

COUNCIL
25 NOVEMBER 2021

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.

Adoption Tees Valley Annual Report 2020-21

2. Vicky Davidson-Boyd, Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley presented the third Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) Annual Report 2020/21 and outlined the work that had been undertaken across the Tees Valley during 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.
3. It was highlighted that this period had been impacted by the National Covid 19 pandemic and adoption activity had to be conducted within the amended regulations and restrictions imposed because of the public health emergency which brought both challenge and opportunity to work differently across Children's Services and the service trialled new ways of working within the permitted adoption services range of flexibilities.
4. We received details of the Early Permanence Strategy which has been collaborative, and has involved key stakeholders with a role in care planning and the placement of children for adoption and the three year review of Adoption Tees Valley which will conclude its findings in September 2021. Members also examined the individual authority performance benchmarking data and analysis of performance.
5. The submitted report also provided details of marketing and recruitment activities; the new initiative to support pathway for prospective adopters; the Quality Assurance mechanisms in place for managing and monitoring the work of the agency, and the quality of work; and provided details of the joint budget and support funding available to the ATV.
6. Members noted in particular the performance of this authority which had seen fewer children adopted than previous years; considered the Moving on To Adoption Model adopted by the ATV as a best practice model in some targeted cases; the challenges facing the ATV; the continued employment of an Education Support Worker co-funded by the five local authority Virtual Schools via Department for Education grant funding for children previously in the care of the local authority and noted that 59 families and children had been supported during this year.
7. We expressed our concern at the delays reported in progressing plans and were given reassurance that this was not a particular concern in Darlington; we discussed the increase in Stage 1 adopters which did not progress to Stage 2 and how this may have been affected by the Covid pandemic; and discussed ways to attract the correct adopters for the children in Darlington.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report

8. Members received the Annual Report of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership (DSP) for the period 2020/21 for our comment.
9. The Local Safeguarding Partnerships are required to produce an Annual Report to account for the Partnerships achievements over the previous year and make an assessment of the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements within the local area and outlines what the Partnership had done over the period 2020/21, drawing upon a range of data and information to outline the progress made and illustrated the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding partnership arrangements.
10. Ann Baxter, Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership attended the meeting to outline the Annual Report and responded to our questions.
11. It was also highlighted that the Covid-19 Pandemic and the challenges posed to ensure children, young people and vulnerable adults were safeguarded had been the main focus throughout the year; and a multi-agency Critical Safeguarding Partnership Group was established in response to the Government's emergency procedures which met weekly to ensure that the most vulnerable were supported and safeguarded.
12. Members were particularly interested to learn about the position in Darlington with regard to domestic violence and the services provided with partners to understand the situation and Anne assured Members that this was a priority area of the Partnership. We also discussed the increase in the number of children looked after in Darlington; and questioned the current position regarding Home Elective Education and if systems were in place to re-introduce those families who have elected to home educate back into schools if they so wished.
13. We also discussed the safeguarding partners and the challenges of ensuring that all groups other than health, police and the local authority are heard and Ann acknowledged that the final report of this Scrutiny on the effects of the pandemic on our children and young people 'voice of the child' had been noted by the Partnership.

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual report 2020-21

14. Members received an overview and noted the work of the work by the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and the Annual Reports of the Independent Reviewing Officer for 2020/21 and the Child Protection Conference Chair for 2020/21.
15. It was highlighted that for the the whole of the period April 2020 – March 2021 the work undertaken by the Children's Safeguarding Unit had been under Covid-19 arrangements and in line with guidance, and all formal meetings, which in previous years had been face to face, had been conducted using virtual platforms.
16. Our questions were in relation to how the rising caseloads as a result of the increase in the number of Looked After Children was being managed and also expressed our concerns for the welfare of the workforce and the impact of home working. We were assured that the workforce had shown great resilience and adaptability during the pandemic and that the LAC numbers had shown some reductions as the Courts had moved back to a more normal routine.

Learning and Skills Annual Report 2020-21

17. Members received an update on the performance of the Learning and Skills Service for academic year 2020/21 to allow Scrutiny challenge of the performance of this externally funded service.
18. It was highlighted that the pandemic had impacted on the Learning and Skills service and delivery in a number of ways over the last two academic years, however staff had responded magnificently and continued to deliver throughout that time, making a very successful transition to online teaching and learning.
19. We discussed with the Head of Skills and Employability the low take up of apprenticeships and the possible reasons for this; how the Service had been affected by the pandemic and the challenges faced; and Members expressed their concerns for the Learning and Skills service with the impact of the pandemic and the potential uncertainties of the Tees Valley Combined Authority devolved funding model diverge from what the rules and requirements were under the Education and Skills Funding Agency and agreed that these concerns be forwarded to Cabinet.

Performance Indicators Quarter 1 2021/22

20. Children's Services Quarter 1 (April 2021 to June 2021) performance information was presented to the October meeting which highlighted the following areas of good practice:
 - (a) 10.1 per cent of the children referred during Q1 had been re-referred to Children's Social Care within 12 months of a previous referral below the internal target of 18 per cent;
 - (b) Social workers completed 90.8 per cent of the Children's and Families assessments within timescale, which remains higher than statistical neighbours, regional and national average benchmarks;
 - (c) 89.7 per cent of Initial Child Protection Conferences were held within 15 working days from the strategy meeting / section 47 being initiated, excluding transfer-in conferences which was below internal target however remained higher than our statistical neighbour, regional and national average benchmarks;
 - (d) 100 per cent of children with a Child Protection (CP) plan and 100 per cent of Children in Care (CiC) have an allocated social worker;
 - (e) During Q1 no child had ceased to be subject to a CP plan who had been subject to the plan for two or more years and we continue to positively perform below the target of 5 per cent;
 - (f) the number of Children in Care (CiC) has decreased to 264 by the end of June 2021 (end of June 2020 (302)) and work continues to safely reduce the number of children coming into care;
 - (g) 90.5 per cent of statutory CiC visits were completed within timescale in line with the target of 90 per cent;

- (h) 9.8 per cent of our Children in Care, as of June 2021, had three or more placements within the previous 12 months below internal target, our statistical neighbour, regional and national average benchmarks;
- (i) 69.1 per cent of our Children in Care aged under 16 (who have been looked after for at least 2.5 years) have been in their current placement continuously for at least two years;
- (j) 8.8 per cent of our Children in Care have been placed 20 or more miles away from home as of June 2021 below the target of 10 per cent;
- (k) 86.4 per cent of the children, newly into care, were seen by CDDFT within 20 working days for an initial health assessment;
- (l) 86.4 per cent of children due a review health assessment year to date had one completed; and
- (m) 21.7 per cent of Care Leavers were not in employment, education or training (NEET) which was positivity below target of 30 per; and 100.0 per cent were in suitable accommodation.

21. Areas highlighted for focus were in respect of :

- (a) Referrals screened and and completed within 1 day during Q1 2021/22 which was below the target of 90 per cent at 68.5 per cent and 9 per cent of the referrals took over three days to complete;
- (b) at the end of June 2021, the percentage of children becoming subject to a CP plan for a second or subsequent time within two years of the previous plan ending was 14.3 per cent above the 6 per cent target, however, related to one family;
- (c) 87.3 per cent of children received a statutory CP visit within 10 working days during Q1 below the target of 90 per cent; and
- (d) 55.8 per cent of children due a dental check assessment year to date had one completed.

Work Programme

- 22. Members gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during 2020/21.
- 23. Regarding the proposed joint review of Youth Unemployment, I have attended a briefing, along with Councillor Renton, Chair of Economy and Resources to discuss the position regarding youth unemployment in Darlington and were advised that a piece of work had already been commissioned by the Chief Executive which Seth Pearson, Chief Executive of Darlington Partnership was leading on. This will be brought to a future meeting.

24. We concluded from the briefing that there did not appear to be a lack of opportunity for young people but there was a lack of enthusiasm and motivation among young people to seek employment or an apprenticeship, which could be a consequence of the pandemic.

Councillor Paul Crudass
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee