

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1 of the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 7<sup>th</sup> MARCH, 2019 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Francis, Hodson, Hunt, F. Miller, and Tye together with Mrs. J. Graham

**Also in attendance:-**

Ms. Jill Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children and Director of Children's Services, Sunderland City Council

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr. James Harrison, Sunderland Echo

Ms. Gillian Robinson, Area Coordinator, Sunderland City Council

Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

The Chairman opened the meeting and introductions were made.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Samuels and Scullion and also on behalf of Mrs. J. Graham

**Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2019**

Councillor Tye sought an update on the matter relating to the briefing on the number of permanent and fixed term exclusions in schools in the city and was advised by Ms. Colbert that she had held discussions with the Regional Schools Commissioner to alert her to the concerns of the Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Tye commented that Members looked to support the work of Together for Children and the Local Authority but that they had no control over the multi academy trusts and the responsibility for that lay solely with the Regional Schools Commissioner. Therefore, it was absolutely right that Elected Members look to have the discussion around the scrutiny of those schools where they had concerns and get some reassurances from the Regional Schools Commissioner about them going forward.

Councillor Smith advised the Committee that a meeting would be arranged, which all parties would be invited to, including the Lead Member for Children's Services and

the Chairman of the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee, and Members would be advised of those arrangements in due course.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

### **Together for Children Performance Data**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with performance information in relation to Together for Children and the commissioning arrangements in the Council, offering assurance over progress and any issues that arise, in the context of the scope of service and performance indicators as set out in the service contract.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Jill Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children and Director of Children's Services presented the report taking Members through each of the Key Performance Indicators and Supporting Measures advising that this was monitored on a monthly basis through the operational Commissioning Group and the Chief Executive's Performance Clinic.

Ms. Colbert advised that this was the final time that the Committee would see the report in this format as new slightly revised indicators had been agreed for the new contractual year and that the report would look and feel different in its presentation in the future, allowing the Committee to be able to consider more current and up to date performance data.

Councillor Hunt referred to the recent visit to the Early Help Team that the Committee had carried out, where the issue of the huge gap in provision for young people who were not yet ready for work had been discussed, as it had been felt that the service were struggling to support those young people. All alternative provision had gone and Councillor Hunt asked what could be done to improve this service for those young people. Ms. Colbert commented that following discussions with the new Chief Executive, Mr. Patrick Melia, a piece of work had been commissioned to look at apprenticeships, the overall skills levels and attainment in the city. Sunderland were below average for attainment for their young people and generally, had a lower level of skills attainment also.

There was need for a systemic review to look to design something different from an economic leadership level so that young people could gain the skills needed and it was recognised that this would take time, but there was the opportunity to have some quick wins and see change in the short term. The introduction of a new work experience programme so that young people could connect with the working world

and offer opportunities not only to children leaving care but all young people was one example.

Ms. Colbert explained that there was no easy answer to address the issue but they needed to work a lot harder to do better for children who were leaving care to give them the right degree of support; which would be different for each young person's expectations, and continue to know where they were to track and offer assistance to them.

Councillor Tye commented that it was right to undertake a review and have a strategic and holistic overview to pull together services. Grant funding was available and could be secured by the voluntary sector but they were not able to be able to direct the young people to the right services and working together would improve this. Councillor Tye commented that the Work Experience offer in Sunderland was really poor and schools were advising that they did not have the resources to support young people to find opportunities and they were being left to their own devices to try and secure any positions. This was a really important opportunity for young people to experience the working environment and other agencies could look to help support young people using external funding that was available.

Councillor Francis asked how the 18/19 year old young people with special educational needs were supported in making the transition from education and was advised by Ms. Colbert that there would always be challenges for some young people but as the young person's position changed from Children's Services to Adult Services, the law also changed, allowing young people to make decisions for themselves, which they couldn't when they were younger and still children.

Ms. Colbert advised that Sunderland had a large number of young people on the autistic spectrum and they had to be prepared to be able to have an offer in place that reduced the need for them to have more complex specialist support at an older age. Older young people who had learning disability plans or an educational health care plans did not make the transition until the age of 25 years old.

Councillor Hodson referred to paragraph 3.9 of the report and asked if more information could be provided as to how the case file audit system had changed and also commented that the data didn't provide information for Members as to where the problems were, or how many of the case file audits were being rated as good or outstanding. Ms. Colbert commented that the key measures recorded those audits that met 'requires improvement' or above but she was aware that the last tranche had some good and outstanding ranked audits within it.

Ms. Colbert commented that they were always cautious when self auditing, and rightly so, as they needed to be certain that they had a clear understanding themselves but advised she could bring more information for Members. Ms. Colbert advised that they had an audit tool which helps them to get through a lot more volume of case files and suggested that it may be beneficial for the Scrutiny Committee to invite Mr. Martin Birch, Strategic Service Manager to a meeting after the next Ofsted monitoring visit to discuss the issue in more detail and answer Members queries.

There being no further questions or comments the Chairman thanked Ms. Colbert for her report and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report and performance to date information be received and noted.

### **Ofsted Monitoring Visit of Children's Services - Feedback**

The Chief Executive of Together for Children submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with the outcome of the recent Ofsted monitoring visit of Children's Services.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children took Members through the report, providing an update on progress which had been made since the monitoring visit from Ofsted on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2019 and advising of actions which were either already in place or being introduced to help address any concerns or issues raised by Inspectors. The Committee were informed that the next visit would be made at the end of May, 2019 and that the same protocol would apply whereby they would have agreed which areas they would cover but that they would also include those that they were unable to cover as part of their visit in January, 2019.

Councillor Hodson commented that there were positives to be taken from the Ofsted report but referred to the comments around Northumbria Police and asked what was being done to address the issue. Ms. Colbert advised that as she understood it the issue was more around the current information case file system that Northumbria Police used being out of date and she was informed that procurement of a new system was underway which would help to solve some of the issues. Ms. Colbert commented that more training was needed for Officers on the ground to understand the appropriate level of information that needed to be shared and that they presently met with representatives from Northumbria Police to work through cases at an operational level and to triage referral activity. A training need had been identified and the technology was being put in place to allow higher level detailed information to be shared but Ms. Colbert realised that this could take time while those changes were introduced.

Councillor Hodson followed up asking if Ofsted had identified other local authority areas which perform better in this area and Ms. Colbert advised that she had not been made aware of any but it was clear that Ofsted had felt that these issues were not helping Together for Children make the progress in that area that they needed to. In order for improvements to be made, Ms. Colbert advised that all partner agencies needed to work together to make the level of improvement required as it was not something Together for Children could do alone.

Councillor Bell commented that the comments from Ofsted seemed harsh on Northumbria Police as they may not be aware of any further issues that the service were dealing with for families, he commented that there could be underlying concerns around domestic violence or other reasons for Officers feeling there was a need for a referral to be made. Budget cuts across local authorities and partner agencies were having substantial effects on service delivery and a lot of reasons as to why there may be an increase in family disturbances could be linked to the changes in the benefit system.

Councillor Smith referred to the high proportion of re-referrals being due to parents repeatedly refusing to work with services and was informed by Ms. Colbert that unless it was deemed urgent for services to interact with families then they had to give permission and it was felt that there were too many families declining supportive services. Ms Colbert commented that there were a number of things that needed to be addressed, including:- ensuring families understood the level of involvement they were consenting to; that initial conversations were held with the family through Early Help and not Social Workers; and to work to try and remove cultural myths and stigmas that were already in place about families accepting support from services. Ms. Colbert commented that services were working to improve this area but it would take time to change historical behaviours of families that they looked to engage with to ensure that they could support them and that they were not disengaging and then having to return to access services at a later point.

Members of the Committee referred to a visit to the Early Help service based at the Hetton Centre that they had undertaken recently and commented that they had been informed that Officers felt that referrals were being made at higher levels than they should be or families were not being signposted to more relevant services before being referred. Partner agencies were aware of thresholds and therefore should only be looking to make referrals to more supportive services when they reach a particular level.

Members commented that they felt that it worked well at the Hetton Centre where a number of services were based within shared office space so that they could work together and share information. Ms. Colbert commented that they did not expect all partners to be experts in all areas but that in a time of shrinking resources for all, it was about a willingness for all to go that extra mile and officers working in close proximity could build that confidence.

In response to a query from Councillor Francis around Officers being able to override parental refusal to engage with services, Ms. Colbert advised that there were statutory thresholds and guidance which was very clear and stated that if there were significant concerns then services could proceed without the consent of a parent as the safeguarding of the child was the principle issue.

Councillor Hodson referred to page 26 of the report and commented that the Committee were repeatedly seeing concern being raised around recording and reporting of information and the chasing up of information from social workers and felt that this was an area that needed to be addressed quite urgently, referring to the section of the report whereby it stated that cases were not always referred back for review. Ms. Colbert advised Members that the Ofsted findings were the conclusions of a one-day visit, where they considered a narrow number of around 20 to 30 cases of which there were 2,000 in the system at any one time. Ms. Colbert explained that where they had worked with families in the past but then stopped but the need for some form of support had arose again agencies had not then referred them back. There was a need for partner agencies to understand their role in re-referring families when new concerns arose as if they did not then how could services know there were new issues that needed to be addressed with a family.

Councillor Hodson commented that there was reference made that social workers were not recording what had been done with families and asked if this should be

seen to improve now that the workforce was becoming more stable? He asked if the lack of historic analysis could be due to the instability of the workforce in the past and asked what could be done to tackle this issue. Ms. Colbert advised that there was an issue in ensuring that the workforce were confident enough to use historic analysis to base their decisions upon but explained that from coming in at the 'front door', staff only had a seven hour window in which to make the decision as to whether a case should be referred on.

In response to a further question from Councillor Hodson as to what Ofsted expected social worker staff to do further, Ms. Colbert advised that what Ofsted reviewed was dependent upon the kind of case it was and this could include previous incidents where services had previously engaged with the family. The service were looking at what processes an authority ranked 'good' by Ofsted had in place, and where there were systems in place that allowed high quality data and information sharing to happen and they would continue to drive this forward.

Mrs. Graham referred to thresholds that were in place and commented that it may be beneficial to work with partner agencies to help them improve their understanding of the thresholds, saving time in the future from having to consider a disproportionate amount of referrals being made. Ms. Colbert advised that it was mainly the responsibility of the Safeguarding Board and informed Members that training was rolled out which was really well received by partners. The Committee were advised that partner agencies could contact advisors directly at any time to discuss any queries they may have prior to making referrals.

There being no further questions or comments for Ms. Colbert the Chairman thanked her for the report, and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report and information within it be received and noted.

## **Learning and Improvement Plan**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided for Members an update against Together for Children's Learning and Improvement Plan.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Jill Colbert, Director of Children's Services presented the report advising that the Learning and Improvement Plan consisted of fifteen priorities that had been developed around the recommendations identified by the inspection team. Members were informed that the plan was monitored by Together for Children's Quality and Improvement Committee on a bi-monthly basis and that the layout of the information within the report fits with the new reporting format and offered a more sophisticated suite of information to allow Members to see the progress Together for Children were making.

Councillor Francis referred to action 3.8 on page 33 of the report and asked for more information regarding the 'Imkaan' consultation. Ms. Colbert advised that within the partnerships and community safety service they had a domestic abuse lead and that this consultation was led by the third sector looking into domestic violence,

interventions and service need and commented that she would check with relevant Officers and report back with a fuller explanation for Members.

In response to a further question from Councillor Francis as to when it was expected that the two actions highlighted as 'red' would improve Ms. Colbert advised that in relation to action 5.7 it should be resolved quite quickly, or alternatively the service may look at how they manage disabled children's assessments in future. With regards to action 2.4 around the implementation of Liquid Logic, Ms. Colbert advised that she felt that this action needed to be re-profiled as it was taking longer than expected to complete the development and implementation but added that this was not having any detrimental impact on those children who were missing and/or CSE.

The Chairman having thanked Ms. Colbert for her report, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the information contained within the report be received and noted.

### **Child Sexual Exploitation and Missing Children**

The Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board submitted a report (copy circulated) in relation to the pathways and models for working with young people who are being, or are at risk of being sexually exploited and those that go missing from home or care.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Jill Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children, presented the report apologising in the first instance for the number of acronyms used within the report, advising that she would ensure that a glossary was requested in future for Members reference.

(for copy presentation – see original minutes)

Ms. Colbert presented the report on behalf of the Board, advising that this was one of the most comprehensive reports Members would receive on this issue. Members were advised that it was clear from the report that the Board were aware of the situation in the city and knew what needed to be done to identify, assess and respond to the risks that face the young people of the city.

Ms. Colbert apologised for the level of acronyms contained within the report and advised that she would request that in future a glossary was provided for Members to refer to.

Councillor Hodson referred to the information around the gender of young people being referred to pre-MSET (Missing, Sexual Exploitation and Trafficked) and MSET and commented that he could not see any specific actions to target those groups, such as young males. Ms. Colbert explained that young women were seen as being much more vulnerable and therefore services tended to be more risk averse to this target group rather than to young vulnerable men. Ms. Colbert advised that all of the work being undertaken at present in relation to criminal exploitation and youth offending would be around identifying and working with those young people who

were vulnerable and at risk but that there was a role there to ensure that through working with partners, services were targeting young men at risk of being referred.

Ms. Colbert stated that she was happy to go back to the Board to seek further information around what was in their programme to address the issue, specifically in relation to young males, but advised that each young person was provided with a very individualised programme and if there was a specific group identified then a dedicated piece of work would be carried out to target them and raise awareness of services available to them. Ms. Colbert advised that the data within the report covered a very narrow window so this may have had an effect on the results also.

Councillor Francis referred to the number of referrals to MSET, averaging at 26 to be considered at each meeting and asked how they could be expected to go through each case in detail if they were dealing with so many at one time. Ms. Colbert advised she would be happy to approach the Board for further detailed information but in the first instance referrals would go through a risk assessment before agreeing as to whether they should progress to the next stage of the process so there was not always a huge amount of data, at that level, to process. For information, Ms. Colbert advised the Committee that 65 to 7- referrals a day were presented at the front-door so it was not unusual to assess that much data and information and should it be necessary extra meetings could always be called to consider higher amounts.

Councillor Smith commented that after listening to social workers, partners and Members she felt that the lack of alternative youth provision was having an impact as she felt that there was not enough in place at the present time. Ms. Colbert commented that at the last Board they had undertaken a piece of work to look at a what a multi-discipline, adolescent, one-stop shop would look like, where young people could visit a single site to talk, in confidence, about issues such as sexual health, drugs, alcohol, etc. Sunderland did not appear to have a service similar to this and if one was to be provided Ms. Colbert advised that it would probably need to be based in the city centre to be the most accessible to all young people. Ms. Colbert advised that in bringing together the right partners they could look to describe what a one-stop service could provide and how they could look to work differently from the same site at times to see if they could reach more young people across the city.

The Chairman having thanked Ms. Colbert for the report and it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the information contained within the report be received and noted.

### **Annual Work Programme 2018/19**

The Head of Member Support and Community Partnerships submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work for the 2018/19 municipal year.

(for copy report – see original minutes)



Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report, advising Members of the Committee of the remainder of the work programme for the last meeting of the municipal year.

6. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme be received and noted.

### **Notice of Key Decisions**

The Head of Member Support and Community Partnerships submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from the 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2019.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

7. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

(Signed) P. SMITH,  
Chairman.