noted that work continued with schools regarding school meals to ensure all vulnerable children received meals as in the first instance there had been issues with the governments school meal voucher system with some families not being able to access them. He also stated that Early Help services had provided family activities such as online cookery sessions, and budgeting and relationship advice as well as children's activities throughout the Easter holiday and plans were in place to create holiday activities over the summer holiday period to make it easier for parents to entertain their children.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services informed the committee that support had been given to the 240 schools that had remained open throughout the pandemic offering places to vulnerable children and those of key workers. He felt that the leadership and support from staff had been fantastic. He noted that there had been significant planning carried out across the sector for the reopening of schools on 15 June 2020 to more children and that had been a huge success. He confirmed that work had been undertaken with the psychology team to look at the mental health of children and staff. He noted that 1400 laptops from the Department for Education had been distributed to social care children to allow home schooling. However, laptops for disadvantaged pupils in year 10 had not yet been received, although most of County Durham's year 10s attended academy schools and distribution may come directly from the academy school.

Members were advised that in relation to early years the service had introduced short term Free Flexible Entitlement (FFE) funding arrangements for childcare providers to help them remain open. The service had promoted the availability of early years provision to DCC key workers, parents of vulnerable children and partners and had achieved successful signposting.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services felt that feedback from children and families at the maintenance of the service had been excellent. He informed Members that the service was developing a celebration/promotional tool to show the creativity of vulnerable children during the lockdown. He updated the committee that the next phase was to restore and recover the service whilst living with Covid 19. He acknowledged that there would be bumps in the road going forward but a huge amount of work would continue to translate government guidance to comprehend the implications for the future of the service. There had been some positive use with technology in engaging with young people and the service would consider keeping this method of communication.

The Chair thanked the Corporate Director for his comprehensive presentation and invited members questions.

Councillor Wilkes wanted to know if the school transport budget would be manageable when the schools went back in September 2020 with government's legislation concerning managing bubbles and social distancing. He was unsure if there would be sufficient capacity in the system to cope. He wanted clarity on how much the budget would be reduced by in terms of obtaining vehicles and the affordability of the service. He felt that the more it reduced the more the risk.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services agreed that school transport was a huge risk in the next phase and had been raised with the Department of Education. He felt that the issue would need to be addressed on a national level before it came down to a local level. At present he advised that social distancing was based on the two-metre distance protocol that reduced the capacity in providing transport and increased the costs. He noted that it was proposed to reduce the social distancing to one metre but as yet no guidance had been received from government but he was uncertain if this would make any difference in capacity or cost.

Councillor Wilkes wanted to know if the Council were aware of how many parents had decided to take their children to school themselves.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services was unsure of the level of uptake for school transport at present, but it was being investigated to ascertain arrangements for the next phase to get all children back to school in September. He expected that there would be a mixture of parents requiring transport and parents transporting children directly to school in the first instance with an increased need for transport transpiring as furloughed parents no longer had capacity went back to work.

The Head of Education and Skills confirmed that data was analysed on an individual school basis and systems were in place to ascertain the number of children returning to school.

Councillor Jewell asked with the use of technology had the decision-making process been affective or challenging and wanted to know whether the quality of decisions had been maintained. He felt that the process may not have been as effective through virtual means.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services agreed that working virtually and remotely had been challenging but had not had a negative impact on the level of service provided. He noted that children and young people were used to technology which had not hindered face to face contact but enhanced it with more children engaging than before lock down. He perceived that working in this way had benefits that would be taken forward as staff had adapted well, used

time more efficiently and they had increased partnership working that enhanced the decision-making process.

Councillor Jewell was concerned that the quality of service may not have been maintained and that there was criticism that decision making was not as good as in person.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People Services reassured members that technology had worked far better than anticipated and had enabled staff to spend more focused time on decision making. He advised that CYP staff and staff from Social Care had an hour catch up every morning to focus on key issues that had not happened prior to lock down as staff didn't necessarily have the time to do so. He added that technology had created even better partnership working between key people like the Police and Health Services that would have been physically impossible previously in trying to get people in the same place at the same time. He advised that in lessons learned these successes would be key elements to maintain and take forward into the future.

Councillor Coult thanked Officers for all their hard work that had supported service continuity and schools. She praised school staff for going above and beyond the call of duty. She felt that the mental health of children and staff that had continued to attend schools had been well looked after but she required clarification on what had been done to support those who had not gone back into the school setting.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services responded that although he had specifically mentioned children transitioning and already back at school that this did not mean the same resources were not available to children broadly. He expected further risks as more children returned to school of ongoing mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. He assured Councillor Coult that progress activities had been looked at on both a regional and local level to ensure a universal level of support was offered to all staff and children. He advised that the HR infrastructure for staff had enabled them to access mental health support. He added that available resources had been identified and expertise utilised within the psychology service to continue excellent work as a partnership as a key part in the long-term plan, the effectiveness of Covid 19 and the transition for children.

The Head of Education and Skills reiterated that there had been huge resources invested into both education and psychology with the 'happy self' document being used that emphasised mental health issues and the transition for change for schools. Schools also had rigorous systems in place where schools contact the most vulnerable to check in with them on a regular basis, to check not only their academic progress but also their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Councillor Gunn, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services thanked Officers for their continued conscientious work and underlined what the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services had said. She acknowledged that it was a stressful time for schools and the resilience of staff had been extraordinary. She noted that her timetable of meetings had not altered during lock down and continued to meet with key officers regularly to examine the copious amount of government guidance. She was very grateful to all staff who had stepped up to the challenge that this change had brought and was confident that the dynamic work would continue.

Councillor Wilkes thanked Councillor Gunn for her regular emails over the past few months that ensured that all Councillors were kept up to date. He felt that robust pressure had been directed at the government for extra funding and identified that technology had been very important in moving forward in communicating efficiently and effectively. He believed that this had been an opportunity to help with financial pressure to protect front line staff.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services thought that the new ways of working had created an opportunity to be more efficient with staffs' time and had strengthened interaction with families that geography may have prevented.

Councillor Crute recognised there had been huge challenges faced by schools, staff and children who had done well to cope with the situation. He queried what had been achieved around transition for year six children going to new schools when they reopened and what had been organised to equip year ten/eleven students as they moved into a new academic year and what had they been offered in the lead up to their GCSE exams.

The Head of Education and Skills responded that schools had been very creative in adapting their normal transition arrangements to support year six students as they moved into secondary school. He reported that Head Teachers had developed remote visits and tours with children that involved the virtual exploration of classrooms and key places in the school to show future children what the buildings were like. Virtual meetings had taken place with form and subject teachers to enable children to familiarise themselves with new faces. He confirmed that information hand overs between schools had still taken place that contained key pastoral needs of each child to ensure children would be supported to succeed in all areas of their education and development. He notified members that for children going from year 10 to year 11 there had been a lot of media coverage and schools were committed to offering GCSE study either through online or virtual face to face meetings so children could finish what they started.

Councillor Smith was concerned with private nursery settings and their struggle to survive the impacts of Covid 19. She enquired as to what measures had been established to safeguard the provision so it was not lost in the future if they struggled to remain open.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services replied that all nurseries had faced challenges and through the service Early Years Team there was a good understanding across the board and all nurseries had been offered support to meet their needs. DCC maintained nurseries had higher level of provision staying open than anywhere else in the region and had met the demand. He informed the committee that government guidance had considered the implications on this provision and had provided substantial funding in County Durham to maintain nursery places for the future. He noted that the help that nurseries had received had led to an increase in the number of bids submitted for funding. He worried that mitigated risks would increase as the furloughed scheme lapsed.

The Chair thanked both Officers for their presentation and extended thanks to all staff in the education service that had maintained services to children.

## **Resolved**

That the report and presentation be noted.

## **7 Refresh of the Work Programme 2020/21 - Report of the Corporate Director of Resources**

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources that provided the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CYPOSC) with an updated work programme for 2020/21.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained the updated work programme for 2020/21 and the different elements that would be covered within scrutiny. She noted that it had flexibility which was essential to respond to items that may arise and had been framed around the Covid 19 pandemic.

Councillor Wilkes was concerned that when children returned to school in September that buildings would not be fit for purpose. He assumed that there would be a back log of repair work. He noticed that there was no scrutiny around school buildings contained in the work programme. He wanted to know where these concerns would be addressed if not at a scrutiny committee. He stressed that there was a need to prioritise schools to ensure they were fit for purpose especially with pressures from government making additional burdens of creating bubbles and social distancing.

Councillor Smith responded to Councillor Wilkes that there was a detailed review being undertaken by the service that would include school buildings. She confirmed that the finalised report would be fed into the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee for analysis.

Cllr Gunn confirmed that there was an ongoing review into children and young people's services. She noted that school buildings had been incorporated into the Schools for Future project in 2003 but funding was cut short and government had been lobbied for additional funding for rebuilds and the refurbishment of school buildings

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People Services highlighted that the review would cover issues with school buildings and their sustainability. He stated that in terms of capital funding there were currently three pots of government funding aimed at schools, DCC got an annual allocation around school condition which was for emergency repair works and small health and safety type activity to school buildings. He advised that the allocation for this year was £4.8 million across 266 schools but when taking into account split sites this rose to 290 which was limiting. He noted that the second stream of funding was basis need funding and this was only for expansions and could not be used for school replacement or condition type of activity. The third stream of funding was the priority build schemes which there had been two schemes over the last seven years and was a school by school bidding process nationally this money did not come via the local authority but went to individual schools in urgent need of renewal. Schools were required to meet a range of criteria; Durham had four schools successful in round one and three schools that were successful in round two. Durham did not have substantial challenges throughout the school estate, but there were a number of schools known in need of renewal or at the minimum some form of refurbishment as well as the conditions backlog that continued to grow because the allocation did not meet the full cost that was required. Durham were waiting to understand the detail of the announcement that was to be made about school buildings and because of the review Durham were in a good place to evidence the rationale and priority and be able to develop bids quickly.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People Services acknowledged that there were challenges across school estates and their need for refurbishment. He agreed that the back log had increased but allocation did not meet cost. He also informed members that funding came through the secondary sector and academies had a different route for funding that did not come through the local authority.

Councillor Wilkes believed that Councillor Johnson the former portfolio holder for Children and Young People's Services had brought in more capital funding for works to improve schools.

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People Services cited that there had been many successful bid submissions for external funding for new schools.

Councillor Crute thought that the committee should await the outcome of the review to base any further work necessary on the evidence collated.

**Resolved**

That the proposed work programme for 2020/21 was noted and commented upon.

That the flexibility offered to emerging issues within the work programme for 2020/21 as attached at appendix 2 be agreed.