

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 6 January 2025

PRESENT – Councillors Allen (Chair), Crudass, Layton, Renton, Toms and Dr. Riley

APOLOGIES – Councillors Ali, Johnson and Storr

ABSENT – Councillor Dulston

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillor Wallis

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Chris Bell (Assistant Director of Children's Services), Tony Murphy (Assistant Director Education and Inclusion) and Brett Nielsen (Assistant Director Resources)

CYP21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Dr Amanda Riley declared her position on the board of governors of Heathfield school.

CYP22 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 28 OCTOBER 2024

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 28 October 2024

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 28 October 2024 be approved as a correct record.

CYP23 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025/26 - 2028/29

The Assistant Director – Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) which invited members to discuss and give consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2025/26 to 2028/29 with particular emphasis on those services and finances within the MTFP which specifically related to the areas within their remit and forward views to a special meeting the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

It was noted that since the MTFP had been published for consultation that the council had received notification of the draft financial settlement for 2025/26 which the Assistant Director Resources briefed the committee on the headline changes. It was also highlighted that the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement (LGFS) has been received in late December 2024, covering the 2025/26 period only.

In summary we noted that positive progress is being made overall with additional funding, however, there remains a significant annual funding deficit.

Questions were raised which included as to whether a breakdown of spending for individual services is available with the response that further information to that displayed in appendix 1 can be provided if members contact officers with their specific requests.

It was also asked as to whether updated figures will be included in the MTFP as they become available, with officers confirming that the most up-to-date version of the plan will be provided for Cabinet in February and for the Special Meeting of the Council on 20 February 2025.

Discussions were held in which members credited officers within Children's Services for their positive work in reducing costs by bringing services in-house and reducing the number of external placements.

RESOLVED - The MTFP was considered and members agreed to:

- (a) Forward any further comments to the Chair prior to the Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 20 January 2025.
- (b) That authority be given to the Chair, in consultation with the Lead Scrutiny Officers, to agree the Minutes of this meeting prior to their inclusion in the Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 20 January 2025.

CYP24 SEND STRATEGY 2025-2029

The Assistant Director Education and Inclusion presented the draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy 2025-2029 which details the key elements of the Strategy and the planned implementation with partners.

Members were informed that the SEND Strategy establishes our strategic approach to the delivery of SEND services for children and young people in Darlington, ensuring the offer is coordinated and responsive to the needs of our community. The strategy sets out our shared local area vision, principles, and priorities to ensure that partners across the Darlington local area are working together effectively to identify, assess and meet the needs of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) from birth to the age of 25. The SEND Strategy has been coproduced with partners across the borough, and is fundamental to implementing partners responsibilities under the Children and Families Act 2014. It reflects the ambitions and priorities of the Council Plan and other key strategic documents.

Questions were raised which included how relevant information regarding SEND and EHCPs is being provided to parents with the response that the offer is displayed in as clear terms as possible on the Council website and that outreach and accessibility remains a focus. With "Let's Talk SEND" sessions promoted on social media and via flyers including QR codes with evening and online sessions being planned for the future.

It was also asked what impact engagement with children / families had on the development of the strategy with officers confirming that they were heavily included with engagement with children in early years being a priority.

Clarifications of tribunal outcomes was asked with info provided that nationally, 98% of tribunal decisions go against Local Authorities however in Darlington this figure is far lower which underscores the effectiveness of work with parents and carers.

It was asked to whether academisation is an issue to SEND delivery with officers confirming that SENCO staff are present in each school to aid with delivery and if any issues are raised to the Local Authority, they are always considered carefully.

Discussions were held which included the possibility of a Task and Finish group to look into message delivery.

A member also highlighted that parents have reported difficulties in accessing dyslexia diagnoses which officers agreed to look into.

RESOLVED – Members agreed the recommendations and noted the priorities outlined in the strategy.

Members were also provided with an update on progress made on the Council's Safety Valve agreement to address historic deficit in the High Needs Block which supports education provision for young people with Special Educational Needs. The council entered into the "Safety Valve" agreement with the Department for Education (DfE), enabling funding over a 5-year period to address the accumulated deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs Block (HNB).

RESOLVED – Members noted the Safety Valve terms of agreement and progress made to this date.

CYP25 TRANSITIONAL SERVICES

The Assistant Director Education and Inclusion 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) to prepare for adulthood.

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 includes young people with disabilities or those who may need ongoing care as they transition from Children's to Adult Services.

A member expressed their appreciation for the work being done in this area and asked the key policies of the plan with the response that working with families is a constant priority and maintaining the responsibility of Children's Services to support individuals into the care of Adult's Services.

RESOLVED - Members noted the content of the report and agreed the suggested recommendations.

CYP26 WORK PROGRAMME

The Group Director of Operations submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest should be included in the previously approved work programme

RESOLVED – That the work programme be noted.