

CITY OF DONCASTER COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 14TH MARCH, 2024

A MEETING of the CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL was held at the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICE, WATERDALE, DONCASTER DN1 3BU, on THURSDAY, 14TH MARCH, 2024 at 4.30 PM

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Leanne Hempshall

Councillors Tim Needham, Bob Anderson, Laura Bluff, Steve Cox and Charlie Hogarth

Co-optee – Antoinette Drinkhill (Church of England Education Representative)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Rebecca Wall, Service Director, Children, Young People and Families
Jane Cresswell, Head of Service Equity and Inclusion
Amelia Clark-Allan – Young Advisor
Connie Rushton – Young Advisor

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Susan Durant, Tracey Moran and Rob Reid

| | | <u>ACTION</u> |
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| 17. | <u>TO CONSIDER THE EXTENT, IF ANY, TO WHICH THE PUBLIC AND PRESS ARE TO BE EXCLUDED FROM THE MEETING.</u> | |
| | There were no items of business where the press and public were to be excluded from the meeting. | |
| 18. | <u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY.</u> | |
| | There were no declarations made. | |
| 19. | <u>MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 7TH DECEMBER 2023</u> | |
| | RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 th December 2023, agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. | |
| 20. | <u>PUBLIC STATEMENTS</u> | |

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| | There were no public statements made. | |
| 21. | <u>CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE DEMAND MANAGEMENT AND NEGLECT</u> | |
| | <p>The Assistant Director for Childrens Social Care presented a report relating to the demand and impact of child neglect at both a national and local level.</p> <p>It was outlined and recognised there was a continued increase in demand in childrens social care and early help intervention. The Assistant Director stated that as a strategic partnership to support growing demand, awareness of the issues associated with impact of neglect in Doncaster against national figures, was imperative, to address and put in place required support whether it be early help or child protection. The parental factor, including activities they could be suffering from or associating themselves with, could contribute to child neglect, was explained. It was stressed that the difficulties some families faced would have been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, unemployment and the Covid pandemic.</p> <p>With regard to the data set provided the Assistant Director explained that the children protection numbers for Doncaster were positive and identified where the local authority sat in comparison to all local authorities.</p> <p>The following areas were addressed by the Panel in detail:</p> <p><u>Locality of family hubs</u> – In response to a question relating to how the sites were chosen it was explained that a mapping, need and resource exercise was undertaken to establish locations that would best support communities’ need. It was recognised that a number of family hubs were well established and embedded within the local authority’s communities. A Member thanked the Assistant Director for the hard work undertaken through the family hubs.</p> <p><u>Deprivation rankings</u> – it was highlighted by the Panel that Doncaster ranked 41 in the deprivation ranking and questioned whether this was a percentile or 41st of all local authorities across the country. It was explained that it was dependent on which report the figures were identified in as there were different ways this number was utilised. For this report the figure provided was 41 out of the broader national authorities. The Panel was asked to air caution with the data provided because the figure used was from 2019 and due for refresh.</p> <p><u>Children experiencing homelessness and not in affordable housing</u> – It was explained that for children in care the local authority had a robust homeless protocol with St Leger Homes of Doncaster, particularly if young people aged 16 and 17 were at risk within their family, they</p> | |

could be provided a placement through St Leger Homes or assisted living. It was acknowledged that some vulnerable young people would not access this support until they had “sofa surfed”. It was stressed that the local authority worked with partner organisations to ensure a housing offer was available to young people if required and over the last 12 months 7 young people had sought housing provision support.

When a young person was provided a housing placement they were provided tenancy support, depending on the level of need or assessment it could be a personal visit at their home. Initially a young person was provided with high support, with some still requiring sleeping staff with the ultimate aim of preparing them for their own property and tenancy.

With regard to the safety of properties used for young people it was confirmed to the Panel that a quality assurance and safety visit was undertaken by the Commissioning Team in line with a safety framework. Young People’s opinions were also taken into account in addition to consultation with partners.

In response to placing young adults in areas where there was a risk of high anti-social behaviour, it was explained that there were two forms of accommodation used. Ofsted registered and for these properties a local area risk assessment would be required and include liaison with the Communities Team and Police to provide a good understanding of what the areas were like. It was also stressed that when a children’s home was established, contact with the safeguarding business unit and partners was required and if found to be inappropriate it would be recommended that children were not be placed in certain areas. It was stressed that links with the Communities Team was extremely strong which assisted with intelligence provision about each area considered.

Demand management and the Working Together 2023 publication – A Member referred to this publication and associated requirements under sections 17 and 47, with his opinion being a positive move but with challenges. He continued to ask if requirements under this would reduce demand over time and what the impact would be on demand management in terms of neglect.

The Assistant Director explained that when discussed with the DfE it was clear that the local family help offer needed to be well defined by the Safeguarding Partnership. It was outlined that new guidance had not made a change to statutory guidance, with Section 17’s being led by a Social Worker which had always been the common practice and rule. The Working Together publication gave permission to consider whether a Social Worker was best placed to manage children in need. It was the Assistant Director’s opinion that a Social Worker was best person to lead on a child protection investigation. It was stressed that work was currently being undertaken with partners and across the region to address the position with a clearer picture expected by

September 2024. The work being undertaken in relation to this issue by the local authority was welcomed by Members.

Support for families – in response to a question it was explained that with regard to lead practitioners a huge amount of work was undertaken through schools and communities and would make the decision about when to undertake family support. It was noted that education colleagues were the strongest partner in terms of lead practitioners and the work undertaken was extremely positive. With regard to health, there had been a recent surge in health visitors taking a lead practitioner role and huge engagement with Early Help and CAHMS.

With regard to comments relating to schools being education establishments and now undertaking social care, it was outlined that early years funding had been increased for providers to work closely with schools, particularly ensuring children were school ready. This element of work was generally undertaken by Early Help co-ordinators employed by the Local Authority.

Children in care in Doncaster – In response to a request for an explanation relating to the variation in numbers on the graph on page 18 of the report, it was explained that when addressing children who were looked after, a key part was quality of intervention. This information could be plotted against when the local authority was classed as good or inadequate, and following intervention numbers generally increased due to being very risk adverse. It was explained that currently there was an emerging challenge with adolescents facing neglect, maybe following many points of intervention. It was noted that the Families Together Team was undertaking intensive multi-disciplinary work relating to the reunification of children returning to family.

With regard to children entering care due to neglect, it was noted that South Yorkshire Police had undertaken a specialist programme of work to recognise neglect, and had led to children being brought into care under Police Protection Orders. Some of these children returned home quickly following investigations with support where required.

It was stressed that the largest influx of children in need at the current time was unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and this was addressed in detail later in the meeting.

A Member questioned if workloads were increasing or reducing for Social Workers. In response it was explained that a monthly performance meeting addressing caseloads was held, but aired caution that the numbers of cases allocated may not create a high caseload, it was more the complexity of a case. It was acknowledged that there had been workforce instability at Doncaster, however the Council now had the right levels of staff to provide a good stable service, following

services, what support they were seeking allowing quality evidence prior to decisions being made.

It was stressed that employees and the Local Authority's partners had a strong understanding of the decision making thresholds with robust oversight and support for staff being in place. Newly appointed staff held smaller caseloads with strong supervision. Regular moderation of cases was undertaken to identify any possible poor practice which would be addressed immediately and no cases were closed without Team Manager oversight.

Workforce and staff retention – it was outlined that Social Worker vacancies had reduced significantly with staff only leaving to progress their career. Currently there were approximately 50 agency staff employed with a number wishing to convert to full time employees.

Care Leavers – in response to a number of queries relating to this issue, it was explained that when a young person reaches the age when they leave care, experiences for each young person varied. The Personal Advisors and case workers would assess what each young person required, with some preferring no contact whereas other wished for strong support. There was a set visiting pattern agreed to ensure the right level of contact was in place. Young people, were automatically provided with a full level of support, for example, how to make appointments to see your GP to more complex issues relating to housing applications and finance management. It was noted that a visit every 8 weeks was the required "keep in touch" rate but some young people preferred to be contacted through other means. The young person must be informed of the level of support available for them to access.

It was noted that feedback from young people leaving care showed that having a drop in session with the Department of Work and Pensions was really helpful and a place where they felt comfortable to seek assistance. Working with partners to provide additional support of this nature would reduce the reliance a young person would need from their Personal Advisor.

In response to concern expressed with regard to how easily it was for a young person to contact support, it was explained that a Personal Advisor was assigned to them alongside the daily duty and daily drop in service. If a young person lived out of area they could access the same services in the area where they lived with the arrangement that if a reimbursement was required this would be met by the Local Authority.

With regard to new technology, it was report that a company had worked with the local authority and provided 50 telephone sim cards for young care leavers as part of their leaving care pathway plan, the take-up of which would be monitored to support future need. It was agreed

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| <p>that the current uptake would be provided to the Panel following the meeting. It was stressed that not all young adults required a sim card for many reasons, for example, in employment, accessing training and bursaries with many opportunities available to them, and some care leavers also had a lot of support from their families.</p> <p>The provision of leisure passes had also been made available with the condition that the young people evidence the impact activities had on their well-being to secure more passes on a regular basis. Young people were also focusing on a “Quarterly Questions” event and addressed well-being, where the concern of loneliness would mostly likely be identified through this route.</p> <p>In response to a Young Advisor questioning how the Local Authority was signposting the positive services to young adults, it was explained that an interactive local offer was available but was an area of information provision it wished to review. The main point of contact was often the Personal Advisor who would provide such information. Some young people were also very actively involved in social gatherings and events for example the Carers Football Team but others required a bit of guidance and support.</p> <p>It was clarified that the number of care leavers were identified on a monthly basis and the figure of 237 referred to in the report was identified as of the end of January 2023.</p> <p><u>Number of children in Social Care</u> – In relation to paragraph 26 of the report, where it referred to numbers increasing, it was explained that one of the key issues children’s services addressed was to ensure its services were effective. To do this the re-referral rate and reasons were monitored to ensure programmes of intervention were correct. It was noted that it would take an appropriate amount of time to collate this information.</p> <p>With regard to how the positives of social care intervention with families was addressed, Members noted that it was about families understanding the realities and what help was available. It was stressed that social care intervention would not automatically mean their child/children would be taken into care. The Assistant Director referred to the Ofsted focused visit where the Local Authority had been challenged about accumulative harm. She explained that mechanisms were in place to address this issue and referred to the function of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) that would make a decision to override parental consent if it was felt appropriate.</p> <p>The Assistant Director assured the Panel that from audit activity the Local Authority was confident that it had moved from requires improvement to good, focusing on clearer outcomes for families and children but it needed to be confident that the best care and support was provided.</p> | People and Families |
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| <p><u>Care for children seeking asylum</u> – It was confirmed that Central Government funding was available to support children arriving in Doncaster and details of this would be provided following the meeting. It was explained that if a child arrived in Doncaster through the National Transfer Scheme, they would be part of the South Yorkshire Intake. However, some children arrived spontaneously or placed in adult accommodation but following assessment were also found to be a young person. It was noted that there had been a significant rise of children placed in hotels, with 20 presenting themselves in a very short space of time. Doncaster, at the time of the meeting had 55 asylum seeking children in it's care.</p> <p>It was recognised that placement for these young adults was challenging as they required semi-dependent accommodation with average costs rising from £900 to £1200 per placement three years ago rising to now costing £3,200, with Government funding not meeting this need creating a large funding gap. It was reported that the Executive Director for Children, Young People and Families chaired the regional strategic partnership addressing reasonable costs and good care alongside the Department for Education.</p> <p>In response to a query with regard to spontaneous arrivals, it was explained that not too many arrived through this nature in Doncaster compared to other areas, for example in Hull, however they could be picked up at Service Stations or motorways across the areas network. Some young people could have been trafficked and were identified through criminal investigations but Members noted these were very small numbers and the majority of young people seeking asylum were managed through the National Transfer Scheme. It was noted that some young people arrived with identity documentation, yet presentation through hotels has found that the young people may have lied about their age when at the assessment centres. They would do this to ensure they were provided with accommodation and when they arrived in Doncaster, after further scrutiny, were found to be, for example, 15 years old. It was noted that two Social Workers were required to undertake the assessments and the team had an excellent relationship with Border Force. Members were pleased to learn that when there was a surge in numbers arriving in Doncaster, Barnsley Borough Council provided tremendous support that included transport and translation services.</p> <p>It was clarified that with regard to all young adults leaving care or seeking asylum they had informed the local authority that reaching 18, their life naturally started to change dramatically and to lose family support and accommodation in a short period of time it was dreadfully tough.</p> <p>The Panel learnt that Askham Court would shortly be opening to provide a 12 week supported living programme to prepare young adults</p> | <p>Service Director Children Young People and Families</p> |
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| | <p>to move into their own tenancy. A strong partnership agreement was in place with St Leger Homes for safe tenancies, including shared tenancies to help with the cost of living, with the local authority providing robust tenancy support. It was noted that other support opportunities were already in place across the borough.</p> <p><u>Investment in Doncaster residential placements</u> – Members were pleased to note the positive progress in reducing high cost external residential placements but expressed concerns that some communities may not be accepting and asked what was being undertaken to promote community support. It was explained that when the Local Authority investigated placing looked after children or care leavers in specific areas, the resilience in areas was addressed. engagement would be undertaken with Councillors and communities to break down negative barriers but also create confidence and a pleasant setting for the children and young adults to live. As expected some areas required more consultation and engagement than others and residents opinions would always be taken on board. A Member stated that these children and young people could be very much misunderstood and they were not in care due to their behaviour but just wishing to have a decent life.</p> <p><u>RESOLVED that:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1. the discussion and report, be noted 2. the officers be thanked for the information provided and questions answered; 3. ward data relating to deprivation figures, be provided to Member of the Panel; and 4. to provide assurance to the Panel that the needs of care leavers are being met, what is currently offered, what an average from a Personal Advisor visit looks like, how ancillary support is provided and any gaps in service, be provided to the Panel. | <p>Service Director Children Young People and Families</p> |
| 22. | <p><u>OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PLAN AND THE COUNCILS FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS</u></p> | |
| | <p>The Senior Governance Officer presented the Scrutiny Work Plan and Council’s Forward Plan of Key Decisions to the Panel for it’s consideration. She also requested that if Members were aware of any areas they wished to give consideration to in the new Civic Year, to inform both the Scrutiny Team and the Chair ahead of the Panel’s work planning meeting.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the report, be noted.</p> | |

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Dated: _____