

COUNCIL
DATE

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 2024-25

2. We welcomed the Safeguarding Partnership Business Manager who presented the report which Local Safeguarding Partnerships are required to produce 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 report summarises and reflects on the work of the Partnership over the 2024/25 period.
3. Points of note included the introduction of new roles within the partnership moving forward with Chief Officers holding overarching responsibilities for safeguarding arrangements with Education colleagues being incorporated. The previous role of Independent Chair has been changed to Lead Partnership Chair and the role is currently undertaken by the Director of People Group, Darlington Borough Council. An Independent Scrutineer has also been appointed to help drive improvement across the partnership.
4. A member asked to clarify the chairing arrangements for the Partnership and was informed that this operates on a rotating basis to ensure fairness amongst partners.
5. We noted the content of the report and members commented on the quality of information provided. The Committee also expressed their gratitude for the work of Amanda Hugill, Safeguarding Partnership Business Manager throughout her many years working for Darlington Borough Council and wished her a happy retirement.

Child Care Sufficiency Review 2025

6. We were joined by the Head of Education Partnerships who presented members with the report. Local authorities are required 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'.
7. 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

8. The National Childcare Expansion Programme is ongoing. The changes are as follows:
 - a) From September 2024, the introduction of 15 hours of funded childcare for eligible working parents of babies from 9 months up to 2 years old.
 - b) From September 2025, the introduction of 30 hours of funded childcare for eligible working parents of babies from 9 months up to 3 years old.
 - c) A government ambition is that by 2026, parents and carers of primary school-aged children who need it will be able to access term time childcare in their local area from 8am – 6pm so that parents can access employment and improve labour market participation.
9. The National Wraparound Childcare Programme is part of the childcare reforms announced in the Spring Budget 2023. Local authorities have been allocated start-up funding over two academic years to support schools to increase the number of places offered to parents. To date, 14 schools have been awarded grants to expand the number of places available or create new places. The total number of places expected to be made available to parents/carers through the programme is approximately 400.
10. Questions were raised which included clarification of the “Disabled Access Fund” with officers confirming that this is a £925 payment per child for a care setting to spend on staff, time or resources which is followed up by the Link Officer to ensure monies are spent properly.

A member raised the point that 76% of carer applicants do not have the appropriate qualifications and asked if assistance is available for this. Officers confirmed that links exist with Darlington College with various routes to qualifications available and that they attempt to signpost applicants, but that staff will look into boosting communications going forward where possible.

It was also asked if specific childcare offers are available for single men with officers confirming that care offers are equal to all who require them while acknowledging the reluctance of many men to apply for assistance and will aim to be explicit going forward that offers are available to all who qualify.
11. The Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion alongside Members and Portfolio Holder expressed their gratitude for the work carried out by staff in with the smooth integration of the new expanded offer.
12. We noted the content of the report and that sufficient childcare is available in Darlington.

Annual Fostering Report

13. The Service Manager, Children’s Services presented members with an overview of the Fostering Report covering the period April 2024 – March 2025. Main themes including the ongoing focus on recruitment with 10 new foster carers joining the service and that the outlook is good with annual reviews retuning positive feedback. It was expressed that the next annual report will strive to have an enhanced focus on Darlington ambitions.
14. A member asked if it is common for single men to apply to be foster carers with officers confirming that it is rare with none currently present in Darlington

15. Members noted the annual report and the information provided and praised the service for their positive work during the period.

Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2025-2026

16. The Assistant Director Children's Services presented performance information covering the period July 2025 – September 2025. Points of note include a 46% overall increase in referral numbers when compared to the same period 12 months prior, of which 10.6% were re-referrals which is well below the 18% limit, 83% of referrals were completed within the timeframes which is an increase on previous figures but is a focus for improvement still.
138 children had a Child Protection (CP) plan open at the end of September 2025; an increase compared to 99 in September 2024. 57 plans were started in Q2 2025/26 however this increase is relative to the overall increase in total referrals.
Placement stability remains a key focus for the service and is also showing positive development.
17. Members raised questions which included if work around those aged 22–25 were identified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is being promoted with officers confirming that it is with a formal SEND Young Persons Group being created who will assist in the creation of plans moving forward.
A member asked to clarify placement distances and costs with officers commenting that the aim is place children withing 20 miles of their home base in order to help maintain their current networks.
It was asked if the increase in violent incidents is a reason for concern and members were informed that this is not a general increase but that one children's home is experiencing very challenging children at present.
18. We noted the performance information provided and agreed to raise any further queries with the appropriate officers.

Work Programme

19. Members gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during 2025/26, and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.

Councillor Hilary Allen
Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee