

North Yorkshire Council

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 21st June 2024 at 10.03 a.m.

Present: Councillor Barbara Brodigan (Chair)

Councillors Alyson Baker, Stephanie Duckett, Caroline Goodrick (Vice-Chair, via Teams), George Jabbour (substitute for Tom Jones), David Jeffels, Janet Jefferson (via Teams), Peter Lacey (substitute for Andrew Murday), Cliff Lunn, John Mann, Andy Paraskos, Yvonne Peacock), Kirsty Poskitt (via Teams), John Ritchie and Karin Sedgwick (substitute for Nathan Hull).

Co-opted Members: Stephen Jennings (Primary Sector Representative), David Sharp (Voluntary Sector Representative) and Ross Strachan (Secondary Teacher Representative, via Teams).

Officers (Children and Young People's Service, unless stated): Stuart Carlton, Corporate Director, Rosie Appleby, Head of Placement Support, Sally Dunn, Head of Finance (School, Early Years and High Needs), Howard Emmett, Assistant Director, Resources, Jon Holden, Head of Strategic Planning, Mel Hutchinson, Assistant Director, Children and Families, Amanda Newbold, Assistant Director, Education and Skills, Louise Wilson, Head of School Improvement, Marie-Ann Jackson, Head of Localities, Alice Skaith, Holiday Activities and Food Co-ordinator, Simone Wilkinson, Group Manager, Early Help, Alice Fox, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Legal and Democratic Services.

In attendance: Councillor Janet Sanderson (Executive Member for Children and Families) and Councillor Annabel Wilkinson (Executive Member for Education and Skills).

Copies of all documents considered are in the Minute Book

10. Welcome by the Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. She reminded Members that as we are the pre-election period, to be mindful of avoiding giving an individual or a political group a platform by which they can influence public opinion. The Chair informed the Committee that there was a change in the order of agenda items, with Items 9 and 10 becoming Items 8 and 9, and Item 8 now being Item 10.

11. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nathan Hull, Tom Jones and Andrew Murday. Councillors Karin Sedgwick, George Jabbour and Pete Lacey attended as substitute members. Apologies from co-opted Members Andrew Smith, Tom Cavell-Taylor and David Watson.

12. Minutes of the meeting held on 17th April 2024

Resolved –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 17th April 2024 be confirmed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

13. Any Declarations of Interest

Councillor Caroline Goodrick declared an interest in the Citizens Advice Bureau, and Councillor Kirsty Poskitt and David Sharp declared an interest in FEAST.

14. Public Participation

Six statements had been received from members of the public. In accordance with the Council Constitution, a maximum of 5 statements (in order of receipt) were accepted by the Chair and read as follows:

1. The following statement was read out by Stephen Coe:

- I wish to bring to the committee's attention that the process of assigning special school placements is opaque and causing parents of the county enormous distress.
- The process also has no audit trails, as records of decisions are not routinely kept, which prevents any improvement work or ability of families to understand the system.
- As such, the system is open to abuse and corruption due to preferential treatment, fabrication of assessment results, and the cultural view that consulting families. and communicating with them 'takes too long'.
- That the SEND team is using the tribunal system to triage children into SEN places.

Stuart Carlton, Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Service, provided the following response:

Decision making relating to the admission of a child or young person to a special school is governed by the requirements of the Children and Families Act 2014 and related SEND Code of Practice(CoP). Information about this is available on North Yorkshire's Local Offer website, as are details of organisations who can offer independent advice and support.

The Law secures the general presumption in law of mainstream education in relation to decisions about where children and young people with SEN should be educated and the Equality Act 2010 provides protection from discrimination for disabled people.

To access special school a child or young person must have an Education Health and Care plan. This Plan includes information about their special educational needs and the education health and care provision that is required to meet their needs. This is a holistic view of the child or young person and is based on all information available to the LA at the time.

The final EHCP also names the educational school or setting. This section is concluded following discussion with a child's family and the young person themselves, as well as an analysis of all of the assessment information available. Should a parent/carer express that they want a special school place then the Local Authority must consult with that school irrespective of whether it feels that school is able to meet needs.

Placement decisions are made in accordance with the CoP Section 9.79:

If a child's parent or a young person makes a request for a particular nursery, school, or post-16 institution in these groups the local authority must comply with that preference and name the school or college in the EHC plan unless:

- it would be unsuitable for the age, ability, aptitude or SEN of the child or young person, or

- the attendance of the child or young person there would be incompatible with the efficient education of others, or the efficient use of resources

We have high aspirations for all children and young people with SEND in North Yorkshire. We want them to:

- Have the best opportunities so that they achieve the best outcomes
- Be able to attend a school or provision close to home, where they can make friends and develop their place within their local community

Of course, each child has an individual presentation, and each family has views about the provision they feel is appropriate and consequently each decision is unique but always guided by the requirements of the Code of Practice and associated case law. There are occasions where a family and the Local Authority do not agree on a placement decision, and it is acknowledged that this can be difficult for families.

If families are concerned about the processes which have not been resolved through discussion, then there is an option to make a formal complaint at either Stage 1 or Stage 2. Following this a family can make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman should there be grounds to do so.

We take all information from compliments and complaint seriously. This helps us to develop our practice. If there is an unresolved disagreement about a placement, then a family can appeal to the SEND tribunal

Record keeping is important and are kept for each child in the SEND system including assessment information, EHCPs, annual reviews, consultation responses from schools. Overall analysis of County wide data including decisions made, trends, demands and areas of emerging need is undertaken and reviewed regularly to inform processes and provision planning.

All decisions made are taking with care, with the child at the centre, and without any bias. Effective communication is seen as a central element to good practice and is through conversation and e mail. The SEND team have recently undertaken a full review of our processes including developing their approaches to effective communication with families.

Whilst the tribunal system offers families and young people an important right of appeal it is not a route we would want to go down - we always aim to find shared solutions before this point through discussion or formal mediation. Of course, any decision which is made by tribunal must be adhered to.

2. The following statement was read out by Verity Shepherd:

I am Verity Shepherd. I adopted my 2 children 14 years ago. I am a Learning Disability Nurse of 22 years and a special school nurse of 7 years. I am here to share my views regarding the huge failings in the adoption system that left my family in a state of crisis for years, resulting in our son prematurely leaving the family home due to his dangerous behaviours being beyond our control. Once our son moved out of our family home, the support offered surged to the level that he had always needed. We now parent him from a distance and this works well for him. Before adoption, my son suffered pre-birth and developmental trauma and separation from his birth family causing Attachment Disorder and Early Life Trauma issues. We were not told about the reasons behind his behaviour until he was 10 years old despite him being assessed but discharged by various services for 5 years. Shared experience of many adopters suggests that prior to adoption, children will have suffered trauma, while the adopters will have undergone a rigorous screening process. Yet the Adoption Support Fund mainly focuses on parenting courses as if trauma has little to do with the child's behaviour.

Our story is one of almost 800 similar stories shared on Facebook support groups. To best demonstrate the flaws within adoption, I will compare adopters to foster carers (although I do not wish to de-value the work they do):-

In terms of training - Foster carers are told exactly what behaviours to expect. Adopters are 'sold' adoption as a way to have a happy family and they are not forewarned of the catastrophic effects of the pre-adoption trauma.

In terms of expectations - Foster carers are seen as doing their best with a foster child who has issues. Adopters are judged and blamed for their child's behaviour by the very people who are meant to be helping them, and in some cases issued with child protection orders.

In terms of education - Foster children are offered suitable support and it is automatically recognised that they will have issues. Adopted children have the same expectations as birth children, and are often labelled as 'Naughty'.

In terms of respite and 'notice' - Foster carers get respite as requested and they can give 2 weeks' notice- less than most jobs. Adopters BEG (unsuccessfully) for respite over years of crisis. When they are forced to request that their child moves out of the family home, they are left for months without support, told they risk being charged with abandonment, fobbed off, and told there are "no placements available". The only way to spur social services to action is to heartbreakingly instruct a solicitor to request a Section 20 and make their child homeless.

In terms of finances - Foster carers receive up to £450 per week.

Adopters could therefore be seen as the largest body of volunteers in the country. In conclusion, for children with these issues, the Adoption system and Support Fund are not fit for purpose and need a total overhaul with adopters in crisis being used to assist this process.

3. The following statement was read out by Samantha Smith:

My name is Samantha Smith, I have BSC (Hons) in Biomedical Sciences. After working as a research scientist I became a science teacher. I have been teaching for over 20 years. In 2010 my husband and I adopted 2 siblings. Our daughter was aged 2.5 years and our son aged 15 months. This was following 18 months of intense scrutiny, training and multiple panels to be approved as adopters. That was the start of our story. Currently we are at the point where only our 16-year-old son is living in the family home, our daughter now 17 lives elsewhere on a section 20. She moved out on September 8th, 2023. At this point we had been in crisis for more than 2 years, desperately asking for help. The service we received fell far short of what our family needed and deserved. We were made to feel that it was our fault, that the extreme behaviours our daughter showed were 'normal teenage behaviours'. We were ignored and my family fell apart. Unfortunately, my story is not unique. I am on a Facebook group with around 800 families, all who have or are experiencing the breakdown of their family. Children leaving the family home prematurely and going to foster care, residential care or supported living arrangements.

Adoption UK do an annual nationwide survey of adoptive families, over 4000 families took part in 2023. The findings give an indication of the difficulties adoptive families face.

-The proportion of families reaching crisis point has risen from 30-38% from 2022-2023.

-38% of families are facing challenges but coping and only 24% were mostly doing well.

-69% of adoptive parents were less likely to feel optimistic about their family's future.

- 75% of families agreed that it felt like a continual battle to get the help and support that their families need.

- Additionally, there was an increase from 57-60% of parents who had experienced violence from their child.

-the figure for children leaving the family home prematurely (adoption disruption) has doubled from 2021 to 7% - this figure means that 100's of children in England are moving into other living arrangements.

Adoption can be an amazing experience; I love my children. However, ALL children who are adopted from the care system will have developmental trauma and attachment disorder. This needs to be recognised by the services that work with adoptive families. We are 'ultimate' parents, we are put on training courses, assessed, observed like no other parents. If we say we can't manage our children's extreme behaviours, then we need to be listened to and supported. These behaviours are textbook trauma responses. My husband and I know our children better than anyone else, we asked for respite. We knew with regular respite we would be able to manage. We didn't get any support that helped our family. For everyone's safety we had to make the heartbreaking decision to make our daughter homeless and request a S20. Once she was out of our home, she did get more support.

But in the 3 mins I have all I can say is it was also lacking, and she was in more danger than ever. We did complain to the authority and every part of our complaint was upheld at stage 3. This situation should never have happened. We should have been listened to and supported. We wanted to work with social services to safeguard our family and keep us together. Fortunately, we have stuck by our daughter, despite her best efforts to push us away. We are parenting from a distance. I am pushing for change so other families don't have to experience this. The adoption system and support is not fit for purpose, families need ongoing support.

Mel Hutchinson, Assistant Director, Children and Families, provided the following response which encompassed Statements 1 and 2:

Thank you to both Verity Shepherd and Samantha Smith, for sharing your views. We are sorry to hear the struggles you have both experienced as a family.

We know that many children who are placed for adoption may have had experiences where they have suffered neglect, trauma and loss which can have a significant impact on their development and well being over time. Children who are adopted have different and individual circumstances and needs that is personal to them and their family.

One Adoption complete in depth assessments and deliver training to assist individuals to understand some of those difficulties that children may experience as they grow and develop. We know the importance of having information shared openly to ensure individuals can make their own informed decision and choices about if adoption is right for them. There has been a great deal of research and a better understanding of trauma over the past 10 years which has influenced practice.

When families are struggling, they can receive support directly from the adoption support service, who offer a range of support to families for example training, activity days, peer mentoring, one to one and group support, therapeutic support, which may include therapeutic, enhanced adopter parenting courses, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DPP), Theraplay and therapeutic life story work. We recognise that for some families they do experience child on parent violence and the adoption service have offered training on this for many years (Non violence resistance training, NVR). All this type of work assists and helps families to understand the needs of their children and how they as a family can be supported, we do understand this can be very difficult for families. The adoption service can access the Adoption Support Fund to request therapy where there is an assessed need.

There are children who may experience neurodiversity and receive a diagnosis for example autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder whether they have been adopted or not. However, we do recognise that those children who have experienced loss and trauma may have additional needs as well as any diagnosis i.e., attachment disorder.

Where adopted families are experiencing crisis and a breakdown of relationships this may require additional services either through Section 17, Child in Need or Child Protection, where there is significant risk. As a service we strive to work alongside families to support them as, we know that where it is right children are better remaining in their home environment wherever possible, or within their family network. Unfortunately for some this is not the case and children return into care, under S20 or under a Care Order, Children Act, 1989. It is not our intention for parents to feel that it is their fault or blamed in anyway. We know the importance of families needing to feel listened to and apologise if this has not been the case.

Virtual School do have duties to support adopters with advice and information where there are challenges for adopted children within their education. Virtual School also provide training to schools to understand complex trauma for those children that have had this experience.

We do acknowledge that some foster carers access respite care, but this is not all and is determined on availability and as part of their role. Families who adopt children it becomes their legal responsibility and consideration would be given to how the LA are able to support, where there is an assessed need, as with any other family living in North Yorkshire.

Foster carers do receive an allowance, which varies dependent on age. I can also confirm that many adopters also receive an allowance. This is dependent on their personal circumstances and financial assessed need.

We are committed to supporting adoptive families in the best way possible.

4. The following statement was read out by Jakki Wilby:

I am Jakki Wilby and I am Vice-Chair of the Scarborough, Whitby & Ryedale Foster Carers Association (FCA), and I want to tell the story of the journey we've been on in seeking to improve conditions for North Yorkshire foster carers. For many years, leaders of local FCAs have met with your managers to discuss issues of common concern. We have been treated courteously, but few of the significant changes we have sought have been granted. Whilst modest annual increases in allowances and fees have been implemented the lot of carers has become more demanding. We find ourselves in the strange position of being the backbone of a statutory service, but we have no rights - we are volunteers. In early 2022, we decided that we needed to campaign more effectively as FCAs working together across North Yorkshire. We petitioned Councillor Sanderson and Stuart Carlton with 170 foster carer signatures. A period of intensive discussion took place with a number of options considered. But most of these were ruled out. A modest package of improvements was introduced in April 2023, but we didn't think that these would solve either carers' or the Council's problems. It should be regarded as a first instalment.

As we continued to listen to carers, it was clear that this was not just about money it was also about lack of respect. Carers to drift away from caring and too few new ones were coming forward. We were moving towards a situation where private sector carers would be required. We don't want that, your managers do want it and it's far more expensive. But the system is at capacity, and local carers are under pressure to house more children. I'm one of them.

We undertook Freedom of Information requests to find out what it was costing other local authorities for an average week's childcare - everywhere else cost more. You're able to do this because the service is kept largely in-house. But the service is now operating in continual crisis. You desperately need to recruit more carers, but enquiries are insufficient. One of the reasons for this is that carers are generally unhappy, under-compensated and disrespected. Few of them will recommend North Yorkshire, and many of them 'want out'. We called a public meeting in February to explain our concerns and invited our local Councillors. Some of you attended and carefully listened to us - our carer testimonies and our suggested solutions. The general response from them was one of shock.

That's why we're here today. Since then, we have met again with Janet Sanderson, but there appears to be little in the way of a meeting of minds. This Spring our allowances and fees only increased in 2024 in line with inflation, and there has been no second instalment of the improvement package. Carers continue to leave but the number of children in care continues to rise. This problem is not going away.

Mel Hutchinson, Assistant Director, Children and Families, provided the following response:

Thank you, Jakki for sharing your views. We have been working closely with the FCA Chairs for many years, listening to your views, experiences, and your helpful voice in advocating for local foster carers. As you are aware I, Mel Hutchinson, Assistant Director have attended the FCA meetings to enable a close working relationship to address concerns promptly and listen to yours and local foster carers views. We agree that it is very important for foster carers to feel valued and respected. Training and discussions are continuous with the workforce, in particular with newly qualified social workers just starting out in their career. We were grateful for the work and collaboration with foster carers to produce a video which is now being delivered to social work teams around the importance of relationships, respect, and values. We have encouraged that if foster carers have any concerns, they escalate this directly to the social work manager in order to have a prompt response to resolving any concerns raised.

In North Yorkshire, every year all Foster Carer payments are uplifted on 1st April by the rate of CPI Inflation the previous December. In 2022, when inflation increased rapidly in the year, the extra ordinary step of making a mid-year increase on 1st October 2022 was also made, this was due to the rise in cost-of-living pressures, recognising this was the right thing to do. On the 1st of April 2023, the Accredited Premium was boosted above the rate of inflation, as well as implementing new 'bridging payments' of up to three weeks for Accredited Foster Carers. We also implemented that all mileage was allowed to be claimed (previously Foster Carers had been expected to pay for the first 100 miles out of the child's Allowance). We also offered the staff benefit scheme, Vivup and paid £500 golden hello for newly approved carers and recommend a friend. This totalled in the order of £300K of additional funding to Foster Carers. This was directly in response to hearing the views of foster carers and whilst it did not meet all the requests that the petition highlighted, it did improve the overall package to our foster carers.

North Yorkshire's Foster Carer payments are above the government nationally recommended minimum for Allowance payments. We also complete a bench marking exercise regularly which is carried out within the Yorkshire and Humber Region. This was completed in the summer of 2023 and only Bradford paid the equivalent of Accredited Foster Carers more than North Yorkshire.

The Freedom of Information to gather the costings of other LAs would be higher than NY, this is because many go out to the private market for Independent Fostering Agency's that cost significantly more than LA rates. North Yorkshire work hard to keep children within NY and within our own foster carers. Many children who come into our care are placed with their family as connected foster carers and this is

in line with our practice model of keeping children living with their family wherever possible.

We have seen a rise in the number of children needing to come into our care for example, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children through the National Transfer Service. These children are not solely placed into foster care, those that are 16 plus are placed into supported accommodation which North Yorkshire have made significant investment, funded by the UASC grant, in order to provide appropriate accommodation.

Whilst we have seen a reduction of enquiries since covid and the cost-of-living increase, which has been seen nationally we are now starting to see an upward trend, which is positive however, we recognise there is still more to do. I can confirm we have now been able to pay up to 16 golden hello/recommend a friend payments.

5. The following statement was read out by Keith Miller:

My name is Keith and my wife and I have been fostering for nearly 15 years and have looked after 29 children in that time. Currently we have three in care and until last Sunday it was four, as the boy turned 18.

When we talk together and with other foster carers at formal and informal events there are many aspects of fostering that are being questioned now, and they come together as different themes. One of these themes is the distancing of children's social workers from children and foster carers, so much so that many present themselves as focussed on process, procedure and protocol compliance as opposed to problem resolution.

Today social workers will say, "I have to do a statutory visit and want to come at this time", whereas before it used to be, "How are things going and when can I visit?" In not being as close to the placements, there is greater emphasis on our ability to advocate for children, but we find the system slower to respond than a few years ago, and as one social worker said recently, social workers can be told off for challenging the system even when it's in the child's interest to do so.

There is now clear evidence of where social workers and their managers put pressure on foster carers to pick up the slack when the system does not provide that to which children are entitled.

We all understand the wider context within which Children's Services has to operate and can sympathise with the conflicting considerations. But at the front line operational level, we see a system under pressure which will often use foster carers as its release valve, and without consideration for the consequences for us and the children in our care.

My wife and I are very happy to continue looking after children and we are also keen to play a constructive and positive role in making things work better for foster carers and children. Without foster carers there is no fostering service.

Mel Hutchinson, Assistant Director, Children and Families, provided the following response:

Mr Miller thank you for your submission to the scrutiny panel. I was sorry to read that you feel children's social workers are not as visible as they previously used to be. Social workers have statutory duties to visit children regularly as part of the care planning regulations. We know that building relationships is key to developing effective working together and ensuring the plan and team around the child is working well. We would encourage foster carers to contact managers if they are not receiving visits appropriately or any other concern they may have.

We continually listen to the views of foster carers and regularly review feedback received into the service. There is a current piece of work being completed with Social Workers ensuring they are understanding of the importance of the role that foster carers do and see them as part of the team around the child and promoting joint working. There has been a video completed in partnership with foster carers which is being rolled out to all workers and particularly to our newly qualified social workers. The video is being used as part of the induction programme for new staff. All managers within the service have seen the video and are fully sighted to it.

I can confirm we have seen an increase in the number of children in our care since the pandemic, and cost of living crisis which has created extra pressures on the Fostering Service. We do contact foster carers when searching for placements to enquire if they may consider offering a placement. Where carers do not wish to be contacted, we respect this decision and ensure this does not happen. We do understand that at times there can be a number of calls about children.

We value the commitment and care shown to our children in North Yorkshire. We want to see all of our children thrive and we know that fostering families provide this opportunity, for which we are extremely grateful. We regularly meet with the FCA chairs and have various meeting and liaison meetings with other teams reviewing feedback from carers to continuously reflect and improve our service.

15. Chair's Remarks

The Chair was unable to attend Full Council on 15th May 2024, however, she did submit the following questions to Councillor Janet Sanderson, Executive Member for Children and Families and Councillor Annabel Wilkinson, Executive Member for Education and Skills. Their responses are below:

What is the current rate of achievement of completing EHCPs within the statutory time limit and how is NYC dealing with the complaints and threats of legal action that have been received from some parents?

Response

Since 2015 we have seen an increase of 233.6% new plans issued in North Yorkshire. Timeliness of EHCPs has decreased both Nationally and Regionally. We have now improved our timeliness 2 years in a row (2022 and 2023), moving us to a similar position to the latest reported national average and better than most recently reported statistical neighbour average. Requests in calendar year 2023 were the highest ever received, approx. 39% higher than the previous year, which was the then highest ever received number of requests in a calendar year. Since 2021, owing to the increase in demand for EHC assessments and the lack of Education Psychologists (EP) locally and nationally, we have commissioned external temporary support to meet EHC demand. Whilst this enabled the Council to meet an increase in demand and improve timeliness of assessments in 2022 and 2023, from the autumn of 2023 the availability of temporary EP's was such that we needed to further strength our supply of temporary workers and increase rates to attract the required capacity. Whilst this has supported the meeting of demand into 2024, a backlog of assessment is being worked through. Fortnightly performance and improvement meetings are in place to constantly performance manage the temporary staff programmes. With this increase in supply and rates now in place, capacity has increased, and we forecast being able to clear the backlog this year. As the backlog is cleared, the out of timescales plan is then recorded. As a result of the out-of-date plans going on record, we see performance numbers drop, and this is what we are seeing on the current statistic reports. This will however improve throughout the year when the backlog is completed. It is also worth noting that the number of requests for plans has now dropped for 4 Quarters in a row, which is very welcome news, but still remains significantly higher than it did in 21/22. Alongside these temporary measures, we have strengthened our direct workforce. We have recruited a Principal EP, increased the team numbers, and have recruited five EP's

from abroad that will arrive in our teams later this year. We then plan to recruit assistant and trainee EPs to complete the team. In the interim the SEND casework team have strengthened their communication, so parents are aware of the current challenges within the statutory assessment process. There is a Caseworker attached to each child undergoing assessment and they remain the single point of contact in order to support parents through the process. Case work officers are trying to maintain regular communication with parents. Parents are also able to use the corporate complaints policy if they remain unhappy and of course seek out further assistance from the Local Government Ombudsman.

What percentage of children and young people in North Yorkshire are deemed to be disadvantaged? What % of funding for outdoor education have these children been able to access?

Response

Research into the long-term impact of outdoor education residential visits for children and young people identifies lasting impacts including, increases in self-confidence, independence, improved communication, and teamwork. 17% of all school age children and young people in North Yorkshire are deemed to be disadvantaged. For context, whilst this number has increased since the pandemic, it remains below the national figure which is around 20%. As I said in my response to a very similar question you asked at Full Council last July "It is the responsibility of the individual governing bodies to determine how they support pupils to attend all types of residential visit, whether with the council's outdoor learning service or elsewhere." The council's outdoor learning service does not receive any routine 'funding' to support access. It is a traded service where each school /other organisation will make a booking for a group of pupils and the school / other organisation will decide if they use pupil premium or other funding source to support children with costs for residential and other day-time outdoor learning activities (eg forest schools). These activities can take place in school, through one of the NYC centres or through a third party and so the council does not hold these records.

NOTED.

16. School Governance – Roles and Responsibilities of Governing Boards and the Relationship between the Local Authority and Maintained Schools

Considered –

A presentation by Amanda Newbold, Assistant Director, Education and Skills, Jon Holden, Head of Strategic Planning CYPS, Louise Wilson, Head of School Improvement and Sally Dunn, Head of Finance (Schools, Early Years and High Needs).

The Chair explained that this agenda item was requested a result of the Call-In meeting held in April 2024 regarding the proposed closure of Fountains Earth Primary School. It was agreed that further information about roles and responsibilities of governing boards, and the support that the council offers to school would help the Committee gain a better insight around processes and procedures.

The presentation comprised of three elements:

- North Yorkshire Schools' Context
- Responsibilities, including LA support for governors
- School closures in North Yorkshire

The key points are summarised below:

- Everyone agreed school governors and governing bodies do an outstanding job.

- It isn't always the closure of a school that impacts the community, it's often other factors that occur before a school closes that creates the impact. These include elements such as not enough affordable housing or jobs, and low pupil numbers.
- Extensive consultation and procedures are followed which is a lengthy and thorough process, and it will be at least 2 years before a governing body will contact a local authority to explore closing a school.
- Whilst some schools are closing, new ones are opening or merging with others, and NYC is always available to support and update governing boards and local Councillors throughout the process.

It was proposed that a working group could be considered to look at the impact of school closures and the support provided. It was also proposed to pause school closures, particularly in the more rural areas, until the local plans have been completed. After considerable debate, the majority of members felt that a working group wasn't necessary because there is already adequate support provided to communities, parents and children, and an ongoing dialogue between governing bodies and the authority. Factors such as birth rates and new housing plans are reviewed on a regular basis and taken into consideration so a pause isn't required.

NOTED.

17. Update on the Holiday Activity and Food Programme in North Yorkshire – FEAST (Food, Entertainment, Art and Sport Together)

Considered –

A presentation of the FEAST Impact Report 2023 by Alice Skaith, Holiday Activities and Food Co-Ordinator, Children and Young People's Services. A short video about the project is available here:

<https://app.frame.io/presentations/f2bfb963-309e-46e0-aca5-4ef527ad874d>

Alice explained that FEAST provides a range of free holiday activities to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people across the county, including young carers, refugees and asylum seekers, and children with SEND. Those who receive free school meals automatically qualify.

The key points are summarised below:

- The DfE have funded FEAST through their Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) grant since 2021/22 and 2024/25 is the final year of that funding period. Funding has increased over the years, but not in line with the growing demand. This year they received a grant of £1.4 million.
- Children receive free healthy food that meets the School Food Standard, and FEAST supports families through promoting healthy lifestyles (providing recipe cards and ingredients) and signposting to services (such as foodbanks).
- They work in partnership with over 80 local voluntary and community-based providers and the team is encouraging them to look for additional funding so that they can continue the work after 2025. All of the providers comply within the DfE framework. There are 12 specialist SEND providers.
- FEAST are always mindful to deliver activities in the more rural parts of the county and transport can be provided (Council approved taxis). Selby is one of the areas where provision has grown significantly.
- Some Councillors have funded FEAST activities and meals by allocating some of their locality budget.

Members asked if there had been an impact on provision if demand for take-up has increased. Marie-Ann Jackson, Head of Localities, explained that it is the DfE's ambition that all children should have access to an activity within one mile of where they live. However, given the geographical make up of the county, this was never going to be possible for NYC. They have had to limit the number of places to be able to offer provision in the more rural areas. There is also a ringfenced budget for one-to-one and two-to-one specialist care for children with SEND.

One Councillor asked if there was evidence of an increase in benefits take-up from families accessing FEAST. This is not something that had been explored but could be looked at.

It was agreed that FEAST has been a massive success and extremely far-reaching, enabling children to access other grant funded schemes.

NOTED.

Councillor Mann left the meeting at 12.20pm

18. Fostering North Yorkshire Update

Considered –

An update from Mel Hutchinson, Assistant Director for Children and Families.

The key points are summarised below:

- There have been 17 Golden Hello's of £500 since January 2023.
- Over 75% of children living in foster homes are in stable long-term arrangements.
- There has been an increase in children under 5 and 5-9 living in foster care, whilst the largest cohort of carers is 55-59yrs.
- There is a very strong performance in health and dental check-ups, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs), and Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for children in care.

The Committee heard from one Member of their personal experience and the growing pressures on being a foster carer. There was also concern of the rising number of younger children requiring care, especially considering the ageing population of carers. A Member suggested that a task and finish group could be set up to look at how foster carers can be better supported.

It was pointed out to the Committee that NYC's Fostering Service have many more carers compared to other local authorities, this is an indication that the majority are happy and pleased with the level of support they receive, which offers reassurance. It was important to put things into perspective and Members have spoken to many foster carers who have no complaints about the service.

After a lengthy debate, the majority of the Committee decided that a task and finish group was not required. It was accepted that there will always be some instances where foster carers experience challenges, and the Corporate Director urged them to contact the service with any concerns. The Assistant Director explained that they are always looking at ways to improve the service and investigate all complaints.

NOTED

19. Annual Report of the Young People's Champion

Considered –

A report by Councillor Alyson Baker, Young People's Champion.

The report highlighted the range of activities, engagement, and networking which Councillor Baker has participated in on behalf of the council. She pointed out that she has also supported and signposted a lot of families to council services. She congratulated Children's and Young People's Service on their work and Ofsted achievement. The Committee thanked Councillor Baker.

NOTED.

20. Treating Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

Considered –

A report by Stuart Carlton, Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Service.

This item is in response to the Notice of Motion at Full Council on May 15th 2024, which called to treat care experience as a protected characteristic. The Committee agreed the first step would be to consult with care leavers to hear their views, as engaging with them is paramount. They would like to hear if care leavers have experienced any discrimination. They asked the Corporate Parenting Members' Group to lead on this and report back at the next Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on October 4th.

Resolved –

That the Committee:

- (a) Notes the report provided;
- (b) Ask the Corporate Parenting Members Group to lead on a consultation with care leavers for their views on whether NYC should adopt care experience as a protected characteristic;
- (c) Receive an update at October's meeting.

21. Work Programme 2024/2025

Considered –

A report by Alice Fox, Senior Scrutiny Officer, which invited Members to consider the Committee's Work Programme for 2024/2025.

Resolved –

That the Work Programme, as it stands, be noted.

22. Any other Items

The Chair advised that she had no other Items of business to raise.

23. Date of Next meeting

This would be held on Friday 4th October 2024 at County Hall in Northallerton, commencing at 10.00 a.m.

The meeting concluded at 1.10 p.m.

AF