

COUNCIL
21 MARCH 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.

School Transport and the Associated Services

2. We received a report from the Assistant Director, Education and Inclusion, which provided Members an update on the current arrangements for the Council's Home to School Transport Policy and outlined the changes made in recent statutory guidance. The report highlighted that Darlington Borough Council has a statutory duty to provide free home to school transport in certain circumstances.
3. Discussion ensued on the different budgets involved in the provision of the service and the sharing of information on the recent changes with appropriate staff. We were also keen to understand how information regarding the policy and the recent changes was communicated to parents.
4. Members raised questions in relation to the number of children that transport was provided for, the average cost per pupil, and whether any checks were undertaken to ascertain whether parents had the wherewithal to transport their own children accordingly. The transport provision for those receiving specialist provision elsewhere was analysed, with Members questioning whether it might be more efficient to provide specialist provision within the Borough.
5. Members also requested greater clarity around the timetable, consultation and decision-making in relation to the policy, and expressed a desire for the policy to come back to Scrutiny prior to the final decision being made.

Childcare Sufficiency Review 2023-24

6. The Committee received a report to inform Members of the findings of the 2023-24 Childcare Sufficiency Review. The report set out the Department for Education's Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities required that a Local Authority must 'secure sufficient childcare, so far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0-14 or up to 18 for disabled children' and that should report annually to elected Council Members on how they are meeting this duty.
7. It was highlighted that the Darlington Childcare Market is made up of private day nurseries, pre-schools, childminders, out of school clubs, nursery schools and nursery units, and that the pandemic has made the childcare market more complex and less predictable.

8. It was pleasing to note that indicators show that there has been sufficient overall capacity to meet demand throughout the period of this review, nevertheless, any unmet demand will need to be continually monitored to ensure that parents are able to access training and work in the coming months and years.
9. The Committee entered into discussion on the limitations to provision, and whether any limitations were related to infrastructure, resources or staffing. Members were keen to hear the feedback received from providers in relation to the National Childcare Expansion Programme, and it was pleasing to note that providers appreciated the Council's early action and surety around funding, and that there was no sense of undue alarm in relation to April's phased changes, however Members heard that there was not the same confidence in relation to future tranches of the programme.
10. We discussed the potential for expansion of the Council's own maintained nurseries, and the funding streams available to meet the cost of any future expansion. Members further explored the additional demands around recruitment, which included additional Government funding and the piloting of a retention and recruitment scheme, which included a bursary scheme with an incentive payment for those qualifying or returning to the sector. Members were keen to understand any contingency arrangements should childcare provided by extended family, such as grandparents, reduce.

Councillor Hilary Allen
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee