

FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 18TH JANUARY, 2024

Present: Councillor D Burnett in the Chair

Councillors: D Burnett (Vice-Chair), L Caffrey, B Clelland, P Craig, K Henderson, H Kelly, K McCartney, R Mullen, A Ord, M Ord, D Robson and Rachel Walton

Also in Attendance: Councillors: G Haley

Officers: S Dunn, A Houlahan, J Whitehead.

Apologies: Councillors: M Hall, E McMaster, J Mohammed and L Moir

118 Minutes

119 Schools Performance Overview Report

The Committee received a detailed report detailing the position of Gateshead schools in relation to:

- Ofsted Inspection findings for September 2022 - December 2023
- Outcomes of Gateshead students in relation to tests and examinations
- Exclusions in Gateshead for the academic year 2022-2023
- Elective Home Education (Academic Year 2022-23)
- School Attendance (Academic Year 2022-23: Autumn and Spring Term)

Data included in the report relating to OSFTED scores relates to the overall scores given. It was noted that some schools also have outstanding elements and that inspections have been positive.

OFSTED inspections will be paused until the end of January and training needs need to be completed by 19 January 2024. All school inspectors need to receive mandatory training; a majority of the Gateshead School Inspections Team are serving inspectors and do additional training.

Information on permanent exclusions will be included in the next School Performance Overview Report. Concerns were raised by the Committee that permanent exclusions of SEND students are disproportionately high. An advocacy offer is available to parents to challenge permanent exclusions, although few parents challenge exclusions. There are plans to expand this into a wider advocacy offer for parental support.

The Committee discussed home education. There is an expectation that the numbers of students in home education will decrease to match pre pandemic levels. Numbers are beginning to decline, but the reasons for home schooling remain predominantly related to mental health. Prior to the pandemic, reasoning mainly related to religious motivations. Where children are removed from school due to mental health struggles, a connection is maintained with a focus on re integrating students into schooling. Extreme struggles with mental health have been exacerbated by the pandemic and coping levels in schools.

Some concerns were raised about children who are home educated being more at risk of radicalisation. Parents of children being home educated have a staff contact at the Council who reports that parents tend to be engaged with them. This staff member monitors

radicalisation risks and offers a package of support with many opportunities for children to get involved in activities outside of school that will support their education and their return to school. This package runs hand in hand with early help and social services.

RESOLVED:

- i. The Committee considered the positions of schools in relation to the listed sections of the report.
- ii. Further data on home education will be circulated to the Committee.

120 Early Years Sufficiency

A report was presented informing the Committee of the availability and sufficiency of childcare in Gateshead to fulfil the local authority duties as documented within the Childcare Act 2016.

Group early years providers and the number of early education and childcare places they offer have remained stable with only very small changes in number. However, the rate of decline in the number of childminders continues. In 2016, there were 131 Ofsted-registered childminders in Gateshead but by 2023, the number had fallen to 66. (A reduction of 50% over the seven-year period). This trend is reflected nationally. There is no current evidence that the loss of these places has had any impact on sufficiency in Gateshead.

At their most recent inspection, 94% of all Gateshead providers were judged as either good, outstanding, or met. 13 There are 13 providers not yet graded by Ofsted (2 After School Clubs and 11 Childminders). There was one day nursery (Busy Bees in Blaydon) that was graded as Inadequate at the time of the assessment, but this has been re-inspected and is now graded as good. There was also one pre-school (Lyndhurst) graded as Inadequate at the time of the assessment, but this has been re-inspected and is now graded as Requires Improvement. First inspections are usually carried out within a provider's first 30 months of operation, but there have been some delays to this timescale due to the pandemic.

The following issues were highlighted for consideration:

- Declining early years population. For example, between 2016 and 2022 the number of two-year-olds living in Gateshead fell from 2,289 to 1,897. A reduction of 17% over a six-year period. The wards most affected by the falling birth rate are Blaydon, Felling and Deckham.
- The number of two-year olds eligible for a funded place is reducing, partly due to the falling birth rate and partly because the government has not increased eligibility thresholds in line with inflation or increases in minimum wage. For example, most working parents are eligible because they claim Universal Credit. However, their annual net earned income must not exceed £15,400. There were 935 Gateshead children eligible for a funded two-year-old place in July 2018. There are now 706. (January 2023). A reduction of 24% over the last five years.
- Overall, 91% of providers report that they have vacancies and there is a direct correlation between low occupancy and the level of sustainability.
- The number of providers and the number of places on offer have generally remained stable with only relatively small changes. However, the number of childminders continues to decline. From July 2016 to July 2023, the number of childminders has reduced by 50%.
- Media articles frequently refer to a national crisis in the Early Years sector. In Gateshead, providers report that agencies are unable to provide supply staff, vacancies are not able to be filled and people with lower levels of skills and experience are being appointed into leadership roles. It seems likely that this will ultimately have a detrimental effect on quality. 90% of Gateshead's group childcare providers agreed that there was a crisis within Early Years, 77% agreed that there was a staff recruitment crisis and 51% agreed that there was a staff retention crisis.

RESOLVED:

- i. The contents of the report and Childcare Sufficiency Report 2023 was noted.
- ii. The Committee approved the publication of the Sufficiency Report on Gateshead Council's website.
- iii. The Committee agreed to bring the report to the attention of Councillors and Portfolio holders.

121 Regional Adoption Agency Annual Report

A report was given providing a summary of the work undertaken for children with plans of adoption within Gateshead Local Authority.

The reporting period 2022/2023 represents the fourth full year of operation by Adopt North East. Performance information for 2022/2023 evidences a consistent level of demand for forever families. This is consistent with the partnership's higher

than national average children in care population. Unfortunately, over the year such robust demand for adoptive placements has not been matched by stable or increasing supply of available adopters. In 2022/2023 outturn represents the lowest number of applications to adopt received by the agency since it started. The links between adoption, cost of living crisis, employment, and lifestyle changes since COVID 19 has undoubtedly suppressed interest in adopting.

The reporting period between 01/04/2022 to 31/03/2023 summaries Adopt North East overall performance:

- Match 103 children
- Placed 103 children, 19 of which were Early Permanence Placements
- Supported 105 children to be adopted
- Received 366 contacts about becoming and adopter
- Approved 59 adopters

In 2022/2023 the number of children with a plan of adoption reversed was one. The reason for reversal was that maternal grandparents presented late (at the Final Hearing) expressing a wish to care for their grandchild.

RESOLVED:

- i. The Committee considered the report.

122 Work Programme

The Committee requested that a response to child poverty be added to the Work Programme.

It was noted in the discussion of item F120 that a report would be brought to a future committee on school readmission rates.

RESOLVED:

- i. The Work Programme was agreed.
- ii. An item responding to child poverty will be added to the 2024/25 work programme.
- iii. An item on school readmission rates will be added to the 2024/25 work programme.

Thursday, 18th January, 2024

Chairman at the meeting on
Thursday, 18 January 2024