

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 6<sup>th</sup> JULY 2023 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Guy in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Curtis, Dunn, PWL Gibson, Samuels, and P. Smith together with Mrs A. Blakey.

**Also in attendance:-**

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

Ms. Stacey Hodgkinson, Service Manager, CIRT Performance Customer Feedback & Planning, TfC

Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Education, TfC.

Ms Majella McCarthy, Director of Children's Social Care, TfC

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

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Cllrs Chapman, McDonaugh, D. Snowdon and D.E. Snowdon.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023 be confirmed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of Cllr Dunn in the list of those present.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**North East Pathfinder – Foster North East**

Ms Majella McCarthy, Director of Children's Social Care, Together for Children, presented a report (copy circulated) in respect of the above matter. To compliment the report Ms McCarthy provided the Committee with a comprehensive powerpoint presentation which explained the background to the development of the pathfinder, the DfE's financial contribution, the aims of Forster North East in creating a package of intervention to boost foster carer numbers, the development of a new case management system, together with the structure of the Pathfinder and its governance arrangements.

(for copy report / presentation – see original minutes)

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

Councillor Curtis asked if there was any ‘pre training’ or a buddy system for people interested in fostering prior to making a formal application, and also what were the main issues in relation to recruitment and retention? Ms McCarthy replied that training would only take place once a formal application had been made, however there were lots of regional recruitment events and information available on the hub to encourage prospective applicants to take that step. With regard to recruitment the main issue was overcoming misconceptions about who can foster, the different fostering options, the support available and time constraints. Communication was the key to overcoming the misconceptions and central to this were events like the Fostering Awards where foster carers talked positively about their experiences. Retention was less of an issue. Once recruited foster carers tended to remain in the role. The main reason for people leaving the service was old age and retirement.

Councillor Curtis was pleased to note that having a disability would no longer automatically preclude someone from becoming a foster carer.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dunn regarding whether there were any groups that were particularly difficult to foster, Ms McCarthy advised that they tended to be teenagers, young children that had suffered trauma or a child that needed to be fostered as an ‘only child’.

Councillor Samuels asked how long would the pilot last and how would it be assessed? Ms McCarthy advised that the DfE funding was for an initial 6 months. If it could be evidenced that the pathfinder was working well, the aim was to establish it as a sustainable model. Ms McCarthy stated that she would be happy to bring an update report back to the Committee in due course.

There being no further questions for Ms McCarthy, the Chair thanked her for her attendance and commended the work of the Mocking Bird staff and the wrap around support that they provided:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Together for Children - Customer Feedback Annual Report**

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 2022 to 31st March 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 thereon.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby regarding previous problems in recruiting to the section, Ms Hodgkinson advised that the section was now fully staffed. The previous issue had been the difficulty in recruiting to the position of the 'Independent Person' however this had now been addressed.

Councillor Dunn asked if young people were made aware of how they were able to register a complaint. Ms Hodgkinson confirmed that they were and that complaints could be made via the Mind of My Own App, their social worker or foster carer. Information on how to make a complaint was clearly available on the TfC website.

Councillor Gibson referred to the table of initial contacts detailed in paragraph 4.1 of the report and asked if there was a reason for the increased number of contacts in quarter 4. Ms Hodgkinson replied that she had asked the same question herself, but it appeared that nothing specific could be identified. Mr Marshall added that the majority of complaints tended to arrive during periods of transition.

Councillor Gibson stated that it was clear from the tables in paragraphs 6 and 7 that the percentage of complaints was greater for the Corporate side than for the Social Care side and asked if there was a particular reason. Mr Marshall replied that it related to an increase in complaints regarding the SEND Team. The last year had seen a 30% increase in the number of children with EHCPs in the City. It was a challenging issue for the Team and was very resource intensive. The main problem was that the service was unable to grow quickly enough to tackle such increases year on year. As a result, timeliness in dealing with applications worsened and complaints increased. He added that perhaps the 30% increase could be a key line of enquiry for the Committee. The one positive side of the increase was that it provided a stress test of the system and was useful in any review process. The Chair replied that was the reason he felt it was important to include the report at the Committee's first meeting of the municipal year, as it helped identify the issues it faced.

Councillor Gibson referred to paragraph 8.8 and stated that a numerical breakdown of each complaint would have been useful. In reply, Ms Hodgkinson advised that each bullet point related to only a single complaint.

Having fully considered the report and there being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Ms. Hodgkinson for her presentation and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

### **Annual Work Programme 2023/24**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the developed of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2023/24 and appended a copy of the draft programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Chair advised that the space on the programme for the September meeting had been left blank to allow for an item on 'The Future Provision of Short Breaks'. Councillor Dunn referred to email conversations he'd had with the Chair and said

that what he had wanted the Committee to look at specifically was the decision-making process that had ultimately led to the closure of Grace House. He asked if it would be possible to invite officers involved in the process to the meeting so it could be established how we got to that point.

The Chair replied that he saw the focus of the item as being to make sure appropriate respite care provision was in place moving forward and to ensure that there would be support available for the families affected by the closure of Grace House.

Councillor Dunn concurred regarding the importance of this but believed it was still important that the Committee was able to scrutinise the decision-making process leading to the closure. Councillor Samuels spoke in support of Councillor Dunn's request. The Chair replied that it was something he did not feel comfortable committing to, given the likely confidential nature of many of the issues involved and that he was still awaiting further advice from TfC and Legal Services. He informed the Committee that he would be meeting with Jill Colbert and Legal shortly and that he would advise members of the outcome prior to the September meeting.'

Councillor P. Smith having stated that she had asked that the Committee was able to consider the issues around vaping, Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, replied that it would be scheduled in as part of the Public Health item.

Mr Diamond having sought volunteers to sit on the potential task and finish groups in relation to the 'Impact of Covid on Early years' and 'The City's vocational education offer' it was:-

4. 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 14<sup>th</sup> June, 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.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby regarding item 230526/813 – ('To commission the Child Vision Screening Programme), Mr Diamond advised that he would seek further information on Councillor Crosby's behalf and report back.

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) L. GUY,  
Chairman.