

COUNCIL
26 JANUARY 2023

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.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2021/22

2. Members considered the Annual Report of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership (DSP) for the period 2021/22 which reflected on the work of the Partnership over the period 2021/22, drawing upon a range of data and information, to outline the progress made and to illustrate the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding partnership arrangements across Darlington.
3. During this reporting period the Covid-19 Pandemic had continued to pose a significant challenge throughout the year ensuring children, young people and vulnerable adults were safeguarded.
4. Ann Baxter, Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership attended the meeting to respond to our questions and comments on the Annual Report and in particular how the current scrutiny arrangements were working following the revised Partnership Governance arrangements and the exclusion of schools and external bodies from the Board.
5. She acknowledged some concern over the changes to the legislation regarding the exclusion of education but advised that during the pandemic arrangements had been strengthened with schools and there had been improved engagement with the education sectors, however felt that there had been some loss of voice from the wider partners and she also attended the Primary and Secondary Heads meeting to address any concerns
6. The Children's MASH Operational Group meets as a Multi Agency group which focusses on a number of key themes being seen through the Children's Front Door and we suggested that an elected member from this Scrutiny Committee also be invited to attend those multi-agency meetings.
7. We also sought reassurance that the voices of the Gypsy Roma Travelling (GRT) Community traveller families were being heard, especially in relation to education as 50 per cent of our Elective Home Educated (EHE) were from the GRT community and were advised that the EHE advisor works closely with the GRT Education Service of which this authority is one of only a few authorities that maintain such a service.

Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Services (ILACS)

8. The Assistant Director of Children's Services provided an update on the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) in Darlington carried out between 10 and 21 October 2022.

9. This was the first inspection of this kind since 2018 when services were found to 'Require Improvement'.
10. We were pleased to hear that the inspection led to an overall grading for the service of 'Good' including an 'Outstanding' rating for the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers.
11. Members agreed that it was an excellent report and acknowledged that the inspectors had recognised strengths and improvement across all areas within Children's Services and we acknowledge the hard work of all since the last rating in achieving the 'Good' rating overall.
12. Going forward timeliness of assessments and workforce stability and recruitment are the priorities and this Scrutiny will continue to hold the service to account and help drive improvement.

Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2022/23

13. Children's Services Quarter 2 (July to September 2022) performance information was presented to the December meeting which highlighted the following areas of good practice:
 - (a) 84.4 per cent of referrals were screened and completed within 1 day during Q2 and although below the target of 90 per cent, this was a continuing improvement when compared with previous quarters;
 - (b) 15.3 per cent of the children referred during Q2 had been re-referred to Children's Social Care within 12 months of a previous referral, which was below the threshold of 18 per cent and an improvement on the same period last year;
 - (c) 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;
 - (d) 100 per cent of children with a Child Protection (CP) plan, and 98.9 per cent of Children in Care (CiC) had their reviews completed within timescale;
 - (e) No child ceased to be subject to a CP plan during Q2 who had been subject to the plan for two or more years;
 - (f) no child open to CP had been on their plan for more than 18 months; and no child became subject to a CP plan for a second or subsequent time within two years of the previous plan ending during Q2;
 - (g) 286 Children were in care at the end of September 2022, 13 of which were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children;
 - (h) 24.2 per cent of the children ceasing to be in care did so due to being adopted, 42.3 per cent had a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) / Child Arrangement Order (CAO) granted to a relative and 12.1 per cent returned home to their parent;

- (i) 72.4 per cent of children due a review health assessment and 40.7 per cent of Children in Care that were due a dental check assessment by September 2022 had had one completed;
- (j) The percentage of children who had refused their medical checks had positively decreased throughout the year;
- (k) 19.6 per cent of our care leavers, aged 19-21 and 19.6 per cent of our care leavers, aged 22-25, years were not in employment, education, or training (NEET) which was positively below target of 30 per cent;
- (l) 98.2 per cent of care leavers aged 19-21 and 96.1 per cent aged 22-25, were in suitable accommodation; and
- (m) 58.9 per cent of our care leavers, aged 19-21 and 68.6 per cent of our care leavers, aged 22-25 were in training or employment and 21.4 per cent of those aged 19-21 were engaging in education, 10.7 per cent in studies beyond A level with 11.8 per cent of those aged 22-25 years also engaging in education and 7.8 per cent were in studies beyond A level.

14. Areas highlighted for focus were in respect of:

- (a) 68.1 per cent of assessments had been completed within timescale in Q2, however there had been a reduction in the timeliness of the written aspect of the assessments;
- (b) 87.2 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, during Q2 2022/23.
- (c) 62.2 per cent of children received a statutory CP visit within 10 working days during Q2 which was negatively below the internal target of 90 per cent;
- (d) 85.2 per cent of statutory CiC visits were completed within timescale during Q2 which was negatively below the internal target of 90 per cent;
- (e) 11.9 per cent of Children in Care had had three or more placements within the previous 12 months, which was negatively above our internal target (10 per cent);
- (f) 63.3 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, which was negatively below our internal target (68 per cent); and
- (g) 11.1 per cent of Children in Care had needed to be placed 20 or more miles away from home as of September 2022 which was negatively above the target of 10 per cent, but all placements had been confirmed by team managers to be appropriate for the child enabling them to have the best support either with family links or specialised care.

15. We discussed our concerns around placement stability and the availability of long term placements and also the challenges anticipated as a consequence of the cost of living crisis and Christmas with the fear that more families will be in need of help in the new year.

Work Programme

16. Members gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during 2022/23, and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.

Medium Term Financial Plan

17. At a Special Meeting held on 9 January 2023 Members considered the draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2023/24 to 2026/27, including setting a budget and Council Tax increase for 2023/24 and had the opportunity to ask any questions relating to the services and finances within remit of this Scrutiny Committee. Following consideration of the MTFP our comments were forwarded to the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for its meeting on 19 January 2023.
18. We were provided with an update on the financial pressures on the public sector over the last couple of years as a result of the Covid pandemic and also a decade of significant financial challenge following the economic downturn and the reductions in public sector spending.
19. We noted the current economic climate also presented new and significant financial challenges to the Council's budgets ie. rising inflation and interest rates, energy costs, post Covid demand on social care and national living wage rises putting significant pressure on affordability and unless additional government funding was forthcoming the Council would need to undertake a fundamental review over the course of 2023 to decide how services would be delivered in the coming years.
20. When examining the Revenue Estimates for 2023/24 and the budget pressures and savings we noted in particular the increased demand on the Strengthening Families Team and the increased number of Children and Families requiring support and await the response to the review commissioned by Central Government in respect of the challenges facing Children's Social Care nationwide.
21. We expressed our concern for the long term financial implications on Children's Services and what we perceived as a lack of future investment for children and young people at a particularly challenging time for families and children; discussed budget costs in relation to Adoption Tees Valley, the Regional Adoption Agency and if there was equability across the authorities; and regarding the capital provision of £1.124 m for the replacement roof at Whinfield School questioned if the authority were considering other sources of funding and plans towards future discussions with schools on the implementation of the Education White Paper for full academisation of all schools.
22. We also examined the provision within the budget for discretionary services and discussed whether we felt that these services were being provided at the expense of other core services within Children's Services which are under continued pressure and will continue to do so with the cost of living, working wage and child poverty challenges ahead. We

agreed to forward to Economy and Resources Scrutiny our recommendation that Cabinet consider the impact on Children and Families of all future discretionary spending.

Councillor Paul Crudass
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee