

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held REMOTELY on THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER, 2020 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Hunt, Mann, McDonough, McKeith, F. Miller, Samuels, Scanlan, Tye and K. Wood.

**Also in attendance:-**

Ms Amanda Brown, Chief Executive, Sunderland Carers Centre  
Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children  
Ms Julie Coulson, Finance Officer, Sunderland Parent Carer Forum  
Ms Anita Cutts, Chair, Sunderland Parent Carer Forum  
Ms Karen Davison, Director of Early Help, Together for Children  
Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate  
Mr. Luke Hall, Sunderland Youth Council  
Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Education, Together for Children  
Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate  
Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate  
Ms Lisa Watson, Carer Services Manager, Sunderland Carers Centre  
Ms Paula Wooton, Co Chair, Sunderland Parent Carer Forum

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Mordey, Ms Graham and Ms Blakey

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 1 October, 2020**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 1 October, 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

No declarations of interest were made.

## **Children and Young People with Send and Young Carers -Impact of Covid 19**

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced presentations from the Sunderland Carers Centre and the Sunderland Parent Carer Forum in order to hear more about the impact of the Covid 19 situation on children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and the challenges facing young carers.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

The Chairman welcomed and introduced Ms Paula Wooton, of the Sunderland Parent Carer Forum who provided the Committee with a comprehensive presentation including a brief history of the Forum and its operation, together with a detailed report on the results of the Forum's survey on the experiences of Sunderland's parent carers during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The Chair thanked Ms Wooton for her presentation and invited questions and comments from members.

Councillor Wood commended the 'brilliant' reports submitted from the Forum and the Carers Centre and reflected on what the city as a whole could do to help and support its parents and carers. She suggested that the reports were referred to the Chairs of the Council's Area Committees to see if they wished to have them considered by their Committees. The Chairman agreed and advised that she would propose that as a Committee recommendation.

Councillor Hunt echoed Councillor Wood's commendation of the reports which had made for very emotional reading. She asked if much contact had been made with parents since the full time return to school and whether the feedback showed a decrease in anxiety. Ms Wooton replied that parents of SEND children had initial concerns regarding the bubble system because the travel bubbles for the children were different to those in the classroom however this anxiety had largely eased over time as parents realised how safe the schools were. Ms Cutts added that the survey had been undertaken in the middle of lockdown when anxieties were at the highest point however things had moved on since then. The feedback she was receiving from parents now was that the schools were doing a fantastic job.

Councillor Hunt asked a supplementary question. She acknowledged that the survey had been carried out at the height of lockdown however the findings had highlighted significant concerns from parents eg poor communication over home schooling. She asked if lessons had been learned and what could be done to alleviate such concerns if a second lockdown was enforced.

Simon Marshall, Director of Education, Together for Children replied that the DfE had responded very quickly to get things in place. Lots of advice was now available for parents and schools regarding home schooling and how schools operated their blended learning. Extra funding had been made available to schools for staff training in respect of how this blended learning was delivered. The DfE had also made a huge amount of material available in respect of online learning and school staff had been able to take advantage of lockdown to consider how this could best be delivered, both at home and in the school.

Having said that, Mr Marshall acknowledged that it wasn't always easy especially in respect of SEND children, where lockdown heightened anxieties caused through isolation with children being unable to socialise. There was a reassurance through the HMI inspection regime in that the first question the Inspectors would ask was, were schools adequately prepared to support all children in learning outside of school? He believed also that TfC were now in much better position to support schools and parents should there be a second lockdown having gained experience from the first wave.

Councillor Crosby stated that the survey indicated that mental health issues were a major concern for parents along with the difficulties of accessing professional mental health care. She asked if anything could be put in place to provide support. Ms Wooton replied that although it had been difficult for people to meet in person it was important that they were able to continue to talk to ease fears of isolation. People were encouraged to utilise as many methods of communication as were open for them and to contact the Carers Centre which was there to support all carers.

Ms Watson from the Carers Centre advised that it had revised the way it delivered its services in response to the experiences of Lockdown described by carers. The Centre had run a promotional campaign in early October to advise carers of the support available to them and to acknowledge and raise the profile of the work of Parent Carers who felt that they had become the forgotten carers throughout Lockdown.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Miller, Ms Wooton and Ms Coulson outlined the measures available to support autistic children and their parents in the return to school.

The Chairman then welcomed and introduced Ms Amanda Brown, Chief Executive, of the Sunderland Carers Centre who briefed the Committee on the history of the centre and its work as a service commissioned by the Council and the CCG. She then handed over to Ms Lisa Watson, Carer Services Manager who provided members with an evaluation of the services provided by Sunderland Carers Centre during the acute lockdown stage of covid-19 and the impact the service had for the carers of Sunderland as shown through a survey of 269 participants accessing the service during that time.

Councillor Samuels welcomed the report and stated that she had had the opportunity to witness first-hand the work of the centre when meeting carers there last year. She asked if the Centre had noticed an increase in the number of young carers during the pandemic who hadn't been carers before, what challenges were they facing and was it expected that these new carers were likely to be short term carers albeit operating in very difficult circumstances? Ms Watson replied that the main focus of the Carers Centre was the long-term carers. In the case of young carers caring in the short term, it would encourage schools and GP practices to get involved in providing support. It was important that across the city, messages were continually broadcast advising carers that support was available to them and how it could be accessed.

The Carers Centre had a dozen young ambassadors who took assemblies in schools providing support to their peers. This had stopped during lockdown but it was hoped that they could be video recorded for use in schools in the future.

In conclusion Ms Wooton advised that the Parent Carers Forum intended to undertake a follow up survey of parent carer's experiences early in the new year and that she would love to bring the results back to the Committee. The Chairman confirmed that she would welcome this.

There being no further questions or comments for the representatives from the Forum and the Carers Centre, the Chairman thanked them for their reports and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the contents of the reports and presentations be noted and referred to the Area Committee Chairs for consideration.

### **Annual Work Programme 2020/21**

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided members with details of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2020/21

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report advising Members that upcoming items for the Committee included CAMHS and a presentation from Sir Paul Ennals on the work of the Sunderland Safeguarding Partnership.

Members were reminded that the work programme was a 'living' document and could be amended throughout the course of the municipal year as issues arose.

The Chairman having asked if Members had any questions or comments on the report, Councillor Tye referred to a recent meeting between the Portfolio holder and the Chief Executive regarding the development of a new youth strategy for the city. He asked if a meeting of a small working group could be scheduled into the Committee's work programme with a view to scoping the development of the strategy. In response to an enquiry from the Chair, the Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator advised that she was unaware of the meeting to which Councillor Tye was referring.

Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children advised that she would welcome member involvement in shaping the youth strategy but reminded members of the separation between the Committee's functions relating to policy development and those relating to policy review with the key principle being that no member may be involved in scrutinising a decision in which he/she had been directly involved.

There being no further questions, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Notice of Key Decisions**

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an opportunity to consider those items on

the Executive's Notices of Key Decisions for the 28 day periods from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2020.

(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, they should contact Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer for initial assistance.

There being no questions or comments it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the Notices of Key Decisions be received and noted.

There being no further items of business, the Chair closed the meeting having thanked members and officers for their attendance and contributions.

(Signed) P. SMITH,  
Chairman.