

COUNCIL
30 JANUARY 2025

OVERVIEW OF ADULTS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Adults Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Autism Strategy and Action Plan Update

2. We received a report to update the Committee on the progress made to date in relation to the National Autism Strategy, and the subsequent actions within Darlington. The report reflected a joint position statement from the Integrated Care Board (ICB), the Tees, Esk and Wear Valley (TEVW) NHS Foundation Trust and the Council.
3. The report provided a definition of the condition, gave an overview of the national context and outlined the priority areas of focus for the National Autism Strategy 2021-26, which included the aim of improving understanding and acceptance of Autism within society, the work being undertaken to prevent mental health crisis for people with Autism, and the support provided to encourage more Autistic people into employment.
4. The report also outlined the work being done across the Borough to tackle health and care inequalities for autistic people, and to build the right support in the community and supporting people in inpatient care.
5. We welcomed the involvement of 'Inclusion North' in the development of a local strategy and were keen to invite representatives to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.
6. The Committee entered into discussion on the number of adults in the North-East who had received an autism diagnosis, and how many of these adults were accessing Mental Health services. Members were also keen to know how the numbers on the waiting list for a diagnosis compared to one year ago, and whether the number of inpatients with autism, and the number of inpatients suspected of having autism, but who did not have a diagnosis, was monitored.
7. Concerns were also raised in relation to the contrast between the target to reduce waiting lists alongside the increased identification of people suspected of being autistic. Members were also keen to ensure that the support for the local working group had been budgeted for, in light of the Medium Term Financial Plan.

Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 - 2028/29

8. As with all Scrutiny Committees, the Assistant Director, Resources, submitted a report which invited Members to give consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2025/26 to 2028/29, and forward any views, in particular those in relation to the services and finances which were specifically within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.

9. We heard that the MTFP had been agreed by Cabinet on 3 December 2024, 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 our remit, and forward any views to a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, to be held on 20 January 2025, for consideration.
10. We were reminded that a briefing had been delivered to Councillors on 11 December 2024, which provided an overview and highlighted key points in the MTFP, and we were advised that since the MTFP had been published for consultation, the Council had received notification of the draft financial settlement for 2025/26 with an update on the draft financial settlement provided to Members.
11. Concerns were expressed in relation to the use of reserves to balance the budget, and whilst it was acknowledged that the proposed additional funding received as part of the draft financial settlement was welcome, it was noted that it was still proposed that the Council's reserves would still run out prior to the end of the plan should circumstances remain the same.
12. Members recognised the additional pressures created by the increase in National Insurance contributions, and the concerns raised by suppliers, however we noted that the Council did not have the resource to support the uplift.
13. Discussion ensued on the position in other authorities and Members cited examples where authorities were not in the position to budget for such a lengthy period, and speculated on the manner in which funding might be distributed in a fairer way in future.

CQC Assurance Framework – Update

14. The Committee received an update on the CQC Assurance Framework, which is a structured approach, introduced by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), to evaluating the performance of local authorities in delivering Adult Social Care services. The Framework is aligned with the goals of the Health and Care Act 2022, which aims to ensure high-quality, equitable, and sustainable care for individuals in need.
15. Members received an update on the requirements of the CQC Assurance Framework, the duties and responsibilities of the Local Authority and were provided with an updated timeline for the, at the time, forthcoming inspection, which actually commenced on Monday, 20th January 2025.
16. We welcomed the update from the Assistant Director, Adults, and questioned the possible delay between inspection and the publication of the final report within the timeline, and whether there was any redress in terms of this.
17. Discussion ensued on the national context as regard to the new inspection regime, the logistics in terms of the CQC establishing the inspection structure, and the potential for reflection and targeted inspections at the conclusion of the initial inspection process. Members felt that it was encouraging that staff retention had vastly improved in

Darlington, that the Council maintained a positive workforce, and we hoped that this would be reflected in the CQC outcome.

18. Clarification was sought in relation to the selected areas for improvement or development in terms of the self-assessment, with Members advised that the self-assessment reflected the Council's own interpretation based on national directives and performance indicators, with some specific areas prioritised for completion.

Hospital Discharges

19. We were presented with a report which provided an overview of the requirements on the Local Authority to support hospital discharges and to provide an update on how Darlington is performing in terms of hospital discharges. The Committee was informed that local authorities (LAs) play an essential role in supporting hospital discharges to ensure that people transitioned smoothly from hospital care to appropriate community or home settings, and we were advised that this involved close collaboration with the NHS to prevent delayed discharges and to support people's recovery and well-being after their hospital stay. Our involvement in hospital discharges forms part of the broader health and social care integration effort in the UK, which aimed to provide joined-up, patient/person-centred care across settings, and the key duties of the authority in this process were summarised within the submitted report.
20. Members reflected on the difference between services in Darlington and other areas, noting that the services provided upon discharge in Darlington were markedly better than those experienced in other areas.
21. Discussion ensued on the number of patients involved in delayed transfers of care (DTOC) from acute physical health settings, with Members pleased to note that these figures were extremely low, and any such cases were as a result of systemic failures rather than by the local authority.

Transitional Services (preparing for adulthood for young people with care and support needs)

22. We received a report from both the Assistant Director, Adults, and the Assistant Director, Education and Inclusion, which provided Members with an update on the responsibilities for the Local Authority in relation to support young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in preparation for adulthood.
23. It was noted that the Care Act 2014 places several duties on Local Authorities in England to ensure young people with care and support needs are well-prepared for adulthood. This included young people with disabilities or those who may need ongoing care as they transition from Children's Services to Adult Services, and the report summarised the key areas for preparing young people for adulthood and the key SEND duties of Local Authorities, both of which aimed to give young people a stable, supportive framework for moving into adult life, with a focus on well-being, independence, and meaningful community engagement.
24. The Committee entered into discussion on the process of reassessment and annual review and where assured that young people moving from children's services to adult services are

reviewed regularly. It was noted that there were a number of overdue reviews for adults receiving long term care and support. Members were assured that a risk management approach had been adopted with those with the greatest need/complexity being reviewed first.

Adult Social Care during the Coronavirus Pandemic – Update on Task and Finish Group Recommendations

25. Further to the recommendations submitted to this Scrutiny Committee on 16 April 2024, by the Adult Social Care during the Coronavirus Pandemic Task and Finish Group, we received an update report on the recommendations presented to the Committee. The submitted report stated that the purpose of the Task and Finish Group was to assess the view of both Adult Social Care (ASC) staff (both Darlington Borough Council employees and commissioned staff) and end users in terms of the changes that were required due to Covid and the associated lockdowns.
26. It was reported that the Task and Finish Group gave consideration to the new methods of working that staff and care recipients particularly liked, so that the Council could consider whether these methods should continue to be used / offered as an option after the Covid lockdowns ended. The recommendations of the Task and Finish Group, together with the actions undertaken since the final report of the Task and Finish Group was submitted to the Committee, were outlined within the submitted report.
27. Members noted that there were some recommendations outside the sphere of the Council's remit and were unable to directly influence care settings, however Members were pleased that the Council maintained a commitment to liaising with such settings. Members also noted the impact that the pandemic was continuing to have in terms of waiting lists.
28. We received assurances that the Council's website and the Living Well website had been updated, that residents were being encouraged to access the website via the Netcall service, and that those with additional eligible needs were being signposted in accordance with the Council's duty to do so.

Councillor Andrew Anderson
Chair of Adults Scrutiny Committee