

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 1st DECEMBER 2022 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Mason-Gage in the Chair

Councillors Burrell, Crosby, Dunn, Paul Gibson, Guy, S. Johnston, Samuels, P. Smith and Thornton together with Mrs. A. Blakey.

Also in attendance:-

Ms Jill Colbert, Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, TfC
Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate.

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager, CIRT, Performance, Customer Feedback & Planning, Together for Children

Ms Tracy Jelfs, Head of Service, Cared for Children and Provider Services, TfC

Mr. David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate.

Ms Ruth Rayner, Head of Speech and Language Therapy, South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust

Ms Jane Wheeler, Early Help Service Manager, Prevention and Innovation, TfC

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Cllrs McKeith and Tye.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 3rd November 2022

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 3rd November 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Together for Children Fostering – Ofsted Feedback

Ms Tracy Jelfs, Head of Service, Cared for Children and Provider Services, TfC presented a report of the Director of Children's Services (copy circulated) in respect of the above matter and provided the Committee with a detailed commentary on the

latest Ofsted inspection report into TfC's Fostering Service carried out from 12th – 16th September 2022.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Committee was informed that the Service had been rated as good in each of the following 3 inspection categories

- Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good
- How well children and young people are helped and protected
- The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Members' attention was also drawn to the recommendations arising from the inspection as detailed on page 15 of the agenda papers.

Ms Colbert added that it was a pleasing report and that TfC were working to address any issues arising from it. She advised Members that Ofsted would also be undertaking an inspection of the Regional Adoption Agency and that the outcome of this would be reported back to the Committee in due course.

Cllr Crosby noted that any issues seemed to be around communication but that the necessary systems were in place.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Guy, Ms Colbert advised that it was acknowledged that greater consistency was required in relation to recording, and that this was already being addressed. She also believed that the inspection framework was not completely sensitive to the type of organisation that TfC were. She was satisfied however that the inspection outcome provided a high level of assurance regarding the operation of the service.

The Committee having congratulated Ms Colbert and Ms Jelfs on the successful outcome of the inspection it was :-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Speech and Language Therapy – Support for Children and Young People

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer informed the meeting that Kimm Lawson (Head of Integrated Commissioning for Children and Young People at the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and Together for Children) had intended to join the meeting remotely to provide a presentation however owing to a power failure to the Committee Room Screen this was not possible.

Photocopies of the presentation were circulated for Member's information and Ms Ruth Rayner, Head of Speech and Language Therapy, South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust provided the Committee with a comprehensive briefing on the operation of the Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service, focusing on the impact of the Covid pandemic on the Service and the implications moving forward.

(for copy report and presentation – see original minutes)

The Chair thanked Ms Rayner for her presentation, and invited questions and comments from the Committee.

With regard to the work in connection with 'left behind neighbourhoods', Councillor Samuels asked how areas were targeted and where the play groups would be located. Ms Rayner replied that they would be located at the Children's Centre and the Family Centres. She was unable to say currently which centres would be involved. The service would love to locate within every area however it did not have the staff to do so. Councillor Samuels commended the work of the team in providing a service which not only supported the child but the whole family.

Councillor Dunn stated that he also wanted to 'sing the praises' of Ms Rayner and her Team having had personal experience of the service through the support provided to his daughter. He asked if there was any comparative data to show the number of referrals to the service both pre and post Covid lock down. Ms Rayner replied that she did not have all the data to hand, but the most striking aspect was not necessarily an increase in numbers but rather an increase in the complexity of cases post lock down.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor P. Smith, Ms Rayner advised that the service currently had 1000 active referrals. Councillor Smith was surprised that the figure was so low and asked how referrals were made. Ms Rayner replied that the service operated an open referral system. Referrals could be made via a GP, school or the parent. The service tried to adopt a needs based approach taking a holistic view in thinking about the environment surrounding the child including, speech, motor, eating and drinking. It provided therapy in clinics, school and at home depending on which location best suited the needs of the child.

Councillor Smith referred to the 25 members of staff that the service was able to call on and asked how this compared to the establishment of similar services across the region. Ms Rayner replied that she believed that Sunderland was in good position citing that South Tyneside for example operated with a staff of 14. In response to Councillor Smith's final question regarding what she felt would be the biggest factor in terms of Service development moving forward, Ms Rayner advised that it would be being able to provide enough training to enable her staff to be as multi skilled as possible.

Councillor Guy stated that Ms Rayner's presentation was the best he'd heard since joining the Committee. He stated that it was clear that the impact of covid on children's development was worrying and asked if a long-term picture had developed regarding that generation. Ms Rayner replied that it was too early to know for certain. There were signs that many children had caught up however it was also clear that in general, for children in the most deprived areas this was not the case.

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

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

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 30th September 2022.

(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. She referred to members comments the last time the feedback report was submitted regarding the lack of detail of the complaints received and what had been done to resolve them. She advised the Committee that she had sought to address this in the current report through the use of case studies as appropriate. In addition, as requested by Members, where percentages were used in the report, the actual numbers the percentages related to were also included.

There being no questions or comments, the Chairman commended the report and thanked Ms Hodgkinson for her attendance, and for addressing the issues previously raised by the Committee.

4. RESOLVED that the Feedback report be received and noted

Together for Children Holiday Activity and Food Programme Summer 2022 Evaluation -

The Early Help Service Manager Prevention and Innovation, submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed the Committee on the delivery of Sunderland's Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF).

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Jane Wheeler presented the report providing members with an overview of the Summer Programme, the highlights, details of the activities, the benefits of the programme, its governance arrangements, provider quality assurance, winter 2022 delivery and the future of HAF.

The Committee was advised that the intention had been to complement the report with a video presentation which showed the programme in action however given the power outage to the Committee Room screen this was impossible. Members were informed that links to the videos could be found in paragraph 16 of the report and Mr Diamond advised that he would forward Members a link to the video following the meeting.

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

In response to a concern raised by Councillor Samuels regarding the drop out rate in relation to children receiving means tested free school meals, Ms Wheeler advised that it was believed that the availability of vouchers issued via the Government's Household Support Grant had disincentivised attendance. The aim of the HAF had been to enable providers to include a meal as part of the activity to provide a universal offer and remove any form of stigma.

The Chair advised that she was a HAF provider as part of her job and had also seen the operation of the scheme through her work as a Ward Councillor. She asked how dynamic were Providers in reacting to a situation where the scheme clearly wasn't working, for example, cases where young people weren't attending. Ms Wheeler advised that she had a good Team in place. Providers were required to submit weekly attendance sheets and the Team would actively challenge Providers if attendance was below expected levels. Providers were also put in touch with schools so they were aware of those children in receipt of means tested free school meals. In addition, Ms Wheeler informed the Committee that in general Providers were very good in reporting back when things weren't as they should be for example regarding the suitability of the venue.

Councillor Dunn asked if transport was a barrier to attendance? Ms Wheeler replied that it was recognised that this could be the case and as a result attempts had been made to ensure that the Provision in each area was within walking distance. It was interesting to note however that transport had not been flagged up as an issue in user feedback reports.

Councillor Guy referred to the graph in fig.5 and asked why the West Sunderland Area appeared to do so well. Ms Wheeler replied that there was no clear reason. There were a lot of Providers in that area, many of whom were of long standing and were trusted by their communities.

Councillor Smith having paid tribute to the local organisations for stepping up in a time of need, it was:-

5. RESOLVED the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2022/23

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the developed of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2022/23 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. Ms Colbert confirmed that it was unlikely that the Cared for Children – Deep Dive item would be ready for the January meeting given the tight Christmas deadlines and holiday commitments. It was also looking less and less likely that the Government would be proceeding with the Education White Paper in its current form which would free up space at the Committee's March meeting.

Councillor Samuels referred to the recent death of a child from health issues caused through living in a substandard rented property. She realised given the issue was largely a housing concern that it probably fell outside the Committee's remit but believed it was something that should be looked at by the Council's Scrutiny

function. The Chair replied that she would raise the issue with Councillor Dianne Snowdon, Chair of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee.

5. 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 Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from the 9th November, 2022.

(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.

6. RESOLVED that the Notice 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) K. MASON-GAGE,
Chairman.