

Overview and Scrutiny: Annual Report

2019 - 2021



Northumberland
County Council

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEES
2019 - 2021**

NB: The 2019-20 Council year was extended to May 2021 due to the Covid 19 Emergency. This report covers the whole of that period.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**Councillor David Bawn
Chairman**

1.1 I would like to thank my colleagues on the Committee, particularly my Vice-Chairman, Lynne Grimshaw for all her hard work. I am sure all the Committee would wish to place on record their gratitude to the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, who has facilitated our decision-making process and assisted my role as Chairman, both inside and outside of the meeting room. The work of the Committee has been greatly assisted by the regular attendance of Cabinet members and senior officers, for which I am grateful. Over the two-year period covered by this report, the Committee has met on 14 occasions (eight times virtually) dealing with 39 substantive items of business.

1.2 The Committee members have played a valuable and constructive role in the Council's strategic policy making areas and continue to provide overview of financial and

strategic policy issues.

1.3 The Committee has considered 21 reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Cabinet, and in addition to supporting the majority of them, members have put forward comments and suggested amendments, many of which have been accepted and included in the final decision. The following reports have been subject to that process:

- Devolution of the Adult Education Budget to the North of Tyne Combined Authority
- Blyth Relief Road
- Advance Northumberland Limited
- Northumberland Lottery
- Budget 2020-21 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2020-2023
- Governance for the Borderlands Partnership
- Northumberland Climate Change Action Plan 2020-21
- Budget 2020-21 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2020-22
- The Northumberland Line - Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline Progress
- Proposed Incorporation - Group Holding Company for Northumberland County Council
- Northumberland Climate Change Briefing
- Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal Investment Programme
- Approval of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2021-22
- Enterprise Zone – Northumberland Energy Park East Sleekburn (NEP1)
- Budget 2021-22 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2021-2024 MTFP and Budget
- New Berwick Theatre

- Bedlington Town Centre Redevelopment
- Northumberland Climate Change Action Plan 2021-23
- Borderlands Inclusive Fund Plan
- Budget 2021-22 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2021-24
- Northumberland Energy Park Phase 3 Site at East Sleekburn – Delegated Arrangements for Purchase and Onward Sale

1.4. In addition, the Committee has considered a number of overview reports, including:

1.4.1 **Covid-19: Response and Recovery** – in July and November 2020, all the OSCs received presentations on the Council's immediate response to the pandemic and the plans being put in place to support residents, businesses and communities to recover from the Covid-19 crisis. The Committee praised staff for their flexibility in refocusing their efforts to respond to issues arising from the pandemic and requested further specific updates on actions being taken to preserve their mental health as a consequence of those changes (see below) and on the county's economic recovery. In January 2021, the **Covid 19: Economic Recovery in Northumberland** report informed of the latest position regarding key economic data (including unemployment, vacancies and business confidence) and provided an update on support to businesses and the overall strategy for economic recovery. I was pleased to welcome Alan Welby, Director of Innovation of the LEP and Henry Kippen from the North of Tyne to discuss the recovery in a regional context.

1.4.2 The Committee had also expressed concern at the impact the pandemic may have had on the Council's income streams, so also at that January meeting, members were updated on **Income Generation**. The report provided information on sale, fees and charges generated and collected by the Council, covering the last three full financial years, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20 and contrasted that information against the current financial year 2020-21. As a result of Covid-19, the Council had been unable to generate the level of income expected for the financial year when the budget for 2020-21 was set in February 2020. The government had launched a compensation scheme for lost income relating to sales whereby local authorities absorbed the loss of the first 5% with 75% of the balance being reimbursed. The estimated compensation that the Council would receive for 2020-21 from the government's compensation scheme for lost sales, fees and charges was reported to be £2.045 million.

1.4.3 **Workforce** - in June 2019, members were provided with an annual position statement in relation to workforce related areas of assurance, workstreams/associated action plans and progress to date within key areas for Northumberland County Council for the full financial year of 2018/19. The report also gave an overview of the monitoring and actions taken during that period in accordance with the Council's Whistleblowing Policy for employees and provided assurance to the Committee that there was provision and monitoring in place to achieve necessary Key Performance Indicators relating to the workforce on an ongoing basis. The Committee discussed the actions being taken to deal

with staff sickness absence. Members agreed that they would receive this report annually and that future updates should include benchmark data with similar local authorities as appropriate.

- 1.4.4 In July 2020, this report was presented again to the Committee which updated members on workforce issues in 2019/20. There had been a strengthening of support and wellbeing to employees in the past year with the introduction of wellbeing action plans. These helped the authority to identify the differences between when employees functioned well and when they did not, which helped to identify what was causing sickness absence. Members noted that as a consequence to the Council's Covid 19 response, a significant number of staff had been seconded to new or different roles and were concerned at the effect on their mental wellbeing as a result of the pressures that may arise from this.
- 1.4.5 In December 2020, the Committee considered two reports arising from the earlier workforce discussion and on the impact of Covid 19 on staff: **Mental Wellbeing Impact on Employees of the Council and Support Provided** included a wide range of actions and activities, such as the fortnightly big sing and 'live' fitness sessions, that had been put in place to support staff, many of whom were working from home or needed to shield. The Committee praised staff and teams across the organisation who had delivered services on behalf of the Council during this difficult period. The **Dignity at Work Update** assured members that this policy sought to ensure the dignity and respect at work of all Council employees by preventing acts of discrimination, exclusion, unfair treatment and other negative or demeaning behaviours, and by educating the workforce in the development of positive behaviours through increased awareness.
- 1.4.6 **Debt Recovery** - the Committee continued to receive regular reports which provided information relating to the level of outstanding debt owed to the Council and, in March 2020, members examined the **Support to Customers with Financial Difficulties** which was in place to assist customers who were having difficulty paying their council tax and rent commitments. This involved engagement work with customers, including assistance to prevent people's debts worsening and options for alternative payment arrangements, and the work with, and signposting to, the Citizens Advice Bureau for additional support. Members noted the Community Action Northumberland's offer of support for residents' budgeting. The Committee welcomed the work the Council was undertaking to support Northumberland residents and agreed to continue to monitor issues arising from those experiencing financial difficulties.
- 1.4.7 Also at that March meeting, the Committee was presented with an overview of the collection, recovery and **Enforcement Agent** process for Council Tax. Members were assured that great efforts were made by the Council's officers and enforcement agents to engage with those in Council Tax arrears to recover monies owed before enforcement action was taken, particularly when dealing with vulnerable customers.

- 1.4.8 **Capital Programme 2021-22** – members sought assurance that the capital programme remained on track despite the Covid 19 pandemic. In October 2020, the Committee was advised that there had been a capital expenditure of £24 million during the year up to 31 July, including significant investment in transport; education, improving schools; leisure facilities, and in council housing. However, due to covid, there had been an impact in delivery of some projects causing delays and affecting working practices. It was therefore acknowledged by members that there would be a sizeable underspend with significant reprofiling from 2020-21 into 2021-22.
- 1.4.9 **Advance Northumberland** – in February 2021, Richard Wearmouth, Portfolio Holder for Business and Tourism provided members with an overview of the operation of Advance Northumberland.

David Bawn
Chairman – Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC

2. COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**Councillor Jeff Reid,
Chairman**

2.1 I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Committee, as well as the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, for continuing to make the work of the Committee relevant and productive. I would also like to thank Brian Gallacher, my Vice Chairman, for his useful contribution and support over the last four years. The committee would not work as well as it does without regular attendance of the relevant Cabinet members who submit themselves to scrutiny and the staff who support them.

2.2 Although our meetings have been held virtually in 2020/21, this has not affected the Committee's work programme which continues to prioritise the issues identified by its members, including such important matters as domestic abuse and violence; housing, waste management and environmental issues and community safety.

2.3 However, the Committee did comment on ten reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Cabinet during the two-year period of this update. The following reports were approved subsequent to that process:

- Housing Strategy for Northumberland 2019-21
- Food and Feed, Safety and Standards Service Plan 2019/20
- Northumberland County Council Housing Services Domestic Abuse Policy 2019
- The proposed implementation of the Northumberland Street Works Permit Scheme
- Northumberland Coast AONB Management Plan
- Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2020-24
- 'Our Way' Vision for Cycling and Walking in Northumberland
- Northumberland Waste Management Strategy Proposed Trial of Kerbside Glass Collections
- Northumberland Sports Facility Strategy 2019-2031 & Northumberland Playing Pitch Strategy 2019-2031
- Northumberland Public Library Service Consultation

2.4 As stated above, the Committee has set its own priorities and considered 24 overview and scrutiny reports during the last two years, including:

2.4.1 **Market Strategy** – in June 2019, the Committee was provided with an update on achievements against the 2018-23 Markets Strategy action plan and on the current financial position of Council run markets. Members agreed that regular town markets would help to keep those towns vibrant by maintaining footfall and attracting tourists to the area - provided market stalls did not undercut or compete against, and therefore be detrimental to, established shops. However,

they acknowledged that the Council could only subsidise markets to a finite level, so commended the Strategy for areas of forward thinking, such as the promotion of youth markets. Members therefore agreed that the Council should be working with schools in particular, to encourage more young people to participate in such markets.

- 2.4.2 In general, the Committee acknowledged the excellent work being done to improve and sustain the County's markets but was concerned that the Strategy had not delivered the financial results hoped for and agreed that they would continue to monitor the delivery of the action plan at appropriate intervals.
- 2.4.3 **Domestic Violence and Abuse** - in June 2019, the Committee was updated on the current partnership work programme to coordinate service provision to tackle the issues and harms caused by domestic violence and abuse in Northumberland. Although they noted that much of the emphasis of domestic abuse was on the impact on female victims, members highlighted that men and boys aged 14 and over would be able to seek support from appropriate organisations.
- 2.4.4 The Committee agreed to receive a further report on the outcome of the Government's consultation on domestic violence and abuse in due course.
- 2.4.5 **Northumberland Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authority (NIFCA) Annual Plan 2019-20** - in October 2019, the Committee received a presentation from Mike Hardy, Chief Executive Officer and Les Weller, Chair of NIFCA on how they managed and regulated sea fisheries on the Northumberland coast in a sustainable way, whilst ensuring minimal environmental impact and discussed the challenges that that presented.
- 2.4.6 **Empty Homes in Northumberland** - in December 2019, the Committee examined the issue of empty homes in the county, the measures that the Council was undertaking to bring them into use and the challenges that this presented. The Committee's focus fell on two areas:
- **Purchase and Repair Scheme** – under this scheme properties that have been empty for more than six months are being purchased, repaired and managed by the Council, and
 - **Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO)** - through the use of EDMO powers long term empty properties are being brought back into use. The Council then manages the property for a period of up to seven years.
- 2.4.7 The Committee was supportive of the Council using any measures at its disposal to bring empty homes back into use and agreed to recommend to Council that the additional Council Tax raised on empty properties, as agreed at Council on 6 November 2019, be ring-fenced to bring empty properties back into use.

- 2.4.8 **Street Lighting LED Project** - in March 2020, the Committee considered the progress of the Council's Street Lighting Modernisation Project, including problems experienced during the project which had resulted in a delay in the completion and an increase in costs. These included design issues, sub-contractors going into liquidation and additional columns requiring replacement due to their poor condition.
- 2.4.9 Members were also advised that due to a number of reasons, some works had also been taken out of the contract and would be completed by the Council's own in-house team. A small amount of work remained outstanding whilst waiting for a Northern Powergrid connection. Final inspections were being undertaken on a sample basis for the issue of completion certificates and warranties were in the process of being transferred to the Council from Galliford Try. Negotiations regarding the final cost of the project were in progress. The Committee acknowledged that the project had presented a number of very difficult challenges for the Council and thanked officers and all those involved in the scheme for their hard work and dedication.
- 2.4.10 **Community Safety and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Control** - in March 2020, the Committee examined the current discharge of the Council's duties towards community safety and the control of anti-social behaviour, including how support was provided to Councillors through a Single Point of Contact, Victim Offender Location meetings and ASB Risk Assessment Conferences. Members were also assured that regular meetings were held with the police to raise ASB activities and that police action was being taken where appropriate. Lower levels of anti-social behaviour were handled by the Council, although information was shared between both organisations, for example, police evidence was used by the Council to take enforcement action. Members generally welcomed this approach but felt that more publicity was required about successful outcomes, including numbers of fixed penalty notices and prosecutions.
- 2.4.11 As I say, from June 2020, the Committee has held all its remaining meetings virtually and in July (updated in October), we considered the Council's response to and recovery from the **Covid 19 pandemic** is so far as it impacted on the services within our remit. The Committee were appreciative of the work being undertaken by officers in response to the pandemic and requested that careful consideration should be given to new businesses requiring planning and licensing permission and the impact that these could have on nearby residential areas, and suggested that the positive effect of the work with communities and volunteers be continued and built upon in a constructive way to support and enhance council services.
- 2.4.12 **Fly Tipping** continues to be a concern for the Committee and in September 2020, we considered the Fly Tipping Reduction Action Plan. Members supported the plan and discussed issues around education, enforcement and

the cost of clearing tipped waste. We also agreed that officers should continue to work with Town and Parish Councils, community associations and other groups to tackle the issue of fly tipping.

- 2.4.13 **Active Northumberland** – in January 2021, overview of the arrangements in place for the monitoring of Active Northumberland’s performance through the NCC Client Function. The Committee noted the difficulties that Active had experienced during the pandemic and acknowledged the key role that its services and facilities played in improving both the physical and mental health coming out of the current crisis. However, members were concerned about the uncertainty surrounding Active’s future and requested that regular monitoring reports be presented to the Committee.
- 2.4.14 **The Council’s Response to Anti-Social Behaviour** – members had raised concerns regarding the use of nitrous oxide canisters, particularly in public places, so in February 2021, the Committee considered a report on this issue and the Council’s response to anti-social behaviour in general. Whilst members expressed their appreciation to the Community Safety Team for their continued hard work during the pandemic, and the positive outcomes, they were concerned that there were no age restrictions for the sale of nitrous oxide. The Committee therefore requested that those concerns be referred to the Office for Product Safety and Standards (OPSS).
- 2.4.15 **Northumberland Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS)** – members had requested an update on the Section 106 process following concerns that agreements that had been made with developers may not have always been honoured. In March 2021, this report introduced the Committee to the Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations which provided a requirement to publish an annual Infrastructure Funding Statement. Members viewed this as a positive tool to improve the transparency, accountability and monitoring of developer contributions for both Councillors and members of the public. Members agreed that the IFS be presented to the Committee annually.
- 2.5 The Committee also considered regular updates on the **Fleet Replacement Programme**; the performance of the Fire and Rescue Service following **Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)** reports; on **Customer Corporate Complaints** and on **Environmental Enforcement** issues and agreed that these issues should continue to be monitored by this Committee in future.

Jeff Reid
Chairman – Communities and Place OSC

3. HEALTH AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**Councillor Jeff Watson,
Chairman**

3.1 The Committee has been very busy since the last annual report, due to the COVID-19 pandemic this report covers the work we have done in 2019, 2020, and 2021. This report also covers the change in chairmanship in September 2020, when John Beynon took over the vital work of this committee.

3.2 I would like to start by thanking Lesley Rickerby, my Vice-Chair, Cath McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adults and Children's Services and Chris Angus, our Scrutiny Officer together with all officers who have again provided support to me and the Committee Members through some very complex issues throughout the year, including continued monitoring of the situation regarding Rothbury and Berwick Hospitals and

the relocation of the Whalton Unit to Ashington. Members were also grateful to receive presentations and updates from Healthwatch Northumberland, the North East Ambulance Service (NEAS), Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (CNTW) and the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (NUTH) as well as regular updates on the COVID-19 pandemic from Public Health and NHS partners.

3.3 The Committee has followed its own work programme, only dealing with two reports prior to its determination by Cabinet - Adult Services Market Position Statement and the Independent Supported Living Services. The work programme in 2020 and 2021 was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic with regular updates from Northumberland's Director of Public Health starting in March 2020.

3.4 The Committee considered over 70 overview and scrutiny reports from 2019 to 2021, including:

3.4.1 **Rothbury Community Hospital** - in June 2019, September 2019 and January 2020, members received updates for services at Rothbury Community Hospital. The final presentation set out the ambitions for the facility, including implementing an integrated nurse/therapist led 24 hour community care facility, operational from April 2020. The team would be separate and additional to the current teams who provided care for the local population, and patient care would be interchangeable either in their home or in a hospital bed depending on clinical need.

3.4.2 The Committee was advised that main aims and objectives of the new arrangements were to avoid acute hospital admissions; provision of a 24 hour team dedicated community care either in the patient's own home or in six inpatient beds; proactive focus on patients with long term conditions; a hub for public health support; providing interface support to residential care homes;

establishing the use of telemedicine to support patients; create outreach clinics and collecting outcome data. The long-term goal is for step up/step down support, rehabilitation support, fully integrated model with a public health facility and education for relatives to support the delivery of care.

- 3.4.3 Whilst members welcomed the proposals, they acknowledged that there were challenges to be overcome including recruitment, timescales, and the communication and understanding of the new model of care. The Committee agreed to look at this issue further and a report will be scheduled for later in 2021.
- 3.4.4 **Physical Activity Strategy** - in July 2019, the Committee considered the draft Northumberland Physical Activity Strategy 2018-28, a multi-agency approach co-ordinated by the Northumberland Sport Partnership, which aimed to tackle the wider health and wellbeing issues associated with the rising levels of inactivity amongst all age groups throughout the county. The Strategy proposed a long term 'whole system approach', engaging inactive communities in Northumberland through targeted interventions and a universal offer to reach out to inactive people more effectively.
- 3.4.5 Members discussed how the Strategy could be targeted at different groups, such as older people's walking groups and how a key consideration of the strategy was about getting people to contemplate doing physical activity or working with headteachers to encourage more active classroom programmes and use more active learning on school trips. School based exercise should not be limited to physical education classes. A more preventative approach could also reduce further costs to the health services and other budgets.
- 3.4.6 **Berwick Hospital** - in September 2019 and March 2020, the Committee monitored the proposed development of the hospital. Members were advised that the £25m new hospital would be built on the current site with all current services, integrated primary care service and a JAG accredited endoscopy suite. They were advised that although the building works were ongoing, further planning permissions and subsequent demolition works were needed before the completion of the hospital which was expected to be in 2022. The Committee will continue to monitor progress of the project.
- 3.4.7 **Relocation of the Whalton Unit to Wansbeck General Hospital** - in November 2019, the Committee examined the impact of the relocation of the Whalton Unit to Wansbeck General Hospital since it had been temporarily relocated from Morpeth to Wansbeck Hospital in December 2018, and whether making the arrangement permanent would constitute a 'substantial variation' of the service. Members considered representations from the Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group (NCCG) as the proposer for retaining the facility in Ashington and from a campaign group who wanted the Unit to be relocated back to its original site in Morpeth.

3.4.8 Following the detailed presentations and questioning from members, the Committee was satisfied that the number of beds in the Whalton Unit had not changed, travel issues had been addressed and the location was helpful to people from more deprived areas. It was acknowledged that many people would live further away from Wansbeck General Hospital, but also that many would live closer and there was an equal balance. The CCG also gave a commitment to consideration of providing palliative care in single rooms within care homes and investment for new car parking spaces and additional disabled spaces. Although the Committee agreed that the permanent move to Wansbeck Hospital was not a substantial variation in service, they asked to receive regular updates to ensure that the service was being delivered as proposed.

3.4.9 **Oral Health Strategy** - in March 2020, the Committee considered the legislative process to vary the existing fluoridation scheme, which had been in place for more than 50 years, to encompass more communities in the county. Prior to moving to the formal consultation stage, the Committee sought assurances that the legislative process had been followed appropriately and invited representatives from bodies which were in favour or against the proposals to outline their views to members. Following those presentations and a detailed discussion between members, the Committee agreed that the correct processes had been applied and that a further report would be presented to it as part of the formal consultation exercise later in the year. It was anticipated the Committee would be very involved with the Oral Health Strategy; however, this strategy was put on hold as the COVID-19 pandemic quickly took priority over the Public Health team's time.

3.5 Monitoring Reports - in 2019/20, the Committee has also received the following overview reports:

- Update on Ambulance Performance
- End of Life Care - Update
- Dental Services in Coquetdale - Update (NHS England)
- Customer Experience: Joint Children's and Adult Services Customer Experience: Compliments and Complaints Annual Report 2018/19
- Welfare Rights Annual Report 2018/19
- The Joint Musculoskeletal (MSK) and Pain Service (JMAPS)
- Annual Report of the Director of Public Health
- Cancer Performance - Update
- Sepsis Performance - Update
- Urgent Care Update: Developing the Strategic Direction for Urgent Care in Northumberland
- Winter Planning Update
- Healthwatch Northumberland - Six Month Update
- Specialist Substance Misuse Services - Update
- Safeguarding Adults Annual Report
- CEDAR Programme

- Partnerships with NHS Bodies
- Northumberland Primary Care Strategy and Associated Developments
- Quality Account - Northumbria NHS Foundation Trust
- Coronavirus

Councillor Jeff Watson

Chairman - Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee



**Councillor John Beynon,
Chairman**

3.6 I was appointed to the role of Chairman in September 2020 at a very busy and important time for the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Being part of this imperative Committee over the last 7 months has been an education and a joy. I am proud of the work our Committee has done during these unprecedented times. I would like to thank my Vice-Chair Lesley Rickerby and Democratic Services for their support. The Committee has continued to receive a number of overview reports whilst staying informed of the work undertaken by the Council, NHS, CCG, and Public Health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.7 The Committee has received 20 reports since I became Chair including one report on which the Committee commented before it was determined by Cabinet. The Discretionary Grants for Adaptations to Housing for Disabled People recommended the adoption of a policy permitting the discretionary use of the budget for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), to make possible more flexible responses than were permitted within the mandatory national DFG scheme. The Committee supported the proposals in the report and welcomed the flexibility of means-testing. The Committee agreed this was a positive report that would help and support the residents of Northumberland.

3.8 The Committee has received reports and updates on a number of future strategies and changes including Northumberland CCG's End of Life Strategy, CNTW's CEDAR Project, Northumberland's Coroner's Service, and the Annual Report of the Director of Public Health.

3.9 As is to be expected, the Committee has spent a great deal of time monitoring the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee received regular updates regarding the local, regional, and national picture from the Director of Public Health, CCG, NHS, and other partners. These reports covered the epidemiology of Coronavirus, Public Health's outbreak, prevention and control plan, testing, vaccinations, the impact on our local healthcare services and the wider community, and Northumberland's plan for recovery.

3.10 In addition to the above, the Committee also considered the following reports:

- Complaints Annual Report 2019/2020 – Adult Social Care, Children's Social

Care, and Continuing Health Care Services

- NHS Winter Planning Update
- Newcastle upon Tyne Quality Accounts
- North East Ambulance Service – Quality Accounts
- North Tyneside and Northumberland Safeguarding Adults Annual Reports 2019-2020
- Northumbria Healthcare/Northumberland CCG Cancer Update
- Northumbria Healthcare Quality Accounts

3.11 I cannot end this report without thanking all of the officers at NCC who have worked tirelessly over the last year, with a special thanks to our Director of Public Health, Liz Morgan, and her team. I would also like to extend this thanks to the staff within the NHS and CCG for all they have done throughout this trying time.

Councillor John Beynon
Chairman - Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

4. FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson, Chairman

4.1 Due to COVID-19, this annual report covers two years from May 2019 to April 2021. Over this time the Committee has met on 21 occasions dealing with 76 substantive reports, more than any other OSC. In September 2020, my Vice-Chair, Mark Swinburn, assumed the role of Chairman and I would like to thank him for his support as Vice-Chair and for carrying on the great work of this Committee as Chair. I would once again like to thank the 2020 Committee members and officers for the full part they have played in dealing with such a substantial workload. Their insight and wisdom continue to ensure effective scrutiny.

4.2 The Committee have made comment on 18 reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Cabinet. The following reports were approved subsequent to that

process:

- Proposal and Rationale for Changes to Morpeth Children's Centre
- Outcomes of consultation on extending age ranges of Whitley Memorial CE & West End First Schools
- School Reorganisation Plan 2018-2021 - Annual Update
- Final Business Case for Replacement Buildings for Hadrian Learning Trust Schools
- Proposal to extend the age ranges of Bedlington Whitley Memorial CE and West End First Schools
- Expansion of Whytrig Middle, Horton Grange Primary and New Delaval Primary Schools
- Alternative Education Provision
- Outcome of the Outline Business Case for the Haltwhistle Primary School Provision for Wise Academy Trust
- Proposal to extend the age range of West Woodburn First School to become a primary school with effect from 1 September 2020
- The Development of Additionally Resourced Provision (ARP) for Pupils with SEND in Northumberland
- Key Education Outcomes - 2018-19 Academic Year
- Report of the Exclusions Task and Finish Working Group
- School Funding 2020-21 (National Funding Formula)
- School Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for the 2021/22 Academic Year
- Outcomes of Consultation on Proposals for West Woodburn First School
- Schools in the West - Final Summary Report Regarding Outcomes of Resilience Programme and Development of a Multi-Academy Trust
- National Funding Formula and 2021/2022 School Funding
- School Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for the 2022/2023 Academic Year

4.3 The Committee have also considered many overview and scrutiny reports during the last year, including:

4.3.1 **Elective Home Education** - in July 2019, the Committee received a report informing members about elective home education and actions taken by officers since the last report on 5th July 2018 to ensure that children receive a safe and suitable education. The report was of particular interest to the Committee as it linked to the work of our Exclusions Task and Finish Group. The Committee were advised that as part of the work being undertaken by the Task and Finish Working Group funding opportunities were being explored with the support of Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP in response to the Timpson Report on School Exclusions.

4.3.2 **The Exclusions Task and Finish Working Group Report** came to the Committee in October and November 2019 before being forwarded to cabinet for their consideration in December 2019. Details are set out in paragraph 7.

4.3.3 **Presentation from Northumberland College** - in January 2020, Northumberland College spoke to the Committee following its merger with Sunderland College to become part of the Education Partnership North East. The Partnership was solely focussed in the North East and worked to strengthen further education provision and shared back office services. It was agreed at his meeting that we would receive regular updates from the College on their progress.

4.3.4 **Current Performance** – by July 2020, we had moved to virtual meetings as a result of the pandemic. This did not prevent the Committee from carrying out its role of scrutinising current performance. The report provided details of performance for Education and Skills (E&S) and Children’s Social Care (CSC) up to the end of the 2019/20 financial year and the budgetary position for services within the committee’s terms of reference. There was specific data on exclusions following the work of the Exclusions Task and Finish Group.

4.4 **Monitoring Reports** - in addition to the issues highlighted in paragraph 4.3, the Committee received the following overview reports:

- Corporate Parenting Report
- Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher 2017-18
- Peer Challenge – Care Leavers Service
- Twelve Month MASH Review
- Safeguarding Activity Trends Report (2)
- CIN Census Benchmarking (Safeguarding Activity Trends Annual Report)
- Outcomes of SEND OFSTED – Update
- Summer Activates and Holiday Hunger
- OFSTED Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI)
- JTAI Action Plan
- Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression

- Finance and Performance Six Monthly Report (2)
- Adopt North East
- Annual Report of the Principal Social Worker
- Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board - Annual Report
- Northumberland County Council Fostering Service 2018-2019
- Children Social Care and Universal Credit
- Young Carers
- Director of Education Annual Report
- Annual Test of Assurance
- Youth Service review
- Learning and Skills Service Draft Self-assessment for 2018/2019
- AYSE Academy Evaluation
- MSET Report
- COVID-19

Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson
Chairman - Family and Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Mark Swinburn,
Chairman

4.5 In September 2020, I was appointed Chair of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. I would like to thank my Vice Chair, Ken Stow, the Committee's Scrutiny Officer, Chris Angus, and the Committee's Senior Democratic Services Officer, Lesley Little. I would also like to extend a special thank you to Cath McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director for Adults and Children's Services, and all her team for the hard work they do for Northumberland and its residents.

4.6 The Committee's work programme was influenced by COVID-19 and the Committee received 5 COVID specific reports, including regular updates on the Winter Support Grant. The reports covered the following areas:

4.6.1 COVID Update from the Director of Public

Health - this updated focused on the return of schools and testing arrangements for pupils. Feedback from Headteachers was also shared with the Committee.

4.6.2 **COVID Update from the Director of Public Health** –the Committee were provided with an update on the current epidemiology of COVID-19 within the wider North East population and more in-depth information on the case numbers in young people within Northumberland. Work previously carried out by PHE around supporting schools had been moved to Local Authorities allowing a system to be set up which enabled schools to access advice and support tailored to them.

- 4.6.3 **COVID Recovery Report** – this report set out the Council’s plan for recovery. The Committee focused on Section 5 of the report: Education and Children’s Services. The report highlighted the work the Council was doing to support parents, drawing particular attention to activities of Northumberland Communities Together.
- 4.6.4 **Winter Support Grant** – in December 2020, the Committee received a presentation from Northumberland Communities Together. We discussed the recently issued Winter Support Grant that would support eligible families and the wider community over Christmas, February half term and Easter Holidays up to 31 March. The £992k grant allocated to Northumberland would fully fund free school meals (FSM) during the holidays and would allow further wrap around services to be provided by the Northumberland Communities Together team to reach households in need.
- 4.6.5 **Winter Support Grant (Inc Free School Meals)** – In February 2021, the Committee received an update on the Winter Support Grant and FSM via a written report. Northumberland had a high take up of the Huggg voucher system which had been a very successful and well appreciated way of assisting families. The Communities Together Hub had provided a wrap service also providing additional support to parents with food, utilities, and clothing. The Committee were informed that Northumberland had committed to doubling the fund for those in receipt of FSM and the value of vouchers for each child would be £30 per week. The feedback from both parents and schools had been positive on the use of the vouchers and Headteachers had advised that a significant amount of work had been taken from them allowing them to concentrate on educating pupils. The Committee will continue to receive updates on the allocation of the Winter Support Grant.

4.7 In addition to the above reports the Committee also received the following overview reports:

- Pupil Premium Funding
- Complaints Annual Report 2019/2020 – Adult Social Care, Children’s Social Care, and continuing health care services
- SEND Recovery
- Care Proceedings and Public Law Outline Annual Report on Progression
- Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report
- Free School Meals Presentation
- Annual Report of the Principal Social Worker
- Education Strategy Board Update
- Tootoot Briefing
- Finance and Performance Report
- Adult Learning Service Annual Report: Learning and Skills Service Draft Self-Assessment
- The Role of Schools Forum

- Director of Education Annual report: Key Educational Outcomes – 2019-2020 Academic Year
- Update on School Reorganisation Plan
- Update on Capital Investment in Schools
- School Exclusions
- Children Who Are Electively Home Educated
- Mental Health Support in Schools
- Joint School Improvement Strategy for North of Tyne
- Verbal Update on the Full Reopening of Schools in March 2021

Councillor Mark Swinburn

Chairman - Family and Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

5. POLICY DEVELOPMENTS - IMPACT ON SCRUTINY

- 5.1 The Overview and Scrutiny function will play an important role in subjecting policy proposals to independent analysis and help the Cabinet and its Partners consider the long-term implications of the decisions being taken. Scrutiny can also provide valuable assurance to the public and stakeholders that their views and concerns will be taken into account in the way the new measures are shaped and implemented.
- 5.2 To retain public confidence, it is important that all existing and new forms of service delivery are subject to robust and public accountability. Scrutiny can harness the challenging and investigative aspects of its work together with its positive role in contributing to policy development and the restructuring of local services.

6. WORK PROGRAMMES

- 6.1 The work programmes will continue to be delivered through a number of mechanisms, for example:
- (a) revisiting previous reviews and issues considered, focusing on progress made with recommendations contained in the reports;
 - (b) light touch reviews on particular issues;
 - (c) Task and Finish Working Groups to look at in depth investigations;
 - (d) receiving information on policy/strategy areas as part of their overview function;
 - (e) cross cutting issues will be considered by joint meetings, and
 - (f) referrals from the Cabinet or Full Council.
- 6.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen have regular briefings from Executive Directors, Directors and Service Heads on current and potential issues which may impact on the respective committee's future workload. These meetings are crucial in managing the work programmes, to ensure that

particularly significant issues are given priority.

6.3 In addition, the Council's Business Chair has confirmed the following methods by which members can influence the scrutiny work programme:

6.3.1 **Scrutiny**

- (a) Any scrutiny member can ask for an issue relevant to their remit to be scrutinised by giving notice to the scrutiny officer and notifying the Chairman.
- (b) Any five non-scrutiny members can also request an issue is scrutinised by informing the scrutiny officer and the relevant Chairman.
- (c) These requests then go to the Chairmen's Group for consideration and referral. It might not always be the case that the item requested by a committee member is best suited to that committee, or workloads or overlap may see it given to another committee to consider.
- (d) Occasionally, items are raised that need an in depth study or examination and may be sent to working groups, which, following a review process, may then make recommendations or present their findings to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee to determine how the matter should be further progressed.
- (e) Scrutiny should also respond to any requests from Council or Cabinet to review particular areas of Council activity.

6.3.2 **Pre-scrutiny**

The Administration have kept in place the pre-scrutiny system, whereby the majority of reports to be determined by the Cabinet are first considered for comment by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, the Chairmen's Group may passport a report directly to Cabinet without comment from an OSC, if they believe that there is not anything meaningful that an OSC can contribute to the process. Any comments or recommendations arising from the OSC meeting are presented to the Cabinet by the Committee Chairman prior to the matter being determined.

6.4 It is envisaged that the scrutiny function will continue to contribute positively to policy development, community engagement and participation, performance monitoring and scrutiny of partners and improvements in the services provided.

7. **THEMED SCRUTINY**

There have been two task and finish or working groups operating at times during 2019/21:

- **Improving Health and Fitness - Health and Wellbeing** - In July 2019 the

Committee's report on improving Health and Fitness was presented to Cabinet. The Cabinet commented positively on this example of well organised and constructive scrutiny. The review had produced a thorough and considered report of which the Cabinet supported all the recommendations.

- **Children Permanently Excluded from School and Elective Home Education - Family and Children's Services** - This report was shared with Cabinet in December 2019. Members of the Cabinet spoke in strong support of the work carried out by Scrutiny on this subject and welcomed anything which brought a more strategic approach to the issue. The recommendations detailed in the body of the report were endorsed.

8. CALL-IN

- 8.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committees can exercise their right to call-in, for reconsideration of decisions made, but not yet implemented by the Cabinet. There was one call-in (Financial Support to Advance Northumberland) in 2019/2021, which was rejected by the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC and no further action was required.

9. VISITS

There were no Committee visits during this period.

10. CHALLENGES/AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 10.1 The key challenge for both members and officers this year is to continue to make scrutiny more effective and outcome focused.
- 10.2 To maintain and build on the current levels of member engagement and attendance by focusing on priority issues of concern to members and the County's residents, providing concise information in appropriate formats and offering a range of training and development opportunities which meet member requirements.
- 10.3 To take on board the increased powers and responsibilities of the relevant legislation.
- 10.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committees will continue to monitor the status of their recommendations to Cabinet. The aim, as always, will be to achieve best practice standards and to make a positive contribution to partnership working and service improvement.

11. FURTHER INFORMATION

If members would like to receive a copy of any of the reports referred to above, please contact the Scrutiny Co-ordinator or, for matters relating to the Family and Children's Services and the Health and Wellbeing OSCs, Chris Angus, Scrutiny Officer. Feedback on scrutiny work or suggestions for possible issues to be included in the work programmes are always welcome. Members are invited to contact the Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen or the Scrutiny Co-ordinator.

12. AUTHOR AND CONTACT DETAILS

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