

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 13 July 2020

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

STATUTORY CO-OPTES – Carly Spence

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

APOLOGIES – Councillor Bell, Malcolm Frank,

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

CYP7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at this meeting.

CYP8 OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Director of Children and Adults Services submitted a report (previously circulated) to update Scrutiny Members on progress within Children's Services since the last meeting with a specific focus on COVID-19 pandemic response.

The submitted report outlined how the workforce within Children's Services had adapted to home working, with some exceptions where staff were building based, and to support understanding of how services were being impacted by the crisis a workforce capacity tracking tool had been developed to support managers across the service to monitor and review service capacity on a daily basis. It was reported that staffing levels had remained at normal levels throughout the pandemic.

Legislative changes came into force on 24 April 2020 to allow for flexibilities in care planning processes for children in care and adoptive pathways through the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, however it was reported that other than introducing virtual methods of working the Local Authority had not implemented any of the amendments and Children's Services remained operational throughout the pandemic.

It was also reported that on 30 April 2020, the Secretary of State issued a notice to be in force from 1 May to 31 May 2020 to modify the duty in Section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014 to secure special educational provision and health care provision in accordance with Educational Health and Care (EHC) plans. This meant that local authorities and health bodies must use 'reasonable endeavors' to discharge their duties considering for each child and young person with an EHC plan and what they could reasonably provide under the circumstances. It was reported that in Darlington normal decision making processes for SEND continued throughout the COVID-19 period and the Multi-Agency Panel continued to meet virtually fortnightly.

With regard to safeguarding and assurance the Council and its partners completed RAG rating of all children and families that were open to services at the start of lockdown to ensure clarity for those who would be of most concern and prioritised visits; and each organisation carried out Covid-19 Risk Assessments to identify the most high-risk families. The individual RAG rated lists from each organisation were combined to produce two Multi-Agency templates for children who have an EHC Plan and children who have a social worker enabling the most vulnerable to be supported and safeguard children who are at risk. A multi-agency group had been established, known as the Critical Safeguarding Partnership Group (CSPG) to ensure strategic oversight across all agencies of vulnerable children and a new set of guidance was developed by partners in the early stages of lockdown.

It was reported that since the start of lockdown and the partial closure of schools on 23 March 2020, 100 per cent of schools in Darlington had remained open for vulnerable children and those with critical worker parents, compared to the national average of 61 per cent of schools being open in April 2020. All of Darlington's schools made arrangements that enabled children with a social worker to continue to attend and children and their parents were actively encouraged to do so and school attendance was monitored daily.

On 3 July 2020 average attendance at school for children with a social worker was 30 per cent which compared favourably with the last published Department for Education national attendance estimate for this cohort which was 18 per cent as of 11 June 2020. It was also reported that throughout the pandemic there had been a strong multi-agency focus on attendance with liaison between Head Teachers, Designated Safeguarding Leads, Social Workers and health colleagues to ensure the most vulnerable children received a co-ordinated approach to their education and on line learning.

With regard to referrals, it was reported that throughout the early stages of lockdown referrals reduced substantially with 38 children being referred during April 2020 compared to 102 during April 2019, however since June these numbers had steadily risen to nearer normal levels with 76 children referred during May 2020. It was also reported that although the number of contacts received regarding domestic abuse had decreased, a larger number of these progressed onto referral to social care which suggested a rise in the severity of the abuse and a higher level of impact/risk/concern for the child. There had also been an increase in the number of children who were feeling the impact of living with physical abuse.

Early Help services continued to respond to all contacts from professionals and members of the public, maintaining a focus of regular contact with families; services that were usually delivered through the children's centres were being delivered online, with advice about children's development and regular video sessions around play and positive interaction proving popular with families; some families required food parcels which were delivered by staff adhering to appropriate working practices; staff continue to review and offer telephone and virtual home visiting support where necessary and have been creative in responding to need using technology and social media; where communication with some children has proved challenging, increased use of the Mind of My Own app has been used to support this; and families open to Keeping Families Together (KFT) were also RAG rated using the Covid-19 risk assessment and had been offered ongoing face to face support throughout lockdown.

The submitted report highlighted missing episodes that were now reducing and reported that most children had adhered to lockdown measures and return home interviews had been carried out through virtual visits; the Assessment and Safeguarding teams continued to undertake assessments, reviews and multi-agency meetings by adapting to virtual mediums such as Microsoft Teams, FaceTime and WhatsApp video calls and where possible using social distancing and PPE, face to face home visits had taken place for children in need, children subject to Child Protection Plans and children who are in care; changes were made to the number of children accessing Harewood Hill Lodge short break centre to minimise the risk of Covid-19 and risk assessments identified the most vulnerable children who were provided with a targeted service; and it was reported that children and families had been very understanding of the change to the way social workers had stayed in touch by virtual contact.

With regard to Children in Care, it was reported that from the beginning of April there had been a total of 26 children brought into care with 61.54 per cent of those being placed with extended family members; during the pandemic the Family Courts adapted to new processes and reduced the type of hearing they would hear in order to manage virtual Court hearings and remained open for urgent applications in respect of children who are at risk of significant harm, however non urgent applications have been unable to be lodged with Court and Family Courts will re-open to non-urgent applications on 1 July 2020; contact between children in care and their families has been via virtual methods and it was reported that young children had found it extremely positive for some children in specific circumstances; it was reported that there had been minimal movement in placements as a result of Covid-19 and moves had only taken place when there had been risks of infection and the reduction in placement moves had resulted in an improved performance regarding the three or more placement moves in a rolling 12 month period for child; Therapeutic Practitioners were supporting social workers with young people and family mental health and well-being; social workers had continued to celebrate young people's birthdays; participation workers held weekly meetings to capture how young people were dealing with the Covid-19 restrictions; and Residential Homes had been working as per regulations and standards with staff maintaining a focus on safeguarding children in their care.

Care Leavers remained in contact with services and had been supported in various ways during the pandemic with continued weekly access to the Psychological Well-being Practitioner for Care Leavers via telephone; foster carers had been flexible to help the service provide placements to meet the needs of children and continued to receive virtual support; Adoption Tees Valley remained operational using remote means to engage adopters and liaise with assessing social workers in the local authority; during lockdown daily meetings had taken place between the local authority and the Regional Schools Commissioner and daily updates have been issued to schools form Education Services; the Schools Forum met on 14 January 2020 and agreed the School Funding Formula Growth Fund and central budgets for schools and early years for 2020/21; Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 reopened on 1 June and Secondary Schools followed for Year 10 and Year 12 from 15 June; a higher proportion of early years providers had remained open in Darlington than nationally and during the pandemic an Early Years Education Strategy Group was established to consider issues facing the sector and to develop strategies to support;

contact monitoring has been undertaken with private residential homes operating in Darlington and no matters of contractual compliance had been identified with positive outcomes for children and young people; and the Darlington Partnership welcomed David Gallagher as the new Statutory Safeguarding Partner representing the Health Sector with responsibility for the Tees Valley and Darlington Clinical Commissioning Group.

The Chair invited the school representatives on this Scrutiny Committee to give their views on the submitted report and their contact with the local authority throughout the pandemic and it was agreed among the representatives that there had been a good working relationship between the Council and the primary and secondary schools and they had felt well supported and that collaboration and communication had been very strong.

The Chair also acknowledged and congratulated the schools on the work they had undertaken in close collaboration with the local authority.

Members discussed the submitted report and in particular requested clarification on how confident Members can be with regard to contact with those pupils who were not back in school and was advised by Nick Lindsay the 11-19 Partnership representative that schools had been undertaking contact with those pupils by door knocks and garden visits to ensure some dialogue with vulnerable families was made and the Assistant Director of Children's Services also confirmed that Covid-19 Risk Assessments carried out by all organisations ensures those children are kept safe.

Members questioned if there had been any cost implications of 100 per cent of all Darlington schools remaining open with low numbers; acknowledged that it was positive to see staffing levels remained strong and services had been learning from lockdown whilst maintaining the quality of contact and that statutory visits continued to be carried out using virtual methods.

Members also discussed the supply of personal protection equipment; Voice of the Child visits; reassurances that children and families were receiving support; with regard to EHC Plans the utilisation of the flexibility of the legislation to undertake Regional Multi Agency Placement Panels; the ceasing of 'reasonable endeavours' at the end of July and how this would affect the authority in regard to timeliness.

The Chair acknowledged the work that had been undertaken with the children and families however reiterated the need to follow the outcomes for these families and suggested that Members carry out a 'deep dive' review and examine this issues in conjunction with the Parent Carer Forum.

Other issues discussed were in relation to on line engagement with those families who did not have English as a first language; digital inclusion and access for all children to laptops and wi-fi; the reasons for the initial increase of missing episodes at the beginning of lockdown; what arrangements were in place for the return of all children to school in September and the logistical challenges facing schools with the management of 'bubbles'; and discussion around the challenges around the High Needs Budget to fund special schools, individual EHC plans and packages for alternative provision.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be noted.

(b) That the thanks and congratulations of this Scrutiny Committee be extended to Children's Services and all educational settings during these difficult times.