

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 **Thursday 3 October 2024** at **1.30 pm**

Present:

Councillor A Reed (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors C Hunt, B Coult (substitute for M Simmons), S Deinali, J Griffiths, C Lines, D Mulholland, K Rooney, J Scurfield and E Waldock

Co-opted Members:

Ms A Gunn

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Bell, M Simmons and S Townsend.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor B Coult substituted for Councillor M Simmons.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

4 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

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

5 Review of Children's Social Care - Service Update Children's Social Care

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services which provided an update on the Review of Children's Social Care, presented by Rachel Farnham, Head of Children's Social Care; Bernadette Toomey, Practice Lead Safeguarding; and Shelly Gill, Service Improvement Manager (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor D Mulholland entered the meeting at 1.44pm

Officers gave the Committee an overview of the work undertaken in respect of the Review of Children's Care, highlighting the progress being made in County Durham; the impact upon children and families accessing services; the impact on the service and information on the National Framework; and the national policy and legislation that was expected in the next year. Officers advised that the Review of Children's Care was the biggest since the Children's Act 1989 and it would change the landscape of children's care and noted that the National Framework set out areas that Durham County Council had been championing for many years. Although the progress of the review had been put on hold due to a change in Government, Officers advised that the new Government would start up again later this month.

Members were advised of the Children's Wellbeing Bill, which was mentioned in the King's Speech, which aimed to transform the lives of children and young people in England by introducing new measures in education and social care systems.

Members learned that in Durham there was a good established Early Help offer and that the Service had a Social Work Academy in place since 2016. Officers updated Members regarding social worker recruitment and retention and that Durham had the lowest turnover of staff in the region. Members received information in relation to Special Guardianship Orders and how the service had worked with families to keep children with loved ones within the family network. In relation to Future Hope, Members learned how a dedicated resource had helped to keep babies with their parents and that had led to a reduction in children under three years old coming into care.

Councillor J Griffiths entered the meeting at 1.59pm

The Chair thanked the Officers and noted the importance of the work of the service in providing a stable life for those young people and their families. She noted, in her experience, that often previous generations of the young person's family were also care experienced.

She was pleased as regards the recent start of 36 Apprentice Social Workers and noted that the issue of the need for change in terms of residential care homes had been highlighted at the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board earlier in the day, with it being preferable in terms of care and cost for children to be in a permanent home. She added that she felt the issue of kinship care was important, reiterating that it was not just families but friends of families that help to support children. She asked the Committee for their questions and comments.

Councillor E Waldock left the meeting at 2.16pm

Councillor B Coult noted that Members were aware of the pressures in terms of the Children's Social Care budget, as referred to by the Chair, with discussions at the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board referencing these earlier in the day. She noted the positive report and presentation from the Officers and asked how confident Officers were in respect of being able to retain Social Workers. She noted she agreed with the Ofsted changes, moving away from single word judgements and asked as regards the work of family support in terms of demand and capacity.

The Head of Children's Social Care noted there had been a lot of work in terms of recruitment and retention to build up the 'Durham offer', in terms of salary, the Academy, support and management, and retention allowance. She added that in 2023 the vacancy rate was 24 percent, with the current rate being 13 percent. She explained that Social Workers reported that they felt they had good supervision, equitable pay and good managers. The Head of Children's Social Care added that nationally changes to Agency rules also helped in terms of cap on agency costs.

The Service Improvement Manager noted workforce data had shown that around four years ago, the average period new Social Worker stay with the Council for two years, with the average now being four years and six months. She explained that another factor was the 'enhanced practitioner' pathway in addition to the managing of caseloads. She noted there was also a celebration of those that made the area their lifelong career, gaining a great deal of skills and experience.

Councillor J Scurfield explained she was delighted to hear about all the positive work and good practice. She explained as regards her work with a football club for women and girls and asked how good the Local Authority was in working with those type of community and voluntary sector (CVS) organisations, noting a body of anecdotal evidence as regards those organisations provide a stabilising factor in what could often be a chaotic time in those young people's lives. She noted this would be a challenge for the Council to engage with those CVS organisations.

Councillor J Scurfield noted that the changes being spoken about were intended to be positive, however, she asked what was coming out of the review that was considered genuinely new, noting many elements sounded very similar to previous practice. She noted that her background had been in early help and asked as regards the balance of resources in terms of that element, noting the ongoing impact from reductions during austerity. She noted the fantastic positive feedback from families within the presentation, however, asked if there had been any negative feedback, and if so, how was it taken onboard for future learning.

Councillor S Deinali left the meeting at 2.25pm

The Head of Children's Social Care noted that work with the CVS was 'patchy', however, the new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) replacing Safeguarding Boards would be assessing the role of Education and the CVS in helping to support young people and their families. As regards what was new within the reforms, the Head of Children's Social Care noted that there was considered to be more 'teeth' available to the service to affect improvements in some critical areas, such as early help, noting previously the need under s17 of the Children's Act 2014 with a requirement for a Social Worker to carry out a 'child in need' assessment, with new arrangements being more flexible, with step-up and step-down thresholds. She added other elements that were beneficial was the five-year career pathways, mirroring that of newly qualified teachers, and the work Government was proposing in relation to children's homes and the market.

The Service Improvement Manager noted that the work of the Children's Pathfinder being undertaken in Dorset was being watched very keenly with innovative work in terms of working from local hubs, such as libraries. She reiterated that the guidelines from Government around agency workers and three years' experience was also beneficial in being able to retain new staff members.

Councillor B Coult left the meeting at 2.29pm

The Practice Lead Safeguarding explained she felt Durham was ahead of the curve in some respects and noted that there were green shoots in terms of work with the CVS, including work undertaken by the Head of Children's Social Care in the east of the county, as well as with new partner organisations.

The Head of Children's Social Care responded to the question relating to negative feedback, explaining that not all feedback was positive and that when received, negative feedback was fed through the robust quality assurance framework, with quarterly audits which fed into children and family contracts. She added that information from complaints also fed through into the process and learning loop.

Councillor C Hunt left the meeting at 2.31pm

A Gunn asked for a profile of the 37 newly qualified social workers and noted that new thinking was that the CVS could help provide greater tools in terms of direct work, where traditional parenting was not working and asked if Social Workers were aware. The Service Improvement Manager noted that, traditionally, social workers were had been young, white females, reflective of the wider workforce in County Durham. She noted that more recently however, there had been a greater degree of diversity and a broader age range. She explained as the good working relationship with New College Durham, with many studying there living locally with strong local roots and strong desire to work in the sector. She added that the apprenticeship route helped open up routes into social work, different to the University route which could have the associated student debt. She added that apprenticeships tended to have a more diverse spectrum of people, notably with a greater number of male and overseas applicants, working with Durham University and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in terms of their Overseas Qualified Social Worker (OQSW) Programme.

In respect of direct work, the Service Improvement Manager noted that family workers too brought in their additional skills to the mix, noting government funded 'kid bags' that not only could be used with children, but also parents, to help with engagement. She added that closer working with early help and social workers was welcomed, with those elements coming together. She noted that in respect of parents with special educational needs, the need to carry out PAMS (Parent Assessment Manual) assessments was helping to upskill staff in terms of these types of tools. The Head of Children's Social Care emphasised that it was vital to build up relationships between social workers and parents so they can work together with families. The Service Improvement Manager noted the National Practice Guidance in terms of parenting practice, the framework and kinship.

Councillor D Mulholland noted the recent figure of 4 years six months in terms of retention of social workers, in comparison to nurses, 16 years, and doctors, 25 years. He noted some other Local Authorities had incentivised new Social Workers with 15 percent salary lump sums among other offers. He noted the main themes appeared to be salary and caseloads. He added he felt that Durham's progress was very good and welcomed the reduce reliance on agency staff.

The Head of Children's Social Care noted there was scope within the recruitment/retention policy to look at such lump sum payments, if supported by an evidence base, if the Authority had continued to struggle in terms of recruiting. She noted the process required sign-off from senior management and the Children in Care Team. She added that currently there was not a high turnover of staff, which was a great success. The Practice Lead Safeguarding reiterated that the career support that was in place in Durham, with clear pathways and support from managers, was helping with recruitment and retention.

She noted that there were also progression routes though other adjacent departments within the Council, such as fostering and adoption, which helped keep the skills and experience within the Council as a whole. The Service Improvement Manager noted that 'welcome payments' had been used in 2021/22 to help compete with other Local Authorities.

Councillor D Mulholland noted the matter was complex and appreciated the multiple approaches being taken to help tackle the issues of recruitment and retention. He asked if areas of best practice from other areas was looked at to feed into our thinking. The Practice Lead Safeguarding explained that the work in developing the advanced practitioner role, together with those broader opportunities within the Council as a whole, helped to attract people to the Council. The Head of Children's Social Care added that the support over those first five years for social workers was also important and explained as regards a focus at Durham on caseloads that had also impacted those retention issues. The Service Improvement Manager explained how caseloads would be increased from eight to 12 to 18 over the first year, then rising to around 22 to 25 from their second year.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.