

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

Present:-

Councillor Samuels in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Curtis, Gibson and Thornton.

Also in attendance:-

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

Mr. Richard Cullen, Strategic Lead, School Improvement and Early Years, TfC.

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

Mr. Simon Marshall, Director of Education, TfC

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

Ms. Kim Richardson, Strategic Education Sufficiency Lead, TfC

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence was submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Chapman, Dunn, McDonough, P. Smith, D. Snowdon and D.E. Snowdon.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 11th January 2024

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 11th January 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Early Years Entitlements Expansion and National Wraparound Childcare Programme

The Director of Education submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation from Richard Cullen (Strategic Lead – School Improvement and Early Years) on the background to the proposed Government policy changes to provide a phased expansion of childcare support for eligible working parents together with the current position in Sunderland.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Committee was informed of:-

- The large-scale childcare reforms aiming to increase availability, reduce costs and increase the number of parents using it, as announced by the Chancellor as part of 2023 Spring Budget.
- The implementation timelines for each of the proposed reforms.
- The funding available to support the programmes and what it could be used for.
- The current position in Sunderland and the potential delivery models.
- What Sunderland needed to do in terms of Early Years Entitlements and Wraparound Programme both by 31st March 2024 and by 30th June 2024.
- The potential risks and mitigations around the implementation of the programmes.

The Chair thanked Mr Cullen for his presentation and invited questions and comments from Members.

Councillor Thornton stated that the proposals were being promoted by the Government as a means to provide financial support for families however that did not seem to be the case. The main driver appeared to be that it would help facilitate the return-to-work agenda. Councillor Thornton added that she struggled to understand why the provision was limited to 38 weeks which would still leave working parents with a large chunk to fund.

Councillor Crosby noted that the figures showed Sandhill ward had one of the highest shortfalls of supply hours and asked if the plans of the new school in Thorney Close to provide care for 0-2 year olds would help. Mr Cullen replied that the figures were based on GP registration data. There was a need to undertake a thorough analysis of supply, demand and need throughout the LA, using ward-level data and additional surveys. The provision at Thorney would help but to what extent could only be a best guess at this point in time. There was national scheme due to launch soon with the aim of recruiting new child miners to replace those lost following the pandemic, which could have a positive impact.

Councillor Gibson stated that it was a very exciting initiative but as always, the devil remained in the detail. He referred to the deadline for Local Authorities to submit delivery plans for programme funding to the DfE and asked if it would be possible for the Committee to have sight of the submission. Mr Cullen confirmed that it would.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Gibson regarding his preferred delivery model, Mr Cullen advised that the decision over delivery models would be led by schools. The concern around this was that they already had pre-existing workload issues.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Gibson regarding the data sources that would inform delivery, Mr Cullen replied that they would comprise residents' sufficiency data, GP registrations, termly surveys and information provided via the Family Hubs and directly from parents.

In response to a further question from Councillor Gibson on the proposal to establish a two-year training programme for the wraparound care sector, Mr Marshall advised

that the Government ambition was that every PVI should have a level 3 Senco and that Sunderland had already achieved this level of provision. Sunderland would adapt its workforce, so it had the flexibility to provide training as and when required. Regarding changing the gender balance, this was something that Sunderland would look to address. It was acknowledged that the sector attracted a largely female workforce however this was the case nationally.

The Chair referred to the condensed timescales and asked if everything would be in place from day one. Mr Marshall advised that the Council would not be delivering services but would be supporting partners to do so. The dates were the Government's and it centred on the ability of the private sector to deliver. It was currently difficult to estimate demand but there was no doubt that capacity needed to increase.

In response to a further enquiry from the Chair, Mr Marshall advised that the Schools Forum would not have a roll in the process. From a TfC perspective, the lead would be taken by Mr Cullen's Early Years Team. TfC intelligence would be developed in line with what partners wanted to deliver.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chair advised that she would propose a means of considering the item further as part of the Work Programme item later on the agenda, and it was:

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Attendance Update

The Director of Education submitted a report, (copy circulated) which updated members of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee on the local attendance landscape and provided information as to how children and young people were supported to increase their attendance at school.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Kim Richardson, Strategic Education Sufficiency Lead, presented the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

Councillor Crosby stated that the figures did not indicate whether any of the absences were for medical reasons. She also noted that the absences in relation to SEND pupils seemed high and asked if bullying could be a determining factor? Ms Richardson replied that the national absence data quoted in the report were the basic absence percentages and were not broken down by category. Regarding pupils requiring a period of absence for medical reasons, schools would record this as authorised absence rather than unauthorised absence. In relation to the possibility that a SEND pupil's absence may be down to bullying this would not be picked up through the raw data but by local intelligence and MSET safeguarding processes.

Councillor Gibson referred to paragraph 4.1 of the report which outlined that the citywide attendance provision was delivered by 4 Attendance Officers who supported 127 schools and questioned whether staffing could be increased. Mr Marshall advised that the onus was on schools to take early intervention work prior to seeking

support from Ms Richardson's Team when there were significant attendance concerns. He confirmed that caseloads are extremely high due to the increase in attendance support required, therefore it was essential that referrals were triaged to ensure that support was timely and targeted for the greatest impact. Mr Marshall added that schools and TfC worked really well together however the lasting impact of Covid on attendance could not be ignored. Good attendance was generally the result of developing a daily routine, Covid had effectively broken the normal routine and for many it was difficult to restart. He believed that the Family Hubs would also be vital in helping to re-establish this routine. Ms Richardson confirmed that her Team were constantly striving to use innovative ways of working in looking to address the problem.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Gibson, Ms Richardson stated that her Team believed that pastoral care was everybody's business in the same way as safeguarding. The Team worked through a number of forums across the city on the basis of a multi-agency approach. All partners played a crucial role in supporting pupils to overcome barriers to attendance and re-setting routines. Initially Ms Richardson's Team had established an inclusion group with representatives from all forms of schools in the City. This had grown to encompass representatives from the Police, Health Care, CAMHS, CYPS, Early Help, Social Care and Targeted Youth Services. As a partnership it worked really well. Its latest meeting was due to be held the following day and would focus on the yr6 / yr7 transition with a view to increasing and embedding attendance before, during and after the move from primary to secondary school.

Ms Richardson and Mr Marshall then briefed the Committee on the work undertaken by the Evolve School with pupils who had issues around emotionally based school avoidance. It aimed to be a physically and emotionally safe and secure place for young people so that they felt able to improve their previous school attendance and access to learning. Because of Evolve's relatively small size it was able to individually customise its support for each young person. It was a short-term intervention but could provide a life changing service. It had achieved extremely high levels of success in returning young people to mainstream education with few young people relapsing. It was a school that was unique to Sunderland and its success had gained national attention including featuring as an item on the BBC's One Show.

Ms Colbert stated that she would submit a link to Evolve's website for inclusion in the minutes for Member's information. ([Consilium Evolve - Home](#))

In response to an enquiry from the Chair, Ms Richardson advised that Evolve was situated on the Thornhill School site but was open for referrals in respect of young people citywide.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Thornton, Ms Richardson confirmed that the service provided by Evolve was only available in Sunderland proving 48 places for young people from across the city. It also provided an outreach model delivering home education during any initial stage where the young person felt unable to go to Thornhill. It was a service that Sunderland as a city should be very proud of.

There being no further questions or comments the Chair thanked Ms Richardson for her report and it was:-

3. 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 referred to the pending items in respect of Elective Home Education and Attainment and felt that the Committee would need to consider these matters in due course. Her preference would be for a report that explained exactly what elective home education entailed for parents and the limited powers available to the Local Authority.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding the attainment item, the Committee was advised that whilst the Regional Schools Commissioner could be invited to come and talk to the Committee, it was extremely unlikely that they would choose to attend. Ms Robinson advised that at the request of members of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee, Mr Cullen and Mr Marshall had provided those members with a detailed briefing on attainment as part of the regular Council performance report and that a copy could possibly be provided for this Committee. Mr Marshall added that he would be happy to arrange for Head Teachers to attend Committee to present their thoughts on attainment.

With regard to progressing discussion on Wraparound Care and Early Years Entitlements Expansion, the Chair advised that she would be looking to hold an informal meeting of Committee members on Teams to scope the item.

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.