

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 11th JANUARY 2024 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Samuels in the Chair

Councillors Chapman, Crosby, Curtis, Dunn, McDonough, P. Smith, D. Snowdon, D.E. Snowdon and Thornton, together with Mrs A. Blakey.

Also in attendance:-

Ms. Jill Colbert, Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, TfC.

Ms. Karen Davison, Director of Early Help, TfC

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Smart Cities and Enabling Services.

Ms Natalie Effard, Service Manager, Family Hubs & Family Support, TfC.

Ms. Stacy Hodgkinson, Strategic Services Manager, TfC.

Ms. Majella McCarthy, Director of Social Care, TfC

Mr. David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Smart Cities & Enabling Services.

Ms. Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Coordinator, Smart Cities & Enabling Services.

Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Gibson.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 30th November 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 30th November 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

TfC Meaningful Measures Report December 2023

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with performance information as at December 2023 in relation to the following Meaningful Measures: -

i) I Feel Safer and Supported.

ii) I Feel Happy at Home and Feel Connected to People that Matter to Me.

- iii) I Take a Lead in My Plans and TfC Makes Sure Workers can Support Me.
- iv) I Feel Healthier, Join Activities that are Fun and My Ideas Help TfC to be Creative

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager presented the report highlighting the areas of focus together with any trends or themes arising and addressed questions and comments from Members thereon.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor D. Snowdon regarding how long in general it took to issue an EHCP, Ms Hodgkinson replied that she did not have that figure to hand but would provide details following the meeting. Ms Colbert added that whilst the figure of 60% hitting the 20 week mark was below the performance target it was within the range of tolerance. There were many Local Authorities that would submit a figure of zero given the volume of demand. In this regard Sunderland's performance was good in the national context. There were external factors that would impact on performance such as school holidays, especially the long summer break.

Councillor P. Smith referred to the figure regarding the % of Cared for Children that have a missing incident and asked if there were any new reasons becoming apparent as to why the children went missing? Ms McCarthy replied there were no obvious new reasons and missing incidents still tended to be to result of the traditional factors such as the pull of a peer group, where the child would rather be out with friends rather than return to the home on time. It tended to involve a specific cohort and TfC were continuing to work with them. Key to this was the adoption of a nurturing approach towards the young person rather than for example, sending them straight to their room.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby, Ms Davison explained action taken to track children 'missing education' i.e no longer on the school roll and clarified the difference between this and children who were periodically absent from school or truanting. In addition, Ms Davison also explained the actions that could be taken by TfC in relation to electively home educated children.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Ms Hodgkinson for her attendance, and it was:

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Early Help Directorate Annual Report 2022/23

Ms Karen Davison (Director of Early Help TfC) presented a report of the Director of Children's Services (copy circulated) in respect of the above matter, which provided the Committee with a detailed commentary on the Early Help Directorate Annual Report for 2022/23 and an update on the current position with regard to Family Hubs.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor Thornton welcomed the report and in particular the hard work undertaken to bring about the achievements highlighted in the executive summary.

Councillor Dunn echoed Councillor Thornton's comments and in particular the level of the detail included in the report. He referred to the commentary on page 42 of the agenda papers which stated, "Recording of referrals has enabled the team to identify key areas of concern including an increased number of referrals for SEN young people aged 21+ who are no longer able to remain at college or training and have limited employment or training options due to lack of local provision or supported internships. Increase in the number of young people with mental health concerns who are not attending school, but because they are not working with or known to other teams, they do not meet the vulnerable criteria so are not on the team's radar until the summer and school identifies them as potential NEET" He asked if there was anything that could be done to address this?

On the basis of 'you don't know what you don't know, Ms Davison replied that there was not a lot that could be done but acknowledged that it remained a concern. In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Dunn regarding support for NEETS, Ms Colbert explained that there was a need for creativity regarding the use of the Council's budgets and highlighted the supporting internships programme led by Simon Marshall and the focusing of available UKSPF funding into projects with the aim of getting all adults of employment age into employment.

Councillor P. Smith referred to the improved data collection in relation to NEETs and asked if this was provided through Liquid Logic system? In reply Ms Davison advised that it came via a Capita system. In response to a follow up question from Councillor P. Smith, Ms Colbert confirmed that Liquid Logic remained a very useful tool for TfC particularly in the way it drove data.

Councillor P. Smith noted the reference to 'Supporting Families' and asked if this was formerly the Troubled Families team? Ms Davison confirmed that it was. She informed the Committee that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) operated a 'payment by results' grant funding scheme. Under the scheme TfC were set a target to identify and evidence that it had made a significant difference to families over a 12 month period. In the past claims had only drawn down around 11% of the total funding available. TfC's performance had now improved to the extent that the target of 427 supported families set by DLUHC for the period of 1 April 2022 to 31 March had been reached by January 2023 allowing TfC to claim 100% of the available funding.

Councillor McDonough referred to the means tested free school meals, noting that the rejection rate seemed very high and asked if unsuccessful claimants were offered advice going forward. Ms Davison confirmed that they were and that this was provided via the Family Advice Service who operated an 'every contact counts' approach. Families would be provided with advice and signposted to benefits advisors and or support available in the voluntary sector. Mrs Blakely informed the Committee that a member of the Early Help Team attended her school one day per week. The Early Help worker had assisted one particular family to claim back dated benefits of £3,000. This was the sort of specialist advice that Mrs Blakey would have been unable to provide herself.

Councillor Crosby referred to discussion at a previous meeting regarding the issues experienced by TfC in trying to cope with an unexpected influx of families who had travelled to Sunderland by accompanying a family member who had arrived on a Student Visa. Ms Davison advised that TfC had now established contacts within the particular community and through the family hubs. Now the families had settled, the

situation was a lot quieter than it was 12 months ago. The legislation had since changed and the visas issued to foreign students no longer allowed family members to travel with them.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Curtis, Ms Davison explained the referral process in respect of cases of bullying. Mrs Blakely added that within her school cases were dealt with through the School Counsellor and Early Help worker.

There being no further questions Ms Davison introduced Ms Natalie Effard, TfC's Service Manager for Family Hubs and Family Support, who provided the Committee with a comprehensive presentation on the development of Sunderland's Family Hubs including:

- The locations of the four recently opened Hubs in Washington, Bunny Hill, Hetton and Thorney Close together with the fifth which was shortly to open in Hendon,
- The Activities provided,
- The oversight provided at each Hub by a Parent Carer Panel,
- The development of a bespoke Sunderland parenting programme (the ABC Course) in conjunction with Sunderland University following special permission granted by the DfE / DHSC,
- The work of the Community Engagement Team,
- The digital offer provided through the Hubs,
- The activity to be provided following Sunderland's successful application for 'Trailblazer Status',
- Staffing and Recruitment,
- Governance and Assurance arrangements

Ms Effard together with Ms Colbert and Ms Davison then addressed questions and comments from Members in relation to:

- The ability of the Hubs to provide early help with speech and language, to avoid the need of a formal referral to the speech and language therapy service,
- The social prescribing provision,
- The source and use of grant funding,
- Initial feedback on the operation of the Hubs
- The promotion of the Hubs through social media and the use of posters / leaflets containing QR code links.

In addition, the Chair referred to the report on the Speech and Language Therapy Service considered at a previous meeting and asked that an update was submitted back to the Committee in due course.

Ms Colbert advised that she would provide a link for Members to the 'My Best Life' webpage referred to in the presentation.

The Committee having congratulated Ms Davison on a successful Annual Report and Ms Effard for her work in the development of the family hubs it was :-

3. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted.

Provision of the Short Breaks Service

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation on the current position regarding the planning process and engagement with families in respect of the Short Breaks Service as requested by the Committee at its meeting held on 2 November 2023.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Majella McCarthy, Director of Social Care delivered the presentation which informed Members that it was hoped to open the home (Red Gables) in Autumn 2024 and which would be fully staffed by 28 TfC employees. Planning permission had been submitted with a decision expected by 14th February 2024. External alterations would be required, making the property accessible for wheelchair users (ramps, low threshold doors, automatic doors etc) and adding new fencing around the garden. Internal alterations would also be made to suit the needs of the building users and would include adding accessible bathrooms and enlarged bathroom with specialist equipment. New kitchen, sensory room, office, and new finishes throughout. The timeframe was based on necessary legal activity including registering the home with Ofsted, consultation with families and the team, essential renovation work, and the recruitment of staff.

The property has extensive outdoor space giving plenty of opportunities to add facilities and would be a nurturing environment for children where they would be able to develop their independence while families were given a moment to recharge, knowing their children were safe and cared for.

With regard to current support, all children and their carers had been allocated a social worker from TfC who had been and would continue to work closely with them to explore all support options available until Red Gables opened. A letter had been sent to every family with SEND needs to inform them of the purchase of the Home and the submission of the planning application together with an invite to an in-person meeting in January 2024 to show them a video of the property, explain the plans and to provide updates on timeframes. TfC would also be asking for volunteers to join its parent/carer groups to discuss topics with them such as use of the outdoor space, technology, and services on an ongoing basis to ensure the space was custom designed to best meet the needs of children and young people in Sunderland and their families.

Interim support to children and parents/carers would include:

- For those children with the greatest need, where TfC also had parental consent, nights at the Ark Short Break Care in Redcar had been spot purchased. For some families, TfC had also funded transport provided by Ark. Ark was a relatively new, 4 bed short break home which was Ofsted registered and could meet the needs of children aged between 4 and 18 years of age.
- TfC also had a small number of children accessing fostering short breaks and it was hoped to recruit more short break foster carers.
- TfC had 8 young people accessing Grace House, who were 17 years of age and who would soon be transitioning to adult social care. TfC had

collaborated with Adult Social Care and SCAS, to offer these young people overnight short breaks in an adult, CQC registered provision to assist with their transition and reduce disruption. Not all 8 had taken up the offer, with some preferring to utilise PA support, but most were now beginning to access the adult provision.

- PA support was TfC's primary alternative for children and young people, including overnight PA support. In recognition of the cost of activities for families when children were spending time with their PA's, TFC had offered a small activity budget (10% uplift on the PA rate) which parent/carers had been able to apply for. This was being paid monthly until March 2024 when it would be reviewed. In addition to this, where overnight PA support was required but PA was not able/willing to use their own home, TfC had provided a personal budget to fund the booking of alternative accommodation for PA's or parent/carers; some families had opted for the child to remain in their own home with the PA and the parent/carer had booked a night in a hotel to utilise their short break.
- In addition to the above, TfC expanded the Family Care & Support Team to provide Leisure Link outreach support in the community (this tended to be helpful for younger children) and made use of the Breathing Space offer. For a very small number of children, TfC were spot purchasing support from an independent care provider to provide community outreach support.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair as to whether any difficulties were expected in recruiting 28 members of staff given the current issues in the market for care staff, the Committee was informed that recruitment in terms of short break care tended to attract a different cohort. There was a relatively lengthy lead in time, allowing for careful thought around a marketing strategy and to plan accordingly. Although 28 posts were a lot they were not all full time positions.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chair thanked Ms McCarthy for her presentation, and it was:

4. RESOLVED that the information be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2023/24

The Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the development of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2023/24 and appended a copy of the programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report and briefed the Committee on the current position regarding those items already scheduled on the work programme and those waiting to be programmed in on a suitable date.

The Chair referred to discussion at the previous meeting regarding a proposal that the Committee looked into Government policy changes to provide a phased expansion of existing childcare support for eligible working parents and suggested

that an initial scoping report was submitted to either of Committee's meetings at the beginning or end of February.

Discussion ensued on accommodating the request in the context of the items already scheduled on the work programme. Ms Colbert advised that she would liaise with Mr Diamond and Ms Robinson after the meeting to find an appropriate solution.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from the 2nd January 2024.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Committee was advised that if Members had any issues to raise or required further detail on any of the items included in the notice, (that were within the purview of the Committee), they should contact Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer for initial assistance.

6. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

There being no further items of business, the Chairman closed the meeting having thanked members and officers for their attendance and contributions.

(Signed) A. SAMUELS,
Chairman.