

COUNCIL
26 NOVEMBER 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 gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during 2019/20, and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.
3. A new item agreed at the meeting was that a half-day virtual evidence gathering event will take place in January 2021 to bring together the lived experiences of children, young people and families to help us better understand the impact Covid-19 is having in Darlington and what future actions may be required. Committee will also hear from agencies, voluntary organisations, educators, businesses, faith groups and others supporting and serving children, young people and families during these unprecedented times. A scrutiny working group meeting was held on 17 November 2020 to develop the Quad of Aims for this piece of work.

Academies

4. Members welcomed Katherine Cowell, the Regional School's Commissioner to the meeting in November, who gave a presentation on her role in relation to; academies, free schools and place planning; the role of Opportunity North East in supporting Darlington, and information on school improvement.
5. The presentation provided an oversight of the academies in Darlington local authority and highlighted strong trust characteristics to provide positive outcomes for children, support strong financial health and provide expert governance.
6. Opportunity North East, support Darlington with five challenges which include; support for young people to continue to do well in secondary education through transition; the ONE Vision School's Improvement Programme; supporting Math departments in 30 secondary schools through a package of support developed by the regions two Math Hubs, one of which is located at Carmel College; and encouraging young people to find a pathway to a good career via a programme of work, engaging with businesses to identify work/training activities for pupils; and also expanding the FutureMe programme, to encourage young people to progress to higher education.
7. The four One Vision Schools in Darlington are: Haughton Academy, Polam Hall School, St. Aidan's Church of England Academy and Wyvern Academy. These schools are part of the One Vision three year support programme that includes guidance on evidence-based school improvement from the Education Endowment Foundation and support from high-performing schools.

8. Members discussed with the Regional School's Commissioner the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to attendance, attainment, safeguarding, digital accessibility, mental health and wellbeing and asked how these issues are being monitored to measure the current and longer-term impact of the pandemic. Katherine confirmed that engagement and support from schools had been excellent during these difficult times.
9. Members were particularly interested to learn about the relationship between the Regional's Commissioner and the Careers Challenge 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.
10. Concerns were also raised about disadvantaged students and members asked for reassurance that the Department for Education were focusing on this particular group of young people. The Regional School's Commissioner confirmed that Opportunity North East support was being offered to schools that may be struggling and daily contact is made with all schools and any feedback is fed into future contingency planning.
11. Following the meeting, at the request of committee, follow-up contact has been made with the Regional Schools Commissioner to reiterate the eagerness of elected members to be positively involved in promoting better outcomes for all children and young people within our borough. Academisation has meant that the formal structures guaranteeing involvement have been severed, but committee have indicated its intention to explore an expanded role for elected members to influence choice, at every level, in order to enhance and improve the life chances of Darlington's children and young people. Committee welcomed the building of a closer relationship with the Regional School Commissioner for the North

Adoption Tees Valley Annual Report 2019/20

12. Vicky Davidson-Boyd, Service Manager for Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) presented the annual report for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.
13. 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 and the report outlined the embedding of the practice, procedures, and systems for delivery of the adoption service to the Tees Valley Local Authorities and its continued development of adoption in the Tees Valley.
14. Committee were presented with information about how the Coronavirus pandemic had affected the service since March 2020, assured that adoption work was able to continue throughout lockdown and were able to ask questions about what had gone well and hear about some of the key challenges for the service.
15. The service continues to focus on maintaining timescales, and progressing early permanence for children, where this is appropriate for them, and provisional data shows a positive reduction in timescales for children entering care to moving in with adopters.

16. There has been significant improvement in recruitment and availability of adopters for the children referred and there has been strategic work with regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies to encourage them to contribute to sufficiency within this region.
17. Committee Members were particularly interested in 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.
18. Assessment timescales are improving, and most adopters are being linked and matched with a child, or children quickly, following approval.
19. The service has placed considerable focus on the adoption support offer to adopters and children, inclusive of those who have previously adopted prior to the establishment of the ATV.
20. Changes to this year's report led members to request further information on governance procedures and financial reporting. A task and finish review on these matters has been added to Committee's work programme.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnerships Annual Report 2019/20

21. Ann Baxter, the Independent Chair/Scrutineer of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnerships attended Scrutiny to present the Partnerships Annual Report for 2019/20.
22. The annual report is a statutory requirement of all Local Safeguarding Partnerships to account for their achievements over the previous year and to determine an assessment as to the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements within the local area.
23. The 2019/20 Annual Report is the first report provided by the Partnership under the new safeguarding arrangements and outlines what the Partnership has done over the period 2019/20, drawing upon a range of data and information to illustrate the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.
24. 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.
25. 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.
26. Members raised concerns at the increase in elective home education with regard to the support they receive, in particular; for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) community, which forms the largest single ethnic minority group in County Durham and Darlington. Members agreed to include this on the work programme to examine in more detail.

Performance – Quarter 1 2020/21

27. Children's Services Quarter 1 performance April to June 2020 was presented to the November meeting which highlighted the following positives:

- (a) All children with a Child Protection Plan and those who are in care, had been allocated to a qualified social worker;
- (b) 89.7 per cent of Initial Child Protection Conferences were held within 15 workings, which remains higher than statistical neighbours;
- (c) Children (93.6 per cent) subject to a child protection plan were visited within 10 working days, above the target of 90 per cent;
- (d) Children in care (94.3 per cent) were visited within timescale;
- (e) Children in Care (6.5 per cent) had three or more placements within the previous 12 months which is below the internal target, the national target, statistical neighbour and regional averages;
- (f) Care Leavers (29.6 per cent) were not in employment, education or training (NEET) and all care leavers (100 per cent) were in suitable accommodation.

28. The areas identified for improved focus were:

- (a) Ensuring that referrals are screened in a timely manner and improving the timeliness of children and family assessments;
- (b) the number of children in care has increased to 291, with Darlington continuing to be an outlier for the high number of Children in Care as compared with our statistical neighbours;
- (c) The number of children (69.9 per cent) due a review health assessment needs to improve
- (d) as a result of dental surgery closures during lockdown, 4.3 per cent of children in care that were due a dental check assessment had one completed.

29. It was recognised that the data for the targets above, which showed a decrease in performance, was reflective of Covid-19 restrictions put in place in March 2020. Notwithstanding this, the figures presented to Scrutiny need to better reflect qualitative issues rather than just timescales and targets. Committee requested a narrative as to the issues impacting the indicators be incorporated into future reports and that numbers of children and young people replace percentages to allow members a better insight into the effect missing or meeting targets has on real people.

Nitrate Oxide Abuse

30. A question was raised at Scrutiny in relation to the potential increase in the abuse of nitrous oxide amongst young people in Darlington. Members shared their concerns at the number of silver cartridges that they have seen discarded within their wards and it was felt that this is an issue that needed further investigation.

31. The Assistant Director of Children's Services advised Members that internal investigations within Children's Services, YOS and SWITCH, demonstrated no evidence to suggest referrals were increasing with regard to children and young people using opiates and ecstasy but could not comment on nitrous oxide.
32. As a result of these discussions and at the behest of Committee, an email was sent to Chief Constable Farrell to raise our concerns about the number of silver cartridges appearing around the borough, mainly in areas where young people congregate- Stanhope Road Park, South Park, Green Park and The Denes with a request for an update as to whether the police consider this and other drug use amongst young people to have increased during the current pandemic and if so, what the force and their partners are doing about it.

Councillor Cyndi Hughes
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee