

COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2024

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.

Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2023/24

2. We received a report which provided Members with an update on performance against key performance indicators for Quarter 2 (July 2023 to September 2023), in line with an indicator set agreed by the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group on 2 July 2021, and subsequently by each individual Scrutiny Committee Chair. The report highlighted where Children's Services were performing well and where there was a need to improve. It was also outlined that where indicators are reported annually, quarterly updates will not be available.
3. Discussion focused on the indicators in relation to Children in Care who had been placed 20 or more miles away from home as of September 2023, and the basis for the target of 10%.

Darlington Children's Services – Self-Assessment 2023

4. The Assistant Director, Children's Services, submitted a report which provided the Committee with the Annual Self-Assessment for Children's Services. It was highlighted the self-assessment is not a statutory requirement, however is developed with input from Ofsted, and that the self-assessment is used as part of Ofsted's ILACS Annual Engagement Meeting and plays an important role in their understanding of local authorities and how they work.
5. We noted that the number of Children in Care had risen, and expressed concerns in relation to the impact that this would have on service provision, with assurances provided that the agency market could be utilised, if necessary. Discussion also ensued on the number of children who were placed in care with no SEND diagnosis, but who subsequently left care with a SEND diagnosis, and whether there was a need to record 'missed diagnosis', however it was suggested that there could be a number of factors that would have an impact and that it would be difficult to quantify.

SEND Resource Base Remodelling at Heathfield Primary School

6. The Committee received a report which provided an overview of the work being undertaken to remodel the existing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) resource base at Heathfield Primary School.

7. We were informed that the resource base at Heathfield Primary School, which is part of Lingfield Academy Trust, had been in its current configuration for a number of years, and that Academy Trust had worked in partnership with Darlington Borough Council to explore how the resource base could be re-modelled to be more reflective of, and responsive to, the needs of Darlington children and young people with SEND, effective from September 2024.
8. We heard that the re-modelling would see the base change to have a primary remit of support for communication and interaction needs which was aligned with the presenting need of Darlington children and young people with SEND, and that the base would be incrementally filled over a three-year period supporting children from Reception to Year 2. It was highlighted that the re-modelling proposal fell within the Department for Education (DfE)'s significant change process for academies, and therefore required a period of open consultation, following which a business case could be submitted to DfE for review and determination.
9. Concern was expressed by the Committee as to whether children at Northwood Primary School would still be able to access provision at Heathfield Primary School, and Members were reassured that they would and that there would be no impact on provision.

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2022-23 and Child Protection Conference Chair Annual Report 2022-23

10. We received an overview of the work undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to Children who are Looked After and Children who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences and / or multi-agency Child Protection Plans, together with the Annual Reports of the Independent Reviewing Officer for 2022/23, and the Child Protection Conference Chair for 2022/23.
11. It was highlighted that for the period April 2022 to March 2023, due to the roll-out of the Agile Working programme and post-Covid-19 working arrangements across agencies, formal meetings, which in previous years would have been face to face, had been conducted using virtual platforms, and that this applied to all Child Protection Conferences and Child Looked After Reviews.
12. Members of the Committee entered into discussion on the tracking of families between areas, how child participation in Children Looked After Reviews worked, and how children contributed, and the desire not to ask children to relive previous bad experiences.

Young People SEND Engagement

13. The Committee received an overview of how Council services engage with young people in relation to the issues relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The report outlined the various activities undertaken to ensure that young people with SEND were able to co-produce plans affecting them and contribute to wider strategic work.

14. The Committee were keen to receive more detail on the wider engagement opportunities that existed for young people, both provided by the Council and external partners, and sought more information in this area at a future meeting.

Adoption Tees Valley Annual Report 2022/23

15. Louise Addison, Deputy Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley (ATV), presented the Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) Annual Report 2022/23, and outlined the work that had been undertaken across the Tees Valley during 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023.
16. We heard that the year had been one of building on partnerships and existing practice to strengthen and improve adoption in the Tees Valley. It was pleasing to know that work had continued with the five partner local authorities to continue to strengthen early twin track care planning for adoption. Ms. Addison highlighted the increased offer to families, and the preparation undertaken for ATV's own Ofsted inspection.
17. We also received information on two key projects, the Pan Regional Early Permanence Project and the Pan Regional Multi-Disciplinary Adoption Support Service. Focus centred on the funding received from the Integrated Care Board, and whether this was something that could be repeatedly accessed on an annual basis, or whether it was a one-off payment.
18. We extended our thanks to Louise for attending the meeting and also for the work of the ATV.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2022-23

19. Ann Baxter, Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership, attended the meeting to outline the Annual Report of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership (DSP) for the period 2022/23, and answer Members questions thereon.
20. We were informed that 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. The Annual Report summarised and reflected on the work of the Partnership over the period 2022/23, 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, and highlighted that the year continued to be shaped by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national safeguarding context had been an evolving landscape as services continued to adapt, many organisations facing national recruitment challenges.
21. We heard that there had been significant organisational change during the year with the introduction nationally of Integrated Care Boards and a new iteration of Working Together to Safeguard Children, along with the implementation of Local Authority Adult Regulatory inspections.

22. We entered into discussion on the introduction of the Integrated Care Boards, and the advantages and disadvantages associated with the reorganisation, and thanked Ann for the work of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership.

Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 – 2027/28

23. We received a report which invited Members to give consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2024/25 to 2027/28, and forward any views, in particular those in relation to the services and finances which were specifically within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.
24. We heard that the MTFP had been agreed by Cabinet on 5 December 2023 as the basis for consultation, and Members were asked to discuss and consider the overall contents of the MTFP, however, with particular emphasis on those services and finances within the MTFP which specifically related to those areas within their remit, and forward any views to a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, to be held on 18 January 2023, for consideration. We were informed that the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee would then agree a formal response to Cabinet on behalf of all the Scrutiny Committees, as part of the consultation.
25. Discussion ensued on whether the costings and savings identified in the report entitled 'Children's Social Care in Darlington – Ensuring Placement Sufficiency and Enabling Creative Alternatives' had been incorporated within the MTFP, the level of detail provided to Members and the format of the report received, the proposed invest to save proposals outlined, and the impact of school non-attendance on budgets.

Children's Social Care in Darlington – Ensuring Placement Sufficiency and Enabling Creative Alternatives

26. The Committee received a report to enable Members to consider a series of proposals to reduce dependence on costly external placements and to support and improve placement sufficiency for children and young people in Darlington. The report referenced a report that had been submitted to Cabinet on 5 December 2023, and invited Members to comment on, and note, the proposals.
27. Members entered into discussion on the improved fostering offer, and the expansion of the Cedars to a seven days per week offer.

Councillor Mary Layton
Vice Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee
On behalf of
Councillor Hilary Allen
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee