

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the MAYOR'S PARLOUR, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 2<sup>nd</sup> NOVEMBER 2023 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Gibson in the Chair

Councillors Chapman, Crosby, Dunn, P. Smith, and Thornton together with Mrs A. Blakey.

**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. Majella McCarthy, Director of Children's Social Care, TfC  
Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Education, 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**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Guy, McDonough, Samuels, D. Snowdon and D.E. Snowdon.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

**Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)**

Councillor Thornton made an open declaration in respect of Item 4 (Future Provision of the Short Break Service) as Board Member of Sunderland Care and Support (SCAS)

**Future Provision of the Short Break Service**

Ms. Jill Colbert, together with Ms. Majella McCarthy, Mr Simon Marshall and Ms Nicola Burn provided the Committee with a comprehensive powerpoint presentation (copy circulated) which explained the current short break provision, details of alternative arrangements, the provision of additional support (through the Breathing Space Programme, supported holidays and additional community short breaks), the

project set up to deliver TfC's new shorts breaks home, together with the next steps moving forward.

(for copy report / presentation – see original minutes)

With regard to the project update, the Committee were informed that a project team was in place and working together to ensure that the pace of action continued. The property purchase was continuing with legal checks being undertaken. Planning consultants had been appointed and the property plans required for a planning application were being drafted.

A communication plan was being developed and would include communication to staff, parents, carers and the community. Associated with this would be: -

- A further question and answer session for families to share progress and engage in future planning.
- Work with individual families to identify specific supports to meet their children's needs.
- A planning group with parents and carers and children, and young people.
- STARS and Young Commissioners groups to guide TfC's coproduction with children.

The next steps in respect of the project were outlined as follows:-

- Completion of the property purchase (by end Nov23).
- Submission of a planning application (by end Nov23).
- Planning application process completed (by Mar24 to be confirmed).
- Property amendment requirements understood (by Dec23).
- Tender process, for company to undertake amendments, completed (by end Feb24 to be confirmed).
- Clarification of longer-term timescales understood (by Mar24)
- Likely 'Go Live' at this stage would be end 2024 (depending upon amendment, recruitment and Ofsted registration timescales).

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

Councillor Dunn commended the Breathing Space scheme as a very positive project that made a real difference. With regard to the estimated date of December 2023 for the new building to go live, he asked if there was likely to be any slippage in timescales.

Ms Colbert advised that the date was based on timescales encountered during similar acquisitions. The main cause of any delay was likely to be the current state of

the construction industry and the shortages of materials and delays being experienced. On the positive side, the building was well maintained, requiring very little work other than appropriate modifications such as the installation of through floor lifts.

In response to further enquiries from Councillor Dunn, Ms Colbert advised that the property comprised 5 bedrooms, accommodating 5 children at any one time and would also include outdoor space.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby regarding the submission of a planning application, Ms Colbert replied that it was hoped that this would take place around the end of November. Councillor Crosby asked if the Committee could receive an update on the planning process towards the end of January.

In response to a question from Councillor P. Smith regarding the reference in the presentation that two families were not willing to discuss an alternative as yet, Ms Burn clarified that one family continued to communicate with TfC but were currently reluctant to accept the alternative arrangements for care being offered. The second family did not wish to engage at this stage. TfC would continue to revisit both families.

Councillor Thornton stated that whilst it was likely to be difficult for families during the interim period, once the planned work had been completed it was likely that the resulting respite service would be a first class provision.

There being no further questions, the Chairman thanked Ms Colbert, Ms McCarthy, Mr Marshall and Ms Burn for their attendance and it was:-

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

### **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children – National Transfer Scheme - Update**

Ms. Majella McCarthy, Director of Children's Social Care TfC, provided the Committee with a presentation (copy tabled) which updated Members on unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum and the National Transfer scheme, highlighting the challenges being faced.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Members were informed that these challenges centred on: -

- Continued national shortage in terms of availability of homes and the risk of supported accommodation providers failing the Ofsted registration process
- Lack of family-based carers – the NEMP regional recruitment campaign had resulted in only 3 referrals to Sunderland, none of which progressed when followed up
- Lack of information provided by the NTS continued to make matching to homes extremely difficult and risky
- Cost and availability of interpreters

- Maintaining stability of homes- overwhelmingly children had a desire to be living in big cities predominantly Manchester or London and would try very hard to get there
- Increasing number of occasions of young people rejecting the home they were provided and these leading to planned and unplanned moves often at cost

The Chairman thanked Ms McCarthy for her report and invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Councillor Crosby asked how many different languages and cultures were being encountered? In reply, Mr Marshall replied that it amounted to around 10 to 12 different languages and this had come as a shock to the system for schools. Sunderland's schools were continuing to provide care and wrap around support but there were significant challenges being faced in terms of the number of languages and the availability of interpreters. Mrs Blakey added that the Sencos had provided a lot of valuable support work and schools were buddying up to share the expertise of their English as a second language tutors.

In response to an enquiry from Mrs Blakey, Ms Colbert advised that the age of the young people concerned was generally around 15 years old. Mrs Blakey commented that it was often the case that the younger the child was, the more adaptable they were to change.

Councillor P. Smith asked that given it was accepted that the missing young people were gravitating towards Manchester and London, did these bigger cities receive extra funding? Ms Colbert replied that they did not receiving any additional funding. If the missing young people remained missing, there was a high possibility that they had been trafficked.

In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Smith regarding how the issue was being funded in Sunderland. The Committee was informed that it wasn't lawful for local authorities not to participate in the National Transfer Scheme. Failure to participate could result in a legal challenge. There was pressure being brought to bear on the Home Office to look again at the scheme. Local authorities took the view that if they were properly funded in respect of the scheme, it would allow them to operate more creatively in trying to address the issues. As it was, in Sunderland it was a huge unaccounted budget pressure for TfC. Its current cohort of Unaccompanied Young Asylum Seekers lived in homes that varied significantly in cost depending on the type of accommodation being provided. Finance provided by the Home Office did not cover the total cost of accommodation and was not provided in a timely manner. TfC also continued to provide accommodation for 6 young people who were now adults but did not yet have the right to remain and therefore had no recourse to public funds. The impact of the National Transfer Scheme remained a growing area of concern financially.

Mrs Blakely asked if there was any acknowledgement from the Home Office regarding what different parts of the country could offer in terms of supporting the young people, for example areas which already contained established communities from the countries they had left. Ms Colbert replied that that was a logical and empathetic way of looking at the issue, however the Home Office formular was based purely on the existing child population of a local authority area. It took no

account of any other variables although she believed that this approach was likely to change.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dunn, the Committee was informed that TfC were required to undertake age assessments of the young people within 28 days. In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Dunn regarding the reasons why some young people rejected the home they were allocated, Ms McCarthy advised that despite an average age of only 15 their life experiences had provided them with an independence that in many cases they were reluctant to give up. Consequently, they did not want to be restricted by the confines of a children's home.

There being no further questions for Ms McCarthy, the Chairman thanked her for her presentation, and it was: -

3. 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.

4. 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 11<sup>th</sup> October 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.

5. 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) P. GIBSON,  
Chairman.