

Children, Education & Skills Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Alex Samuels

Vice Chair: Cllr Dominic McDonough

Committee Members: Councillors: Joanne Chapman, Margaret Crosby, Allen Curtis, Richard Dunn, Paul Gibson, George Smith, Pat Smith, Dianne Snowdon, David Snowdon and Melanie Thornton.

Co-opted Members: Ann Blakey (Roman Catholic Diocese)

At the start of the year, the Committee had an initial scene setting meeting to consider its priorities for the year and establish an annual work programme.

A good deal of valuable data was also derived from the recent Healthy Related Behaviour Study report which this year contained a particular focus on the effect of the Covid pandemic. The main concerns highlighted included having enough money in the family, having enough food to eat, being lonely and struggling with schoolwork. As well as informing our own work programme, the Committee was pleased to hear that the information derived from the survey will be shared with key stakeholders and inform the planning and delivery of future services.

The Committee received a particularly positive report on the progress being made by the Early Help service and the development of the Family Hubs. It is clear that Early Help services are having a positive effect on the numbers of children requiring statutory services, and that prevention work is reducing the numbers requiring targeted early help support. Funding, as ever, remains a challenge, but there is a clearly a real commitment to early intervention and family support and ensuring that children and families get the appropriate level of help and support at the right time, delivered by skilled professionals,

We heard that four Family Hubs have recently been established in Washington, Bunny Hill, Hetton and Thorney Close; with fifth shortly opening in Hendon. Each provides a wide range of activities. Initial feedback on the operation of the Hubs has been highly positive. The activities of the Hubs are being promoted via a number of channels including social media and the use of posters / leaflets containing QR code links.

At the start of the year, the Committee was keen to look more closely at the recently announced Early Years Entitlements Expansion and National Wraparound Childcare Programme which is intended to provide a phased expansion of childcare support for eligible working parents city. While recognising the potential benefits of the programme, the Committee are concerned about practical challenges involved in its implementation. The Committee look to monitor its progress in the year ahead.

In January 2023, a Joint Targeted Area inspection (JTAI) was undertaken into children and families who need help and an action plan for improvement was developed. While there was no formal grading system, the outcome of the inspection was categorised as positive. The Committee heard about the progress being made across the action plan including; communication and involvement of all partners in meetings and decisions about next steps to help children; increased staffing capacity to allow the

consistent involvement of health practitioners; analysis of children's ethnic identity, cultural heritage and diverse needs; the timeliness of early help assessments and plans and finally the quality and effectiveness of the LSP's multi-agency audits. The Committee considered that good progress was being made which will look to continue to monitor in the year ahead.

In December 2022, HM Inspectorate of Probation published the outcome of its inspection of Youth Offending Services in Sunderland. The service received an overall rating of 'Good'. We heard that the service had identified a number of priority areas for development including reducing the number of first-time entrants; reducing reoffending; restorative justice and tackling disproportionality and identify overrepresented groups. Again, it was felt that good progress was being made in addressing areas of improvement.

Building on our work last year, the Committee received an update on SEND provision in Sunderland. We heard that during the year, the service has conducted a Delivering Best Value review of the SEND services in the city, the findings of which reflect the way in which the rise in the High Needs Budget (HNB) has been driven by a rise in the number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP's). The review has focused on the key areas of need and the effectiveness of current provision and has resulted in a number of concrete proposals to improve and expand the future delivery of the service. The Committee commended the work being undertaken in relation to SEND provision in the city and looked forward to the introduction of the proposed improvements.

Following the end of the agreement between SCAS and Grace House to provide the short breaks service, the Committee asked for a report on the background to the issue and the plans moving forward to provide alternative care for children with complex and additional needs. During the year, the Committee has continued to monitor progress with regard to the new delivery model and engagement with families.

The Committee also received an update report on the work of the Virtual School which has a duty to promote the education of Cared for Children. We heard about the work going within schools, with staff in social care and health services and with parents and carers in order to raise awareness and tackle the educational barriers faced by cared for children.

We heard that considerable progress was being made against a range of performance indicators including admissions, educational attainment, and attendance. Once again, the Committee commended staff on the progress being made and looked forward to further improvements moving into the future.

At the start of the year, the Committee heard about Northeast Fostering Pathfinder Project; a regionally focused programme for fostering recruitment and retention. The project has three components that together create a holistic package of intervention to boost foster carer numbers including Regional Support Hub, Regional Foster Carer Recruitment Campaign and Retention Support. The Committee commended the initiative and hoped that support from the Government would be continued into the future.

The Committee received a report on the work going on to support children and young people who were unaccompanied and seeking asylum. We heard that TFC had

developed staffing expertise and pathways to help meet the needs of these young people. However, the challenges and resource implications were considerable and continued to place very significant demands on the service.

The Committee received an update report on school attendance and how children and young people are supported to increase their attendance at school. As with the rest of the country, schools in Sunderland have been experiencing an increase in rates of school absence. We heard that the main contributing factors leading to persistent absence are the recovery from Covid, mental and physical health, disengagement from school, unmet special education need, and a breakdown in the parent/carer / school relationship.

We heard that the challenges that families in Sunderland face are likely to continue and indeed become more challenging and complex. The attendance team will therefore continue to adapt and develop the vital support provided to schools to meet the needs of our children, young people and families and better understand and tackle the barriers to school attendance.

Of continuing concern for the Committee has been the increase in elective home education. While parents have the right to home educate, we are concerned at the potentially detrimental effect on some children. At present, local authorities have only limited powers in this area and we feel that more powers should be made available. We also feel that more detailed, up to date information needs to be kept on elective home education and children missing from education. This is an issue we will be looking to go into in greater detail in the year ahead.

Following on from outstanding Ofsted rating received, the Committee has continued to receive periodic performance reports in order to demonstrate that the level of improvement was being maintained and we will continue to monitor the progress into the future. The Committee has also received regular update reports on Children Services Customer feedback reports. I am pleased to see that these show a continuing reduction in the number of complaints.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the members of the Committee for their contributions and to thank all the officers and witnesses who gave up their time to attend and provide insights into the services they provide and the challenges they face.

Councillor Alex Samuels
Chair of the Children Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee