

COUNCIL
25 MARCH 2025

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

2. We welcomed the Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership who presented the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report to account for the Partnerships' achievements over the previous year and assess the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements within the local area. The report summarised and reflected on the work of the Partnership over the 2023/24 period.
3. Points of note included the feedback has been very positive, with statutory partners continuing to meet on a regular basis (Local Authority, Police and health colleagues) with wider meetings also occurring which additionally include organisations such as education, housing, voluntary agencies, probation and the fire service.
4. We were informed that quality assurance drives the development of the partnership with its key function being to ensure all organisations can work together in the best possible way with children's services having three subgroups covering operational services, child exploitation and the child death overview partnership.
5. Questions were raised which included as to whether any barriers are existent against the partnership's work with the response that the wide variety of partners assist in overcoming any barriers. It was also asked as to whether the partnership is functioning well in comparison to other authorities, and it was confirmed that it is, with large amounts of information being shared including regional and subregional information-sharing, the national panel has also met with Darlington with deep-dive work taking place.
6. A member asked for clarification of the "Joined Up" approach stated in the report, and it was confirmed that this refers to the process in which any referral information is looked at by professionals from the various partner organisations to provide the best possible response. It was also asked if wait times for responses are an issue with assurance provided that statutory timeframes are always adhered to alongside an immediate response to any information received from the police.
7. Further questions included how organisations can become partnered and what training is available with officers confirming that relevant groups, where applicable are invited to attend multi-agency meetings and online training, with level one training also being available to elected members.

8. Discussions were held which included it being highlighted that GP referrals do not always receive full feedback with officers welcoming the feedback and willing to look into these areas.
9. We noted the annual report with members wishing to express their thanks for the positive work of the Safeguarding Partnership and its effectiveness and efficiency with quality information being shared between partners.

Local Designated Officer Annual Report

10. We welcomed the Service Manager, Children's Services who present the Local Designated Officer Annual Report to update Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee on the progress and performance of the Designated Officers' (DO) response to all contacts received relating to allegations/concerns of abuse by those who work with children for the period April 2023 to March 2024.
11. Points of note included that there has been a 25% decrease in activity in the last year, showing a continued return to pre-COVID numbers. There have been 37 substantiated allegations in the period of which 30 resulted in dismissal of staff and 63 unsubstantiated allegations.
12. Members were also informed that the work of DO was carried out by agency workers however an advertisement for a full DBC staff member has been produced for the role in a permanent full-time basis.
13. Questions included as to whether a full time DO is warranted with the response that it is a statutory responsibility, and we were assured that options had been explored before making the decision which included sharing the post with Durham however this was not deemed viable. Another member believed that having a full time staff member in the role is a positive move.
14. A further question was how a rise in complaints are handled by schools and it was confirmed that schools welcome dialogue with the team and that allegations are always dealt with inside the established timeframes
15. We considered and agreed the content of the report.

Childcare Sufficiency Review 2024

16. We welcomed the Head of Education Partnerships who presented the annual Childcare Sufficiency Review 2025. The Department for Education's Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, January 2024 requires local authorities to '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'. In carrying out this requirement local authorities should 'report annually to elected council members on how they are meeting their duty to secure sufficient childcare and to make this report available and accessible to parents'

17. We were informed that the childcare market in Darlington is made up of private day nurseries, pre-schools, childminders, out of school clubs, nursery schools and nursery units. Cases of unmet demand are gathered using various methods: from providers through the monthly attendance returns, by analysing parental enquiries via the families' information service (FIS), via the unmet demand list and from any parental complaints to the local authority. There have been no indications that there has been a lack of sufficiency overall in the borough during the period of the review.
18. Questions were raised which included clarification on who pays for lunches with the response that the DfE issued new guidance around consumables – childcare entitlement providing a free place for a child with guidance as to what providers can and cannot offer or charge for. Officers are happy to speak to any providers to provide advice and will audit providers periodically.
19. It was also asked what the uptake rates of free provision are with the response Darlington is performing well against the relevant indicators and that information is shared with Social Care colleagues to help encourage eligible parents. A code is provided to parents who present this to a provider who then validates it with a 96.95% validation rate in Darlington and that entitlements can be transferred to a different provider due to government safety nets and grace periods for codes.
20. We noted the information and findings of the 2024 Childcare Sufficiency Review.

Home to School Transport

21. We welcomed the Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion who presented the report to outline the current arrangements for the Council's Home to School Transport Policy and outlines the changes in recent statutory guidance with Darlington Borough Council having a statutory duty to provide free home to school transport in certain circumstances.
22. We were informed that previous interest from members with regards to transport for SEND children is now covered in the report and that highlighted plans will be adopted for the commencement of the 2025 academic year. It was also reiterated that the local authority purchases places on school busses who have entitlement to free transportation.
23. A member stated that parents sometimes encounter cancellations from transport providers with officers assuring members that the council are required by law to follow set procurement process, driver scarcity is always an issue however the service is more stable than in previous years. Members were reassured that staff are present from 07:00 every day and ready to react to any cancellations.
24. We considered the report and noted the arrangements in place as well as the changes to statutory guidance relating to home to school transport.

Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2024-25

25. We welcomed the Assistant Director Children's Services who provided members with an update on performance against key performance indicators.
26. Points of note included that 0.6% of referrals took over three working days to be completed in Q2 2024/25, which is outperforming our target of 5%. 64 children had a C&F assessment completed in Q2 2024/25. This is below the 376 assessments started in Q2 2023/24, and in line with pre-COVID figures. 93.9% of the assessments were completed with the 45-day timescale. This is an increase to previous years (51.2% in Q2 2023/24, 73.8% in Q2 2022/23 and 88.4% in Q2 2021/22) and evidence of sustained targeted work and support throughout the year
27. Slowdown in demand continues as per previous updates showing a continued return to pre-COVID levels with almost 94% of referrals being completed within 45-day timescales showing an impressive increase and a reflection of the efforts of staff.
28. A question was raised as to what most commonly leads to breakdown in placements with officers responding that poorer placement stability is experienced in independent placements and noting that some negative performance figures in this area are a result of previous years due to longer term placements taking time to show changes.
29. We reviewed and noted the performance information provided.

Overview of the Local Area SEND Inspection (November 2024)

30. We welcomed the Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion who provided members with an overview of the SEND Inspection Framework, the activity that took place during our inspection in November 2024 and the findings and subsequent actions taken and planned. Children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are 'valued, visible and included', inspectors have found. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission visited to check on services for young people with SEND. Darlington has seen improvements to services for children with SEND since its previous inspections in 2022
31. Points of note included the related inspection covered schools, providers and family views covering both the local authority and Integrated Care Board, both of whom are responsible for SEND provision. The report displayed a great many positive indicators for Darlington with areas for improvement including pathways for children with learning disabilities which will be actioned by officers. Officers aim to publish a year-long plan on the Council website once prepared.
32. It was asked how staff had reacted to the report with the response that from the LA perspective, staff were encouraged to see the inspectors' feedback and will work to focus on any areas for improvement.
33. We noted the update and planned response and members expressed their appreciation for the efforts of staff in achieving positive progress.

Work Programme

34. Members gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during 2024/25, and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.

Councillor Hilary Allen
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee