

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 30TH NOVEMBER 2023 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Samuels in the Chair

Councillors Chapman, Crosby, Gibson, McDonough, D.E. Snowdon and Thornton.

Also in attendance:-

Ms. Nichola Burn, Strategic Service Manager, Family Care and Support, TfC

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

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

Ms. Stacy Hodgkinson, Strategic Services Manager, TfC.

Ms Lorraine Hughes. Public Health Consultant, Health, Housing and Communities

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

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

Ms Samantha Start, Public Health Lead, Health, Housing and Communities

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Curtis, Dunn, P. Smith and D. Snowdon.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 2nd November 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 2nd November 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

TfC Customer Feedback Six Month Summary Report April to September 2023

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with information relating to the compliments and complaints received by Together for Children during the period 1st April 2023 to 30th September 2023.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

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

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby, Ms Hodgkinson advised that it was difficult to explain the recent rise in complaints however it certainly reflected the increase in demand both in respect of SEND and Social Care services.

Councillor Gibson praised the report as very encouraging and if anything underrated the performance of the Service. He referred to paragraph 8.6 in respect of stage two complaints and asked if the 8% that could be neither proved or disproved were kept on file. Ms Hodgkinson confirmed that they were not but at the conclusion of the investigation were recorded as no fault.

With regard to an enquiry from Councillor Gibson regarding the payment of a £7,620 financial remedy in respect of a SEND stage 2 complaint, Ms Hodgkinson described the circumstances behind the complaint. The Investigating Officer had upheld the complaint because they found a school should have been consulted as parental preference school for their son. This would have avoided the action taken by the parent to enlist the services of a solicitor and spend a considerable sum doing so. It was a unique case and did not relate to any trends that would give cause for concern.

Councillor McDonough referred to the comment in paragraph 4.2 regarding initial contacts that stated "Through responding to contacts at the outset, we have helped 78 (73%) of our customers to receive satisfactory responses and resolutions" and asked how the phrase "satisfactory responses" was defined? Ms Hodgkinson replied that it meant the customer was happy with the response received and did not want to escalate the complaint.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor McDonough, Ms Hodgkinson advised that with regard to 'abusive, unreasonable, persistent or vexatious complainants' they were generally people who had exhausted the complaints process, remained unhappy and were unable to accept the outcome.

In response to a further enquiry from Councillor McDonough, Ms Hodgkinson advised that all recommendations arising from a complaint investigation were logged and the learning disseminated as appropriate. This would either be targeted, if recommendations were service specific, or across the organisation if the learning was more general and useful for all.

Councillor Dianne Snowdon stated that her career as a member of Scrutiny Committees went back a long way and there was a period when the performance reports looked very different and were anything but positive. The improvements over recent years were very good and reflected well on the Team at TfC. She therefore wanted to focus on the compliments rather than complaints and drew the Committees attention to paragraph 3 of the report and the various compliments received. She asked how were these compliments fed back to the staff concerned? Ms Hodgkinson replied that the manager of the member of staff would be made aware of the compliment who would inform the member of staff accordingly. Ms Burn

also informed the Committee of how good practice and compliments were celebrated within TfC generally.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding the support provided for Social Workers during the complaints process, Ms Burn advised that Senior managers were usually aware of potential situations developing prior to a complaint being submitted. Risk management meetings would be held, and security assessed. Often pool cars would be used by social workers in cases that gave cause for concern to prevent the homes of Social Workers being identified via vehicle registration. Expertise from colleagues in Occupation Health would also be used to support staff.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman commended the report and thanked Ms Hodgkinson for her attendance.

2. RESOLVED that the Feedback report be received and noted

Health Related Behaviour Survey Findings – Academic Year 2022/23

The Executive Director of Health, Housing and Communities submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an overview of the findings of the recent Health Related Behaviour Survey conducted in the summer term of 2023.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

To complement the report, Samantha Start, Public Health Lead, provided the Committee with a comprehensive presentation which highlighted the key finding of the survey, comparisons between the results of the 2023 survey and the previous survey undertaken in 2021, action undertaken in relation to the priorities identified following the 2021 survey and how priorities from 2023 would be addressed moving forward.

Ms Smart together with Lorraine Hughes, Public Health Consultant, then addressed questions and comments from Members.

Councillor Crosby referred to a growing reluctance in young people to wear helmets when cycling and asked if there were any plans to tackle this. Ms Hughes replied that there was actually a decline in the numbers of young people cycling however this was offset by an increase in the use of scooters. The importance of wearing a helmet was always picked up in the prevention work undertaken by the service and also tied in with the work undertaken with RoSPA. There were various different cycling schemes operating in the city, including one recently established in the north area, all of which emphasised the importance of helmets.

Councillor Crosby referred to the 35% accident rate and asked why it was so high. Ms Hughes replied that the data contained in the report was self-reported. In terms of accidents the patterns changed with age. There was a greater percentage of trips and falls amongst the very young. Accidental poisoning tended to be highest among young children. With regard to people knocked down in road traffic accidents again this tended to feature young people, with incidents increasing as children grew older

and became more independent. There were also seasonal factors to take into account such as an increase in accidents during the darker nights.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby, Ms Hughes confirmed that lack of access to a dentist was a growing problem for children. The latest data showed a drop of 10% leaving a figure of approximately 40% of children who didn't have access to a dentist. Unfortunately, Public Health had little direct influence in the matter with responsibility lying with the Integrated Care Board.

Councillor Snowdon asked if it was possible that the data could be broken down the level of the wards comprising each of the Council's Area Committees as it would be very useful to the Committees in informing the development of their area plans and driving forward the plan priorities. Ms Hughes confirmed that this would not be a problem.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Snowdon regarding how schools were selected to take part in the survey, Ms Start advised that all schools were invited to take part, however the scheme was voluntary, and some schools chose not to participate. Public Health heavily encouraged take up as did Simon Marshall through his direct contact with schools. Councillor Snowdon stated that it would be useful for school governors to be made aware in advance of the circulation of the survey so they could help promote uptake. Ms Hughes replied that she believed the information was included in the Governors' Handbook however she would check and rectify any omission.

Councillor Snowdon referred to the question "Which statement describes you best? - I am happy with my weight as it is / I would like to lose weight / I would like to put on weight" and expressed concern regarding the wording given the social pressures placed on young people in respect of appearance. Ms Hughes replied that it was a difficult question to ask and to find a satisfactory form of wording, however the service always tried to promote the concept of a positive body image that was not about shape but about being fit, healthy and strong.

Councillor Snowdon questioned the timing of the survey and queried that if it was undertaken in September, wouldn't later in school year be a better time after the children had settled in following the long summer break? Ms Hughes replied that she believed September was the date when the results were published rather than when the survey was conducted. She believed the survey was undertaken late in the summer term once the exam season had concluded, however she would check that this was the case and report back.

With regard to an enquiry from Councillor Gibson regarding priority 4 as detailed on page 58 of the agenda, Ms Hughes confirmed that a member of the team was working with the Special School concerned to develop a bespoke questionnaire that was more tailored to the school's needs. Ms Colbert added that TfC's Stars Group would also be very keen to feed into the discussion.

Councillor Gibson stated that there appeared to be marked differences between the responses from the primary school and secondary school pupils and suggested that perhaps this was down to the effect of covid with secondary pupils already becoming socialised prior to the pandemic whilst the primary school pupils were not. Ms

Hughes replied that this was a possibility however the impact of covid was yet to be fully understood.

Councillor McDonough highlighted that the figures showed a high incidence of vaping among under 16s and asked was the health messaging around this effective and what was the policy on vaping moving forward? Ms Hughes replied that the issues around this were complex and emotive. The facts were that 1 in 3 people who were addicted to cigarettes would be killed by the habit. For smokers trying to kick the habit, vaping was a very important intervention. In such cases it was important to avoid any confused messaging around vaping that would drive people back to cigarettes. Whilst there was concern about the harms from vaping, specifically associated with younger people, currently there was not the body of evidence to prove this. However, it was illegal to sell nicotine vaping products to anyone under the age of 18 or for adults to buy them on behalf of under-18s. Therefore, the Team worked in conjunction with Trading Standards colleagues to improve enforcement activity and drive down illegal sales.

In response to concerns outlined by Councillor Chapman, Ms Hughes agreed that smokers with damaged lungs should not be forced to accept vaping as the only alternative. It was only one of a package of measures (eg nicotine patches) that could help smokers to stop. Some people would not be able to quit smoking without using vapes, however no patient should be made to feel it was their only option. Patients should be assessed on a case by case basis taking into account the particular circumstances of the individuals concerned.

The Chair highlighted it was good that the survey showed that the consumption of junk food such as crisps was down however it could also be the case that the consumption of all food was down and suggested that perhaps the question 'Are you getting enough food' was added to future surveys.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair, Ms Hughes advised that the Team were developing a range of ways through which the findings of the survey could be disseminated to parents. The Chair added that it would also be useful if the findings could be sent out via the schools.

The Chair also suggested that it could be useful to establish a focus group of year 10 pupils.

There being no further questions or comments for Ms Start and Ms Hughes, the Chairman thanked them for their presentation, and it was: -

3. RESOLVED that the information be received and noted.

Children In Need and Child Protection - Ofsted Feedback

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with feedback following the recent Ofsted focused visit regarding Children in Need and Child Protection in Sunderland.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Nichola Burn, Strategic Service Manager, presented the report and addressed questions from the Committee.

Members having congratulated Ms Colbert and Ms Burn on the excellent feedback received from Ofsted, it was :-

4. RESOLVED that the report 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 stated that there had been limited interest in the planned Task and Finish Groups in respect of Covid Recovery and also Apprenticeships and T Levels and suggested that as an alternative, the Committee looked at Government policy changes to provide a phased expansion of existing childcare support for eligible working parents.

Ms Colbert advised that she would liaise with Mr Diamond and Ms Robinson to find a suitable slot in the work programme (potentially the February meeting). With regard to Apprenticeships and T Levels it may be possible to invite Sunderland College to attend the April meeting and that Family Hubs could be included within the Early Years report scheduled for January.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that the work programme be amended accordingly

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 8th November 2023.

(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.