

COUNCIL
1 FEBRUARY 2022

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 2021/22, and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.
3. We are also in the process of arranging in the new year meetings with young people from the Darlington Youth Partnership and Council of School Council's and the Head of Education, Employment and Skills, Tees Valley Combined Authority.

Performance Indicators

4. Children's Services Quarter 2 (July 2021 to September 2021) performance information was presented to the December meeting which highlighted the following areas of good practice:
 - (a) 10.7 per cent of the children referred during this quarter had been re-referred to Children's Social Care within 12 months of a previous referral which was positively below the internal target of 18 per cent;
 - (b) 100 per cent of children with a Child Protection (CP) plan and 100 per cent of Children in Care (CiC) had an allocated social worker;
 - (c) No child had ceased to be subject to a CP plan who had been subject to the plan for two or more years, and continue to positively perform below the target of five per cent;
 - (d) The number of Children in Care (CiC) was 266 by the end of September 2021, which was a large reduction of 11.9 per cent when compared with the number of children at the end of September 2020 (302) and work continues to safely reduce the number of children coming into care;
 - (e) 92.9 per cent of statutory CiC visits were completed within timescale during Q2 above the target of 90 per cent;

- (f) 9.8 per cent of our Children in Care, as of September 2021, had 3 or more placements within the previous 12 months and performance was positively below the internal target of 10 per cent;
 - (g) 69.8 per cent of Children in Care aged under 16 (who have been looked after for at least 2.5 years) had been in their current placement continuously for at least two years, in line with the internal target of 68 per cent;
 - (h) 8.3 per cent of Children in Care had been placed 20 or more miles away from home as of September 2021 below the target of 10 per cent;
 - (i) 93.7 per cent of children due a review health assessment year to date had one completed, which was above the target of 90 per cent; and
 - (j) 21.3 per cent of Care Leavers were not in employment, education or training (NEET) at the end of September 2021, which was positively below target of 30 per cent and 100.0 per cent were in suitable accommodation.
5. Areas highlighted for focus were in respect of :
- (a) Social workers completed 87.3 per cent of the C&F assessments within timescale which falls below the target of 90 per cent, although was higher than the 80.4 per cent for the same period last year;
 - (b) 78.8 per cent of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC) were held within 15 working days from the strategy meeting / section 47 being initiated, excluding transfer-in conferences, by the end of Q2;
 - (c) 68.2 per cent of referrals were screened and completed within 1 day by the end of Q2, below the target of 90 per cent and 7.6 per cent of the referrals took over three days to complete;
 - (d) At the end of September 2021, the percentage of children becoming subject to a Child Protection Plan for a second or subsequent time within two years of the previous plan ending was 9.8 per cent, above the 6 per cent target, however this was a reduction from 14.3 per cent as at the end of Q1 2021/22;
 - (e) 87.1 per cent of children received a statutory CP visit within 10 working days during Q2 below the target of 90 per cent; and
 - (f) 75.7 per cent of children due a dental check assessment year to date had one completed, and although below the target of 90 per cent it was a significant improvement from 55.8 per cent as at the end of Q1 2021/22.
6. We noted the challenges around the recruitment and retention of social workers which was both a regional and national challenge and requested information on what the authority was doing to address the shortfall in social workers; we also asked for clarification on the current position regarding caseloads and were assured that caseloads

were at a safe and manageable level; and noted the increase in missing from care and questioned what was being done to address this.

Update of the Developing Darlington Care Collective

7. Members received an update on progress made with the Developing Darlington Care Collective (DDCC), linking MECC (Making Every Contact Count) brief intervention work and the key achievements through 2021 which focused on collaborative working.
8. The Workforce Development Manager gave a presentation which provided an overview of the progress of the Developing Darlington Care Collective aimed at supporting Children and Adult Services sector and outlined the plans to support all aspects of recruitment, retention, training, progression and destination by the launch the 'Darlington Xtra' microsite and associated platforms that support the implementation of the DDCC and gave Members a brief demonstration of the site and its content.
9. We agreed that the microsite was a fantastic piece of work as a conduit/platform for growing our own and attracting the best to Darlington and will greatly assist the focus of the key priority of workforce for 2022.

Children's Centre Services

10. At the request of Members we received an update on the position in relation to services offered for young parents during and post Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions.
11. The Building Stronger Families Service based at McNay Street Children's Centre offers a high level of support by way of targeted delivery through early help assessments and universal groups focusing on parents' mental health, practical skills, and children's development.
12. Parents to be and new parents are able to attend a range of groups across the town, including a pre and post birth group for teenage parents, with midwives working with teenage parents on hand to conduct antenatal checks and there are also several groups aimed at babies up to 12 months and their parents, focussing on parents' well-being and helping them to promote the development of their babies in all areas.
13. As with other services once the working from home directive came from Government the Centres had to close and all these groups closed however work immediately began to try to get as many of these services online as well as practitioners delivering live and pre-recorded sessions on child development, behaviour management and other related issues.
14. The Centres started to re-open with Covid 19 safe measures in place from July, with the bulk re-opening in September 2021.
15. We discussed with the Service Manager, Building Stronger Families the importance of interaction with children and parents through playgroups and other informal networks and that this connection may have been lost during the pandemic. We also discussed the methods of communication and media plans in place to link in to all these groups to offer support and reach out to those hard to reach families.

Medium Term Financial Plan

16. At a Special Meeting held on 10 January 2022 Members had the opportunity to consider the draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2022/23 to 2025/26 and to ask any questions relating to the remit of this Scrutiny Committee, and to forward any views or comments relating to the services and finances within the remit of this Committee to the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for consideration on 20 January 2022.
17. We were provided with an update on the finance settlement which had been received subsequent to the draft MTFP. We were advised that the Council Tax and Precept levels remained as expected at 2 per cent and 1 per cent respectively; that the £1.5B additional funding announced in the Autumn Statement had been split into £822M Services Grant and £636M Social Care Grant and the Council would be receiving £1.579M from the Services Grant and £1.162M from the Social Care Grant, which was higher than the estimate included within the draft MTFP. We also noted that the Services Grant was a one-off payment whilst a further review of Local Government funding was conducted.
18. Members were also advised that the New Homes Bonus had been extended for a further year, and that this would net a further £1.4M above anticipated levels. We noted that there were also a number of deductions from initial draft figures, however overall there would be an additional £1.073M funding for 2022/23.
19. We discussed in particular the level of unpredictability within Children's Services and the Strengthening Families Programme which was key to the improvement journey and providing high quality services and the challenges faced which were still ongoing from the pandemic; the challenges faced by Children's Services around placement markets; how Adoption Tees Valley funding was calculated and the ongoing work in relation to calculating charges to each of the five Tees Valley authorities; ongoing work to reduce the costs in relation to Inter Agency Fees; and the known pressures and efficiencies in relation to Social Care staffing and the increased demand on public funds and the number of children requiring support.
20. We also asked the Assistant Director of Children's Services, if extra funding could be made available for Children's Services where this would be best allocated and focussed. His response was that the area he would most seek to expand would be the Early Help offer, to create more Early Help practitioner posts and for the service to be larger, more accessible and more visible to local communities, children and families in Darlington.
21. Members agreed that access to Early Help helps families address their issues early and if successful prevents expensive and intrusive statutory interventions at a point in the future, thus being both the right thing to do and a more financially viable way of supporting families; and is at the very heart of the Strengthening Families journey already being undertaken working with families.

22. We therefore agreed that in respond to our consideration of the MTFP, that if additional funding became available, Cabinet be requested to give consideration to increasing the budget allocation for Early Help Services.

Councillor Paul Crudass
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee