

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COUNCIL CHAMBER, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 7th SEPTEMBER 2023 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Guy in the Chair

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

Also in attendance:-

Elected Members Observing – Councillors Butler, Edgeworth, Fagan, Hartnack, Mason-Gage, A. Smith and Williams.

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

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

Ms. Majella McCarthy, Director of Children’s Social Care, TfC

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

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

Together with members of the public and supporters of the ‘Give Us a Break’ campaign.

Apologies for Absence

All Members were present.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 6th July 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 6th July 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Future Provision of the Short Break Service

Ms. Jill Colbert, Director of Children’s Services together with Ms. Majella McCarthy, Director of Children’s Social Care provided the Committee with a comprehensive powerpoint presentation (copy circulated) which explained the current short break provision, the current and projected need for the Service, planning for the future, the

provision of bespoke support, the availability of external short break care and the search for an alternative short break care home, TfC's position as provider, together with the next steps moving forward.

(for copy report / presentation – see original minutes)

The Chair thanked Ms Colbert and Ms McCarthy for their presentation and invited questions and comments from Members.

Councillor Samuels stated that she appreciated the need to address the shape of the future provision and welcomed the presentation, however questions needed to be asked regarding the decision making process which led to the ending of a contractual arrangement to deliver a statutory service before any alternative was in place. She believed that the issue should have been reported through Cabinet and expressed concern that Councillors were unable to scrutinise the decision-making process.

The Chair replied that he would respectfully decline any retrospective questions in relation to the decision making as the purpose of the agenda item was to consider the future provision of the Service.

Councillor Dunn stated that he found it disgraceful that the families concerned were not permitted to address the meeting. With regard to alternatives for the provision of respite care, he asked how long had TfC been looking at alternative properties and would it comprise one building or two. He expressed concern that no dates or timescales had been mentioned. This was very distressful for parents and carers who needed to understand where they would be once the Grace House provision ceased in November.

Ms Colbert replied that Grace House was never fully occupied and that no other short break facility in the region was of the same size (i.e. provision for 10 children in one space). She informed Councillor Dunn that she could not provide a date as a new building had not yet been acquired. Inevitably the building would require adaptations and property services would make this a priority. It also needed to be pointed out that the construction industry was currently experiencing shortages in respect of building materials. Families would no longer receive a service from Grace House but it was wrong to claim that there would be no service.

Councillor Dunn added that if it was known how difficult securing a new building would be, why was the Grace House contract ended before an alternative was in place? Ms Colbert replied that she did not end the contract, there was no contract in place to end. The Council had been asked to match the cost and terms of an offer Grace House had from a third party for the space used by the respite service.

Councillor Dunn stated that it was likely that foster carers would have to shoulder a greater responsibility in terms of respite care and noted that nationally there was a shortage of foster carers. In response Ms Colbert explained the initiatives being undertaken regionally to tackle the issue of recruitment and encourage take up.

Councillor McDonough reiterated previously raised concerns that parents and representatives from Grace House were not permitted to address the meeting. In addition, he asked for assurances that everything would be in place once the November deadline arrived and asked if the Council's Chief Executive had met with

Grace House earlier in the week. Ms Colbert confirmed that the Chief Executive had met with Grace House however ultimately Grace House had decided to go ahead with their own plans. She could not give assurances that everything would be in place as a new building was yet to be secured, however she could assure the Committee that work was ongoing across the whole of TfC to provide alternative support for all 39 children who used the Grace House service and a whole range of options were being explored.

Councillor Dianne Snowdon informed the meeting that her career as a serving member of a Scrutiny Committee had begun in 2008. Since this time, she had never experienced a position where members of the public had been refused the opportunity to address a meeting if they had asked to do so. There was no automatic right for Members of the public to address the meeting, but the decision to allow them to do so remained within the gift of the Chair at all times.

Councillor Diane Snowdon referred to Majella McCarthy's run down during the presentation of the percentage figures relating to the numbers of Children for whom future options were being provided and asked if the figures could be circulated to the Committee. In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Dianne Snowdon, Ms Colbert confirmed that suitable properties were being looked at, but it would not be appropriate to discuss the matter further in a public meeting given the open nature of the property market. In conclusion Councillor Snowdon stated that if the issue represented a substantial variation, then she believed it should have been brought to the Scrutiny Committee much earlier in the process.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby, Ms Colbert advised that it was planned that the new property would be open 365 days a year, dialogue was ongoing with the NHS and the recommendations arising from the Government report into Winterbourne View would be incorporated into the new building. She accepted that looking into the future more and more children were living with autism and learning difficulties and the design of the new building would attempt to address this.

Councillor Curtis stated that one of his concerns was that many of the young people using the Service will have become attached to the members staff and he was pleased to see that they would transfer to the new property. In addition, Councillor Curtis expressed concern regarding those families who had not responded to Council attempts to discuss the next steps for them and asked what was being done to encourage them to engage? Ms McCarthy advised that each child had a social worker together with a care plan and conversations were ongoing regarding options and creative solutions. In response to a final enquiry from Councillor Curtis, Ms Colbert confirmed that support for staff from the respite service was provided via the SCAS Human Resources team.

Councillor David Snowdon referred to a letter from TfC sent in 2022 regarding the Grace House provision which made reference to two Ofsted reports indicating some staffing issues and that the building was looking tired. He stated that from what he had seen in the current presentation before the Committee, the emphasis on bespoke care for the individual as part of the future provision will result in a better service than in the past. Ms Colbert advised that the letter referred to had contained extracts from a TfC Board report. As commissioners of the service TfC held the responsibility to ensure that the service provision was satisfactory and it had worked with SCAS to improve standards. The new provision would go through the Ofsted

registration process and its performance would be tracked through the Meaningful Measure report that was submitted to both the TfC Board and this Committee.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Gibson, Ms Colbert updated the Committee on the recruitment process which aimed to increase staff members from 9 to 15, and confirmed that parents would be surveyed to obtain their feedback on the new bespoke provision. This information would also be fed back to the Committee via the Meaningful Measures report. Young people also were able to provide feedback through the Mind of My Own App and the Stars Group.

Councillor Dianne Snowdon asked what was 'Breathing Space', was it available only to Year 6 through to Year 11 children and if so what provision was available before Year 6 and beyond year 11. Ms Colbert advised that Breathing Space was a project that supported the whole family, providing space, time and support for young people with additional needs and their parents and carers. The project was aimed at children in Years 3 to 11 and had a preventative focus looking to reduce the risk of education placement breakdowns and potential escalations, by offering positive opportunities for children and joined-up support for their families. It had proven to be a very popular service among parents.

Councillor Dunn referred to the future provision stating that currently 39 children accessed the service at Grace House with 18 on the waiting list. Given this he questioned whether a 5 bed property would be big enough. Ms Colbert replied that that one child had spent 78 nights at Grace House across the course of a year however the demand from most families would not be as great. The size of the property was important as it needed to operate as a home not an institution. Children had many different needs however she was confident that the specifications of the new building would be well designed.

There being no further questions for Ms Colbert and Ms McCarthy, the Chair thanked them for their attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the presentation be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2023/24

The Scrutiny and Members' 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. In response to an enquiry from Councillor David Snowdon, Mr Diamond confirmed that the work programme schedule appended to the report would be amended to show the correct date.

Members of the Committee (as indicated below) made the following suggestions in respect of additional items for inclusion in the Work Programme

- The impact in Sunderland of the national concerns regarding the use of RAAC in school buildings (Cllr Crosby)
- An update report in respect of this evening's item on the future provision of the Short Break Service (Cllr David Snowdon)
- The Sunderland position in respect of the recently reported rise in the number of children missing from school (Cllr P. Smith)
- Home Schooling (Cllr Gibson)

Mr Diamond having confirmed that he would liaise with the Chair and Ms Colbert regarding the most appropriate means to address the issues raised, either by scheduling an item on the work programme and or the circulation of a briefing note, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members' Support Co-ordinator 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 9th August, 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.

4. 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) L. GUY,
Chairman.