
OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the areas of work under my Children's Services Portfolio: -

(a) Children's Centre Round 2. Cabinet, at its meeting on 7th February 2006 approved the release of £444,090 funding from Children's Centre Round 2 capital allocations to develop 2 additional Children's Centres in the Dodmire and Haughton areas. The Haughton Centre, which subject to further discussions could be based at the Education Village, will provide an outreach facility for Redhall. The Centre for Dodmire will build upon Children's Centre Round 1 developments through the further development of Dodmire Infant School. Cabinet also agreed to release a further £60,000 through 'rural up-lift' funding to develop services in our more disadvantaged rural areas, ie, outreach services in Middleton-St-George aligned to the existing Children's Centre at Maidendale House in Firthmoor and services in Sadberge and Whessoe aligned to the Children's Centre for the Haughton area. The Round 2 proposals will ensure that 4,675 children and their families will be able to access Children's Centre services by 2008, exceeding the minimum government 'reach' target by 296 children.

2. Developments in Children's Services

(a) Student Loans service transferred to DfES to take part in a year long pilot to centralise student loan applications. The pilot is physically located at DfES offices in Darlington and in the longer term if successful may result in a significant increase in the number of jobs within this area for the town.

(b) The new Skerne Park Primary School has opened in a brand new state of the art building sharing facilities with a neighbourhood nursery, a sure start unit and an adult and community learning facility. The library service also intends to use the building as a library access point for ordering pick up and drop off of books.

(c) After several years planning and development the groundbreaking education village will open at the start of April. Springfield, Beaumont Hill and Haughton School pupils are preparing to move into the new setting after the Easter break.

(d) School budget shares for 2006/07 were issued after the February half-term and show an average increase above inflation of 5% on base budget. This is then supplemented by standards fund grants and additional funding for other areas such as personalised learning and workforce reform. There is also additional funding to help cover the costs of the increase in childcare from 33 weeks to 38 weeks per year.

(e) There has also been some moves on accommodation with several teams being relocated to join the main Children's Services accommodation on the second floor of the Town Hall. These include the Schools and Departmental Finance Teams moving from Corporate Services and the Safeguarding Children Team moving from Central House. This will afford the opportunity to provide more integrated working across the new department and is seen as a major step forward by staff.

(f) Darlington College of Technology held a half-term awards ceremony on 16th February for pupils from McMullen House and Eastbourne School who are participating in a different curriculum based mainly at Darlington College. Pupils are awarded prizes for 100% attendance, most improved Key Skills, most improved student. A number of these pupils have already achieved Level 1 qualifications and are working towards their Level 2 (GCSE equivalent awards).

(g) An inaugural meeting of a Bullying and Discrimination Strategy Group was held on 16th February. The purpose of the meeting was to scope the issue, develop terms of reference for the group and to confirm membership of the group. The group will meet quarterly and membership will include representation from a wide range of services/partners.

3. Youth Service Developments

(a) Elections for the Darlington representative to the UK Youth Parliament were held on 16th February 2006, for which I was the Returning Officer. 5 candidates stood and elections boxes were available to young people in every secondary school and college in the town, including Beaumont Hill and McMullen House. An official count was held in Central Hall, Dolphin Centre under the auspices of the Council's Democratic Services Team. 2,580 young people voted (a turnout of 27.3%) and Ashleigh Trevarrow was elected MYP for Darlington. Ashleigh will now work closely with the Youth Service to fulfill her role and assist in the development of the Borough-wide Youth Participation Strategy.

(b) Plans are under way to hold a consultation event for young people living in the Eastbourne, Lingfield, Bank Top and Lascelles wards on 20th April 2006. The event grew from discussions at the Eastbourne Partnership Board and will be held at Darlington's Football Stadium. A range of partners, including residents and young people, are involved in planning and I will be happy to report on the event itself in April.

(c) Following 2 rounds of recruitment, 9 new posts have been filled in the Youth Service.

(d) Young people from Darlington have been involved in an event co-ordinated by the North East Regional Youth Assembly called Bus Buddies. The project enabled young people from across the region to prepare a DVD on transport issues from a young person's perspective. The young people involved have been able to share findings of the project at the recent Transport Users Forum in February.

(e) Work has commenced, in conjunction with Community Development Workers, on an inter-generational project. Running until April the project will seek to bring young and not so young, people together in dialogue and discussion with a view to building relationships and understanding between generations.

4. Visits and Meetings since last Council

In addition to my regular briefing meetings with the Director of Children's Services and Assistant Directors, I have attended the following meetings:-

10th January – I attended the Education Village/Darlington Football Club partnership event, at the Education Village.

18th January - I attended the Darlington Learning Partnership Meeting at Carmel School. I also paid a visit to High Coniscliffe to meet with staff and pupils at the School.

27th January – I visited Abbey Infant and Junior Schools for a meeting with Head Teachers.

30th January – I launched a half day event, based on the Children & Young Peoples Plan.

3rd February – I met with the Head Teacher, Whinfield Primary School for a tour around the school and an update on recent school improvements.

10th February – I visited Springfield School, for a meeting with the School Council; I

23rd February – I was pleased to attend the Looked After Children Achievement Ceremony, hosted by Darlington Football Club. The ceremony was arranged to recognise and praise the achievements of some Looked After Children which might not be the kind of achievement recognised elsewhere, or would reveal that they are looked after. The Club Manager and I met the young people involved, handing out their certificates of achievement, along with tickets for bowling. In addition, Darlington Football Club donated tickets for a match, a bag of goodies and the opportunity to meet some of the players. The aim of the event was to recognise a range of achievements; to encourage the young people to continue achieving and aim to do even better. This would also provide other children in similar circumstances with the opportunity to see how well other Looked After Children had done.

24th February – I met with Ashleigh Trevarrow, newly elected Youth MP for Darlington, along with the Director of Children’s Services and Assistant Director to discuss the Youth Parliament. Also I toured the Skerne Park Primary School, Libraries and Community Learning, Parkside Neighbourhood Nursery and Sure Start Children’s Centre, ahead of its open day on 10th March.

2nd March - Adoption Inspection Meeting – As part of the Adoption inspection process it is a requirement that the Inspectors meet with the Lead Member for Children’s Services. I met with the two appointed inspectors, gave an overview from my perspective and confirmed the positive input from all the officers involved in the operation and delivery of Darlington’s Adoption Service.

2nd and 3rd March – I attended a 2 day joint event for Regional Directors/Lead Members meeting event (IdeA). The aim of this event was to create an opportunity for leading members and directors of children’s services from across the region to get to know each other better and explore each others’ ideas and approaches; to build a common understanding of what major development opportunities and challenges face children’s services in the North East; to agree a set of key issues – of particular relevance to the region - to explore with the Minister at this event and as a basis for further dialogue, within the region and with government; to agree priorities for further support over the coming year; to agree the basis of further contact between the two leading groups.

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Cabinet Member with Children's Services Portfolio