

COUNCIL
31 MARCH 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; and agreed to carry out a review of the Vulnerable Pupil Panel.
3. On 22 February, 2022 some Members met virtually with a Member of the Darlington Youth Partnership and the Member of the Youth Parliament to discuss projects the Council are working on to try and capture the voice of children and young people from across Darlington.
4. And on 11 February, 2022 the Head of Employment, Education and Skills, Tees Valley Combined Authority attended a joint briefing with Members of this Committee and the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee to discuss the education and skills funding allocation as it relates to our authority and where specifically the spend is being focused.

Review of the Special Educational Needs (SEND) Accessibility Strategy 2017-2020

5. We received an update on the review of the Special Educational Needs (SEND) Accessibility Strategy 2017-2020 which sought our views on the Strategy prior to Strategy being presented for approval to Cabinet on 3 May 2022 .
6. The Strategy does not form a part of the Council's Policy Framework however it is a statutory requirement as required by Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 for the Local Authority to prepare an Accessibility Strategy in relation to our maintained schools and this review is required every three years, however due to COVID, the review took place in Autumn 2021 and concluded in early 2022.
7. The Strategy sets out how the Local Authority will work with maintained settings to increase the extent to which disabled children and young people can participate in the school curriculum; improve the physical environment of schools; and improve delivery of information to pupils with disabilities and/or learning difficulties.
8. A consultation exercise which took place with parent/carers, maintained settings, stakeholders, the Darlington Parent/Carer Forum and Darlington Association on Disability and there was a consistent message from parent/carers that there was a need to ensure more staff training for equality and diversity and to ensure that information was accessible.

9. We were particularly interested to learn if there was a similar duty on the authority's academies and how we advise academies and were advised that our officers liaise with the academies and offer their expertise.
10. Members also expressed their concerns at recruitment issues for specialist SEND teachers and how that was affecting service delivery and questioned how the strategy will be monitored to comply with the Local Offer.
11. We were pleased to note that the accessibility issues that had been experienced at the beginning of the pandemic were getting back to normal levels with the continued support of the Parent/Carer Forum

Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2021-22

12. We considered the findings of the 2021-22 Childcare Sufficiency Review which ensures sufficient childcare for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0-14 or up to 18 for disabled children.
13. Prior to March 2020, Darlington's childcare market was fairly stable and the parental take-up rates of the various entitlements was predictable; and from early June 2020 when providers were again able to admit children other than those whose parents were key workers or vulnerable children, the number of pre-school children attending provision rose and by the end of the Summer 2020 term there were 263 pre-school children in attendance.
14. In comparison, by the end of the Summer 2021 term there were 839 pre-school children in attendance in childcare although this figure had reached a high of 1,413 by the end of May 2021 and the figure in early December 2021 was 1,117.
15. We noted that there were periodic short-term closures within the sector due to the pandemic but these were minimal and by the Autumn 2021 term, 1,696 children were accessing an Early Years Entitlements place compared with 1,587 children accessing a funded place in Autumn 2019; and during this pandemic, support continued to be provided to the childcare sector by various means.
16. Through consultation providers had indicated that recruitment and retention was an issue; and following consultation with the Darlington Parent/Carer Forum in Summer 2021 updated marketing information, signposting parents to sources of information about different types of local, registered, inclusive childcare across the borough could be shared so parents had a better understanding of any issues regarding access to childcare and unmet demand.
17. Providers are facing uncertainty with regard to childcare demand, early years entitlements and parent paid income as families' circumstances change, however it was reported that Indicators showed that there had been sufficient capacity to meet demand throughout this period, however any unmet demand will be continually monitored to ensure that parents are able to access training and work in the coming months and years.
18. We discussed affordability issues and the worrying financial situation for providers; the national retention and recruitment problems and general uncertainty in the settings; and

insufficient funding from other sources to ensure the providers are in a position to meet future demand.

19. We also discussed areas of the borough where they felt that sufficiency was not meeting demand and requested further information be brought to Members at a future date regarding demographical/community data; and that we intend to keep a weather eye on childcare sufficiency as Darlington grows in line with the Local Plan.

Councillor Paul Crudass
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee