

**COUNCIL
24 SEPTEMBER 2020**

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Work Programme

2. Members considered and updated the Work Programme 2020/21 developed by this Scrutiny Committee and we agreed that the presentation by the Regional School Commissioner be re-arranged as soon as possible.

COVID-19 Pandemic

3. A report was received from the Director of Children and Adults Services updating Members on progress within Children's Services, focussing specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic response.
4. The report advised on how the workforce within Children's Services had adapted to home working immediately following lock down on the 24 March 2020. Staffing levels had remained at normal levels throughout the pandemic and to support understanding of how services were likely to be impacted by the crisis, a workforce capacity tracking tool had been developed.
5. 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 (Corona Virus) (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.
6. Covid-19 Risk Assessments inclusive of safeguarding and assurance RAG rating were completed for all children open to services from all organisations at the start of lockdown, to identify the most high-risk families and a multi-agency group was established to ensure strategic oversight across all agencies of any vulnerable children.
7. All schools, 100 per cent in Darlington had remained open for vulnerable children and those with key worker parents, compared to the national average of 61 per cent of schools being open; and on 3 July 2020 average attendance at school for children with a social worker was 30 per cent, which compared favorably with the last published Department for Education national attendance estimate for this cohort which was, 18 per cent as of 11 June 2020.
8. It was also 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.

9. Members were pleased to acknowledge that throughout the pandemic there had been a strong multi-agency focus on attendance and congratulated the schools on the work they had undertaken in close collaboration with the local authority. Members did express some concern about the high number of children and young people with Educational Health Care Plans who were not attending school, despite schools being open. Members of this Scrutiny have initiated contact with the Parent/Carer's Forum to pursue this issue further.
10. Members heard direct views from school representatives in attendance at the meeting, on their contact with the local authority throughout the pandemic and were encouraged to hear that there had been good working relationships between the Council and both primary and secondary schools had felt well supported.

Service delivery

11. The Committee noted that the number of referrals had reduced substantially throughout the early stages of lockdown however; since June these numbers had steadily risen to nearer normal levels with 76 children referred during May 2020.
12. Early Help Services continued to respond to all contacts from professionals and members of the public, maintaining a focus of regular contact with families; virtual home visits; and online contacts by use of technology and social media and it was noted that services had been very creative in responding to need throughout lockdown.
13. It was also reported that missing episodes had reduced, and most children had adhered to the lockdown measures with return home interviews carried out through virtual means. Assessments and reviews had also continued throughout lockdown by 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.
14. Since the beginning of April, 26 Children have been brought into care with 61.54 per cent of those being placed with extended family Members. Contact between children in care and their families has been via virtual methods which had been well received; and there had been minimal movement in placements as a result of Covid-19.
15. Residential Homes have been working as per regulations and standards, with staff maintaining a focus on safeguarding children in their care. Care Leavers have remained in contact with services and received support in various ways during the pandemic.
16. Foster Carers have been flexible to help the service provide placements and have facilitated virtual contacts between children in their care and families. Adoption Tees Valley remained operational and children have continued to move into their adoptive placements.
17. Members acknowledged the work undertaken with children and families by children's practitioners and the schools, and agreed to continue to follow the outcomes for these families in various parent/carer forums.

Public Health – Post Covid-19 Priorities

18. At our meeting on 7 September we received a presentation from Ken Ross, the Public Health Specialist outlining the Government's Obesity Strategy, launched in July 2020. The Strategy recognizes obesity as a significant risk factor for covid-19 and also complements the Darlington Healthy Weight Plan; highlighted how schools were being supported with mental health issues, including the successful trailblazer bid for school based mental health support through transition; the focus on children and young people in years 4-8 from September 2021; and the emotional health and resilience nurse, commissioned from the Harrogate and District Foundation Trust.
19. The presentation also highlighted how the 0-19 service had at the start of lockdown, changed its style of delivery to prioritizing families ensuring the most vulnerable had contact from the service, delivered by various virtual means. The service had received positive feedback from parents and families who had accessed the service during this time.

Independent reviewing officer annual report 2019/20

20. Members considered the Annual Report and the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service in relation to Looked After Children and the performance of the unit, in a range of responsibilities.
21. We also wanted to learn more about how the Reviewing Officers were forging relationships with Members, the reasons for the caseload figure in Darlington remaining in the upper limit of the statutory guidance of 70 and discussed the importance of full participation of children in care in their reviews and contact with the IRO.

Performance - Quarter 4 2029/20

22. Quarter 4 performance January to March 2019/20 highlighted
 - 17.2 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;
 - 0.6 per cent of children who had their Child Protection Plan (CPP) ceased, had been subject to a CPP for 2 years or more and continues to remain below the target of 5 per cent;
 - 89.0 per cent of statutory looked after children visits had been completed within the timescale;
 - 94.3 per cent of looked after children who were due a review health check received them within the required timescale;
 - 90.2 per cent of looked after children who were due a review dental check had received them within the required timescale;
 - 28.1 per cent of Care Leavers were not in employment, education or training (NEET).

23. The areas highlighted for focus were
- rate of looked after children had increased and was currently 120.1 per 10,000 population (270 children), compared to 117.2 per 10,000 population (264) last year.

Designated Officer Annual Report

24. Members received the Annual Report of the Designated Officer highlighting the progress and performance of the Designated Officer April 2019 to March 2020 and the required actions for April 2020 to March 2021.
25. Members discussed in particular the increase in the number of referrals in this reporting period explained by a high number of allegations from one particular school which accounted for 19 per cent of the total number of allegations, mostly relating to the use of restraint, and the Action Plan that had been put in place with the Safeguarding Officer to address this issue and what contact had been made with the Designated Officer from other authorities.

Learning and Skills Annual Report

26. We considered the performance of the Learning and Skills Service for the academic year 2019/20. The service continues to perform well with a 'Good' Ofsted grade, whilst supporting some of the most vulnerable adults, young people and families in Darlington.
27. There are a number of challenges to be faced in 2020/21 with the move towards Tees Valley Combined Authority priorities, as part of the devolution of the Adult Education Budget and the challenges faced by Covic-19 with the transition to online learning at the start of lockdown; and the ongoing challenges of apprenticeship funding.

Councillor Cyndi Hughes
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee