

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 2 November 2020

PRESENT – Councillors C L B Hughes (Chair), Bartch, Mrs Culley, Ali, Bell, Crudass, L Hughes, Lister, Lucas, Renton and Snedker

STATUTORY CO-OPTees – Carly Spence

NON-STATUTORY CO-OPTees – Nick Lindsay and John Armitage

APOLOGIES – Councillor Clarke and Tim Fisher

ABSENT – Malcolm Frank, Maura Regan, Glenis Harrison and Janet Woodcock

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Dulston (Stronger Communities Portfolio), Ann Baxter (Independent Chair, Darlington Safeguarding Partnership), Vicky Davidson-Boyd (Adoption Tees Valley) and Katherine Cowell (Regional Schools Commissioner North East)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Jane Kochanowski (Assistant Director of Children's Services), Allison Hill (Democratic Officer) and Tony Murphy (Head of Education and Inclusion)

CYP9 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at this meeting.

CYP10 MINUTES

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 29 June and 13 July 2020; and the informal meeting held on 7 September 2020.

Matters arising were in relation to school attendance, and Members were advised that this is still above the national average; questioned when the use of 'reasonable endeavours' to allow for local authorities to discharge their duties throughout the pandemic ceased, and were advised that this ceased in September; and regarding digital inclusion to allow for all children to have access to laptops and wi-fi questioned if there was enough resource to meet demands for this equipment, especially during periods of isolation (Ref CYP8/Jul/20 refers).

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meetings of this Scrutiny Committee held on 29 June and 13 July, and the informal meeting held on 7 September 2020 be approved as a correct record.

CYP11 ACADEMY TRUSTS

Katherine Cowell, the Regional Schools Commissioner for the North attended the meeting and gave a presentation on the role of the Regional School Commissioner in relation to academies, free schools and place planning, Opportunity North East and

school improvement.

The presentation provided an oversight of the academies in Darlington Local Authority, including the size of the trusts that operate in the Darlington; highlighted strong trust characteristics to provide positive outcomes for children, support strong financial health and provide expert governance; outlined data in relation to school performance by local authority area; and highlighted the Teaching Vacancy Service and Early Career Framework to support new teachers across their first two years of teaching.

The Regional School Commissioner also advised Scrutiny Members how Opportunity North East was supporting Darlington by five challenges which included transition to support more young people to continue to do well in secondary education; the ONE Vision Schools Improvement Programme; supporting Maths departments in 30 secondary schools through a package of support development by the regions two Maths Hubs to improve the quality of maths teaching; encouraging young people to find a pathway to a good career via a programme of work to engage with businesses to identify work/training activities for pupils; and expanding the FutureMe programme to encourage young people to progress to higher education.

Members were advised that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Trust Reviews had been paused and reviews undertaken to measure the longer term impact of the pandemic and the Regional School Commissioner confirmed that the engagement and support from schools had been excellent.

Members questioned how much influence the Regional School Commissioner can have in relation to the Careers Challenge referred to above and were advised that the Board oversees the programme along with the local authority, schools and universities that sit on the Board and can raise any issues with local enterprise organisations.

The Chair also raised Members concerns about disadvantaged students and asked for reassurance that the Department for Education were focused on the disadvantaged. The Regional School Commissioner confirmed that through Opportunity North East support was being offered to schools that may be struggling and that her team speak to other local authorities in the North and schools on a daily basis and all feedback is fed into contingency planning.

The Chair also offered feedback from Members into the team and to offer their support, which the Regional School Commissioner welcomed and offered to provide Members with updates from Opportunity North East.

RESOLVED – That the thanks of this Scrutiny Committee be extended to the Regional School Commissioner for attending the meeting and for her interesting and informative presentation.

CYP12 ADOPTION TEES VALLEY ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

Vicky Davidson-Boyd, Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley presented Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) Annual Report 2019/20 and outlined the work that had been undertaken across the Tees Valley during 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020.

Adoption Tees Valley commenced operating as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) on the 1 May 2018 bringing together the former Local Authority Adoption Agency services of Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton.

The submitted report outlined the embedding of the practice, procedures, and systems for delivery of the adoption service to the Tees Valley Local Authorities; outlined the continued development of adoption in Tees Valley and new ways of working by listening to the views of adopters and those who use the service; and the expansion of the Adopter Partnership Forum.

The Service Manager advised Members how the Coronavirus pandemic had affected the service since March 2020 but that adoption work was able to continue throughout lockdown; outlined what had gone well and the key challenges; provided some case studies and benchmarking data for adoption across the Tees Valley; outlined the work undertaken by the Marketing Officer over the last year; advised Members of the ongoing recruitment process and timescales for assessment of prospective adopters and detailed the preparation training provided by the Service; outlined the role of the Adoption Panel which had been increasing; detailed work in relation to Non-agency adoptions; the embedded procedure for all 5 Local Authorities with ATV that children are referred at the earliest point at which adoption may become their plan: Early Notification; the increase in the numbers of children who are placed for adoption including a profile of those children; and highlighted the level of support available to adoptive families.

The submitted report also detailed staffing levels within the service; the Quality Assurance mechanisms in place for managing and monitoring the work of the agency, and the quality of work; outlined Service Plans for 2020/21; and detailed the ATV shared budget including the general budget and the interagency budget.

Members referred to the number of children from ethnic minority backgrounds adopted from care and in particular the numbers of families approved from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage and discussed how to promote the needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) children; queried evidence these children generally wait longer for a suitable adopter; questioned the benefits and potential drawbacks of Early Permanence carers; and requested the reasons why there were occasions when children have a revocation of their adoption plan.

The Chair requested that future annual reports contain governance information so that Scrutiny Members can be assured that the Director of Adults and Childrens' Services of the authority is attending or being represented and that all lead Members are attending their six monthly meetings as set out in governance arrangements; and thanked Vicky Davidson-Boyd for attending the meeting and also for the work of the ATV.

RESOLVED –That the 2019/20 Annual report of Adoption Tees Valley be noted.

The Director of Children and Adult Services submitted a report (previously circulated) to enable Members of this Scrutiny Committee to consider the Annual Report of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership for 2019/20 and to comment thereon.

Ann Baxter, Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership attended the meeting to outline the Annual Report, which was a statutory requirement to account for the Partnership's achievements over the previous year and to make an assessment of the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements within the local area.

It was reported that the 2019/20 Annual Report was the first report provided by the Partnership under the new safeguarding arrangements for children and adults and outlined what the Partnership had done over the period April 2019 to March 2020, drawing upon a range of data and information to illustrate the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.

It was noted that there had been challenges in establishing a joint partnership, however partners had fully embraced this new opportunity with the aim of strengthening and developing partnership working to keep children, young people and adults with needs for care and support safe.

Nick Lindsay, the 11-19 Partnership representative highlighted that although education was not a statutory partner, education in Darlington had been given a voice and acknowledged the support of all education settings in the development of change.

The Independent Chair confirmed the strong partnerships with the education settings and also referred to the challenge that the Covid-19 pandemic had on everyone in Darlington towards the end of the reporting period and acknowledged the longer term challenge to see how all partners had worked together to keep people safe during this time.

Discussion ensued on the Annual Report and Members referred to Elective Home Education (EEE) and in particular in respect of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) community, which forms the largest single ethnic minority group in County Durham and Darlington.

Tony Murphy, the Head of Education and Inclusion acknowledged the increase in EEE and advised that this was a national issue and that the authority were working with the Traveller Service to address this issue; and John Armitage, the Service Lead confirmed the work that was being undertaken on a daily basis with the aim of reducing the amount of elective home education in conjunction with the Partnership and schools/academies across the borough.

A Member also asked a question in relation to the Multi-Agency Self-Assessment Audit 2019/20 regarding the principles of safeguarding that were reported as generally embedded in practice. The Independent Chair confirmed that the majority of partners did acknowledge the importance of ensuring compliance with the audit and they could demonstrate appropriate safeguarding arrangements were in place, however agreed that improvements could always be made towards raising the profile

of safeguarding.

RESOLVED – That the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report for 2019/20 be noted.

CYP14 PERFORMANCE REPORT QUARTER 1 2020/21

The Director of Children and Adults Services submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide Members with an update on performance against key performance indicators.

The submitted report provided Quarter 1 (April to June) 2020/21 performance information in line with an indicator set agreed by the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group and subsequently by each individual Scrutiny Committee.

The submitted report highlighted where Children and Young People were performing well and where there was a need to improve. It was also outlined that where indicators are reported annually, quarterly updates will not be available.

It was highlighted that 16.7 per cent of re-referrals were repeated within 12 months, which was better than the target of 18 per cent; 100 per cent of children with a Child Protection Plan and 100 per cent of Children Looked After had been allocated to a qualified social worker; 89.7 per cent of Initial Child Protection Conferences were held within 15 workings, which remains higher than statistical neighbours; 93.6 per cent of children received a statutory Child Protection (CP) visit within 10 working days, above the target of 90 per cent and an improvement on the timeliness of visits when compared with the same period last year (81.9 per cent); 94.3 per cent of statutory children in care visits were completed within timescale; 6.5 per cent (19/291) of Children in Care, as at June 2020, had three or more placements within the previous 12 months which is below the internal target, the national target, statistical neighbour and regional averages and an improvement on the 13 per cent as at June 2019; 29.6 per cent of Care Leavers were not in employment, education or training (NEET); and 100 per cent were in suitable accommodation.

The areas highlighted for focus were in respect of referrals screened and completed within one day which was below the target of 90 per cent at 79.8 per cent but also recognised that changes at the front door in March 2020 would have contributed to the figures in this quarter; timeliness of assessments was 74.7 per cent which was below the target of 90 per cent and the reasons for this were being analysed and monitored by the Head of Service although it was recognised that the data was reflective of Covid 19 restrictions put in place in March 2020; the number of children in care has increased to 291 and continues to be closely managed; 69.9 per cent (51/73) of children due a review health assessment in Q1 2020/21 had one completed, which was an improvement on the 60.4 per cent at the end of June 2019; and as a result of dental surgery closures during lockdown, 4.3 per cent of children in care that were due a dental check assessment have had one completed.

Members discussed in particular what could be done to improve the target of referrals screened and completed within one day which was below target; and how to improve the number of children completing a dental health check.

RESOLVED – That the performance information reported for Quarter 1 be noted.

CYP15 WORK PROGRAMME

The Managing Director submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest should be included in the previously approved work programme

The Chair proposed that Members give consideration to ways to carry out a Review of how children and young people are coping in the current climate and to include areas of food poverty, mental health and education.

Members also agreed that elective home education be included in the work programme.

RESOLVED – That the work programme be noted.

CYP16 QUESTIONS

A question was raised by the Chair in relation to the potential increase in the nitrate oxide abuse amongst young people in Darlington. Following discussion, Members shared their concerns at the number of silver canisters that are being found discarded within their wards and felt that this issue needed further investigation.

The Assistant Director of Children's Services advised Members that after undertaking some internal investigations with Children's Services MASH/YOS and SWITCH, there was no evidence to suggest referrals were increasing with regard to children and young people using opiates and ecstasy.

Councillor Dulston, Cabinet Member with the Stronger Communities portfolio confirmed that this was an area of concern and there was physical evidence around the town however the reporting was low.

Members of this Scrutiny Committee agreed that the Chief Constable be contacted for a formal response to the concerns raised.