

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 26 April 2024 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor A Reed in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors B Coult, R Crute, S Deinali, C Hunt, B Kellett, K Rooney, J Scurfield and C Varty.

Co-opted Members:

Prof G Ciesielska

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Cosslett, J Griffiths, C Lines, L Mavin, M Simmons, E Waldock, Ms A Gunn and Mrs L Vollans.

2 Substitute Members

Councillors B Coult and B Kellett substituted for Councillors L Mavin and E Waldock respectively.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 March 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Items from Co-opted Members and other Interested Parties

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised that three questions had been received from Mrs Gunn in relation to the Performance Management report. In relation to recruitment of Educational Psychologists, Mrs Gunn asked how this was going and was it on track to plans proposed at the start of the year?

In relation to Family Hubs, Mrs Gunn noted there were drop-in sessions and asked how they were going, was there good engagement or was there scope to promote more?

The questions would be passed to the service to answer in due course and a copy of the responses would be shared with the wider Committee membership.

6 Children and Young People's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

The Committee received a report of the Director of Public Health which updated the Committee on the work of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Partnership which was accompanied by a presentation delivered by Andrea Bracewell, Advanced Practitioner in Public Health and Diane Foster, Public Health Practitioner (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Andrea Bracewell, Advanced Practitioner, informed the Committee that national data indicated that the prevalence of mental health conditions in children and young people was 1 in 5, which compared to 1 in 9, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. She explained the range of socio-economic factors which impact on poor mental health and that County Durham has approximately 1 in 4 children living in relative poverty. These circumstances increase the risk to young people of developing mental health difficulties that can reduce their life opportunities.

Key national headline facts were presented including that having a probable mental health disorder was more common in the 11-16 age range than in younger children. In the 8-16 age group, rates of probable mental health disorder were similar for males and females, however, in 17-25 year olds, rates were twice as high for females than males. More than 1 in 4 young people aged 8 -16 years with a probable mental health disorder were from families unable to afford out of school activities.

The Committee noted that County Durham is within the top 40% of the most deprived local authorities in England, that over 3% of school pupils have additional social, emotional and mental health needs and over 14% of pupils receive support for special educational needs. Developments were underway to improve the landscape, such as the requirement for all schools to have a mental health lead.

An NHS funded programme of support was available to schools through Mental Health Support Teams and the Family Hubs programme provided early help through pregnancy and the early years with a focus on the first 1000 critical days. The offer included supporting parent / infant relationships, infant feeding and help for dads-to-be.

Diane Foster, Public Health Practitioner, outlined the functions of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Partnership, which was a multi-agency partnership, aiming to drive participation and engagement with young people and families, across all aspects of mental health and emotional wellbeing. 'Experts by Experience' ie a parent/carer and a young person, were co-chairs of the partnership and they added value through sharing their lived experiences.

The Committee noted that the work of the partnership was based on the 'Thrive' model and the Advanced Practitioner outlined the five mental health and emotional wellbeing categories within the needs-led approach.

Information was also provided on the support in education settings including the development of 'Anxious About School' guidance, the Piece of Mind Teams and Emotional Health and Resilience Teams who were dedicated teams within the Family Health Service who provide a universal offer to schools to support young people whilst waiting for onward referral. Rainbow Guides were circulated to schools and the wider community as an easy-to-use guide to accessing support for mental health and emotional wellbeing.

In conclusion, the Advanced Practitioner spoke of how the Children and Young People's Mental Health Partnership will continue to promote the support available, with a focus on early intervention, prevention and resilience building. Future work will consider the changing environment and the additional pressures being placed on children and young people, including through social media. Actions will be informed by the views of young people for a person-centred approach and the schools offer will be reviewed to ensure parity across all schools.

Ann Whitton, Overview and Scrutiny Officer, referred the Committee to the Consett Locality Pilot which aimed to improve mental health support from an experience and outcomes perspective, and she informed members that an evaluation of the pilot will be brought to the Committee in due course.

The officers were thanked for their informative presentation and the Chair invited questions and comments.

Councillor Crute thanked the team for breadth of the work and whilst recognising that the key determinants of mental health were complex Councillor Crute, was pleased to see the hard work being undertaken to make progress.

Co-opted member, Prof. Ciesielska welcomed the input of Experts by Experience in the Mental Health Partnership, to ensure first-hand knowledge and experience informs activities going forward. Prof. Ciesielska commented on the links between mental health and socio-economic vulnerability, stating that people often reach out to the voluntary sector and she asked for information on what involvement the partnership had with the voluntary sector. The Public Health Practitioner confirmed that the voluntary sector was represented on the partnership and within its sub groups and she clarified that the partnership encouraged close work with the Voluntary and Community Sector Alliance.

As an example of the work, the Public Health Practitioner referred to the Consett pilot, where extensive work was carried out within the community to ensure the right communication systems were set up to enable all organisations with links to young people to work collaboratively. Lessons learnt and good practice from the pilot will be used to inform future planning. The Public Health Practitioner added that the holistic approach is one the partnership's strengths which will be used to influence the wider determinants. In addition the Experts by Experience group were supported by the voluntary sector.

Councillor Varty remarked on the enlightening data which had been included in the report in respect of the prevalence of mental health conditions in County Durham's children and young people and she requested that the information be included on the School Governor Hub as School Governors were often the first point of contact for parents. The Advanced Practitioner thanked Councillor Varty for the useful suggestion which would be considered.

Councillor Rooney referred to the Piece of Mind Team and asked why the service was available to only 40% of schools in the county. The Public Health Practitioner explained that NHS England funding was limited therefore the roll out of the service had taken a phased approach, however, the Emotional Health and Resilience Team offer, which worked alongside the Piece of Mind Team, was universally available.

Councillor Coult welcomed the expectation that all schools will have a member of staff trained as a Senior Mental Health Lead, however, she highlighted that this could place additional pressure on staff. The Advanced Practitioner acknowledged the concern which had been considered and she clarified that the role was a leadership role and the implementation of the work will be a whole school approach.

Councillor Coult raised concern at the figures relating to young people who self-harm. She recognised the increasing challenges to young people's mental health such as child poverty, peer pressure and the number of young people who access smart phones and social media from an increasingly young age. The Advanced Practitioner shared the concern however she pointed out that social media was a 'double-edged-sword' as it could also be a useful tool to increase the reach of messages.

Councillor Coult stressed the importance of engaging with young people to understand their perspectives and she asked if the work of the partnership considered pupil voice feedback. The Advanced Practitioner confirmed mechanisms were in place to capture student voices as well as feedback from teachers.

A survey was to be carried out in the near future on self-harm, which will provide information from teachers regarding their knowledge and confidence to deal with incidents of self-harm. The Advanced Practitioner explained Student Voice surveys took place in years 7, 9, and 11. In addition, Peer Mentors enabled young people to support each other in schools and the mentors work together in a focus group which then feeds into the work of Investing in Children and Durham Youth Council. In response to a question from Councillor Coult as to whether there were plans to extend the Student Voice survey to other year groups, the Public Health Practitioner clarified that the current practice was to survey the same pupils, biannually, however she would make enquiries as to whether there were plans to extend the survey.

Councillor Deinali asked how the partnership linked with the service provided by the Rapid Response Team. The Public Health Practitioner stated that the Rapid Response Team aimed to support young people who are at risk of being admitted into hospital due to mental health crisis and the Rapid Response Team works with the 'Getting More Help' sub-group of the partnership which focused on accessing the right help at the right time, to avoid crisis situations.

Councillor Deinali echoed previous comments by members of the Committee on the breadth and depth of the work and she requested further information, in due course, on the impact of the actions and services being put in place. The Advanced Practitioner agreed to provide evaluation of data on outcomes, in the future.

Concluding the item, the Chair informed the Committee that the '3 Dads Walking' were passing through the region. The dads, who all lost daughters to suicide were walking 300 miles to raise funds for Papyrus, Prevention of Young Suicide and to highlight the impact of mental health on young people and their families.

Resolved:

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Acknowledged and endorsed the work of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Partnership.
- b) Noted the contents of the report.

7 Children and Young People's Services - Quarter Three Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2023/24

The Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Resources and the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services which provided details of the forecast outturn 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 December 2023 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

David Watchman, Finance Manager, presented the report, highlighting key points. He explained that the cash limit overspend of £8.1million represented a 4.7% overspend against the total revised budget, which compared to the quarter two overspend forecast of £6.2million. The forecast outturn against each head of service showed the main pressure was in social care. Details of the main variances were provided, including an increase in the children looked after overspend to £9million in quarter three, with the total number of children looked after increasing by 32 between August and December 2023. The Home to School Transport budget showed a forecast underspend of £0.24million and the quarter three forecast for Aycliffe Secure Centre showed a small surplus position of £70,000. It was reported that it will be necessary for the forecast overspend of £8.1million to be funded corporately, from the general reserve.

In respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant, the Committee noted the improved position from the original budget in that the use of reserves figure will be a net £2.23million which was a reduction of £5.72million against the original budget plans. However, 55% of schools will be drawing on reserves to fund their budgets this year.

Members noted that DfE funding had been utilised to support schools in financial deficits however this was one-off funding and pressure for schools will continue.

The Finance Manager informed the Committee that the forecast outturn position for the Dedicated Schools Grant Centrally Retained budget showed a projected overspend of £1.9million and the main factor was the £2.4million High Needs Block overspend which was attributed to the increase in top-up funding for pupils in mainstream settings aged 0-16. Non-maintained and independent special school provision continued to be an area of pressure.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report and invited comments and questions.

Councillor Scurfield observed that despite the increase in the social care budget there was, nevertheless, an overspend. She highlighted the demand for early intervention services and the high cost of placements which require intensive support and she provided the view that there was more work to be done to provide services earlier, to avoid the need for high cost interventions in the future. The Finance Manager recognised that when budgets are strained, discretionary services, including early help provision, were often the first to face cuts. Jim Murray, Head of Education and Skills, pointed out the increasing amount of young people entering care who have complex needs which require high cost placements.

Councillor Coult expressed her view that she would like to see an increase in the use of in-house provision.

The Chair asked the Finance Manager as to what impact the ongoing overspend was likely to have on the medium term financial plan, in the future. The Finance Manager replied that the children looked after budget continued to be a priority and activity was ongoing to improve the sufficiency strategy and increase in-house provision. In response to a further question from the Chair, the Finance Manager confirmed that, at present, no further financial assistance was available from central government.

Resolved:

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the overall reserve position.

8 Quarter Three, 2023/24 Performance Management Report

The Committee received a report of the Chief Executive which presented an overview of progress towards delivery of the key priorities within the Council Plan 2023-27 in line with the Council's corporate performance framework (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Stephen Tracey, Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager was welcomed to the meeting to present the report. The Committee noted that demand for children's social care remained high and an increasing number of young people were entering care with complex needs. In addition, the national transfer scheme had brought additional unaccompanied asylum seeking young people into the county. The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager referred to the substantial increase in requests for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) for children with special educational needs and disabilities since 2019, which had led to backlogs for educational psychologist advice. An increase in agency and locum psychologists had seen some improvement in capacity and it was expected the data would reflect the improvement over the coming months.

The Chair thanked the officer for the report and invited comments and questions.

Councillor Hunt asked whether data was available relating to the number children entering care whose parents had substance addictions and, whether the service works with adult services and other interventions to support parents. The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager highlighted that care assessments take a whole family approach, child protection procedures require a multi-agency response and the early help model has a 'Team Around the Family' which brings together practitioners from various agencies to work holistically, with families. He added that he would refer to the service for further information on the collaboration of services, to be brought to a future meeting.

Councillor Coult asked for more information on the re-referral rate. The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager clarified that re-referrals occur when a young person has been subject to a previous referral within a specified timescale. The figure for re-referrals was approximately 16-17% which compared to the national average of approximately 20%.

Referring to elective home education, Councillor Coult raised concern at the increase and she enquired whether any key drivers had been identified for the increase. The Head of Education and Skills shared the concern and he pointed out that parents were not required to specify a reason why they were electing to home educate, however a number of factors had been identified including behavioural issues, permanent exclusions and relationship breakdown between parents and schools. The Head of Education commented that he would welcome more power for local authorities, within government guidance. On a positive note, an Academy trust was undertaking a pilot exercise to support a family who had removed their child from school. Councillor Coult commented that she would be interested to have more information on the progress of the pilot, in the future.

Councillor Crute spoke of the concerns previously expressed by the Committee with regard to the completion of EHCPs within 20 weeks. He referred to work done to examine social care caseloads and the establishment of a social work academy to build capacity and he added that, should there be an improvement in the completion time for EHCPs through increasing the provision of educational psychologists, he would like to see a similar approach, in order to sustain the improvement. The Corporate Equality and Strategy Manager pointed out that the shortage of educational psychologists was a national issue, however, the service was doing its best to maximise provision.

Councillor Crute welcomed the recent government increase in free child-care provision and he asked what action was being taken to ensure demand could be met. The Corporate Equalities and Strategy Manager confirmed that data relating to early years provision will be reported in future performance reports.

Councillor Crute then referred to a recent meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board where concerns had been expressed at the figures for the healthy weight of children from the ages of 4 to 11 years. Councillor Crute asked whether comparative data was available for school children in years 7 to 11 and he suggested that the issue of the healthy weight of children be an area focus for the Committee in the future workplan. The Advanced Practitioner explained that she was not aware that the comparative data Councillor Crute requested was available, as the National Child Weight Measurement Programme reported only on the height and weight of children in primary schools, in reception year and year 6, however, she would make enquiries within the service.

Kirsty Wilkinson, Strategic Manager for Public Health agreed that the figures around childhood obesity in County Durham were a concern and more work was required to understand the drivers. She highlighted initiatives such as the 'Moving Together' strategy will encourage children and young people, amongst others, to move every day and 'Active 30' which supports schools to encourage every child to participate in 30 minutes of activity, each school day.

The Strategic Manager also referred to work with maternity services to increase breast feeding and promote healthy weight in pregnancy in order to reduce the risk of obesity in childhood. She highlighted the correlation between deprivation and childhood obesity and the increasing availability of convenience foods which were high in fat, salt and sugar. The Committee noted that the Public Health team had a dedicated Advanced Practitioner for Healthy Weight, Dr Kelly Rose, who also chairs the Healthy Weight Alliance and the Chair offered to pass details of the work of Dr Rose to those members who would like further information.

Councillor Deinali spoke of recent media reports regarding the quality of school meals. She also commented on the number of parents providing packed lunches and she questioned whether that was due to the cost and / or quality of school meals. Councillor Deinali commented that processed foods were often more affordable than healthier foods and the impact that had on the weight of children. She asked whether the issues would form part of a review into healthy weight. The Advanced Practitioner advised she would obtain further information on the issues raised.

Stephen Gwilym, Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer referred to a similar discussion which took place at a recent meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board and he informed members that, following that meeting, a letter was sent to the Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services raising concerns around the Fun and Food Programme and eligibility criteria, quality of school meals and healthy weight concerns. The response, when received, will be shared with both the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board and Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved:

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter three performance and the actions being taken to address areas of challenge.

9 Such other business

The Chair reminded members that they were invited to attend the meeting of the Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held on 9 May, for consideration of an item on Water Fluoridation.

The Chair informed the Committee that she attended Durham's Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) on 9 April, together with Councillors Varty and Waldock, which included a tour of the service. She explained the hub was a central point for gathering, analysing and sharing information about children in County Durham who may be at risk of harm or who may need support services. The MASH links with other key agencies and, in the last year, decisions were made within 24 hours on 19,083 contacts and, of those, over 4,000 progressed to statutory Families First Teams.

Councillor Varty commented that the tour had been extremely informative and she was pleased to see so many different practitioners working together for a common goal, including social workers, police, health and administrative staff.

The Chair noted that whilst many incoming enquiries did not relate directly to the MASH work, the team worked hard to ensure contacts were correctly signposted. She concluded by thanking all the staff for their hard work and good spirits despite the ever increasing workload and she encouraged members to visit the hub, to see for themselves the good work being carried out.