

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 3 FEBRUARY 2022 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Dodds, Dunn, P.W.L. Gibson, Mason-Gauge, McKeith, Noble, Samuels, Scanlan, Tye together with Ms A. Blakey.

**Also in attendance:-**

Mr David Airey, Head Teacher, Venerable Bede CE Academy

Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Education, Together for Children

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

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor S. Johnson.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 2 December 2021**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 2 December 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

**Update on Catch Up Funding and Primary to Secondary School Transitions**

The Director of Education submitted a report (copy circulated) which updated the Committee on the use of catch-up funding which was announced by the Government in June 2020 to support children and young people and to also provided an update on the Primary to Secondary School transitions.

(For report – see original minutes)

Mr Simon Marshall presented the report briefing the committee on the Catch-Up Funding Programme, the basis for its allocation, the criteria for its use, the operation of National Tuition Programme (NTP) and School Led Tutoring, accountability for spending and the feedback received from schools about the Programme.

Mr Marshall believed that the challenges in respect of education caused by Covid were not only tiring on children and families, but also on staff and teachers. Omicron had hit schools hard, and the last two or three months had probably been the hardest throughout the whole pandemic, simply because staffing levels were so low at a time where people were already extremely tired. School staff as usual had really stepped up to the plate, with many of them working many more hours than they should have, simply because they wanted to do what was best for the children.

To complement Mr Marshall's report, Mr David Airey, Head Teacher of Venerable Bede CE Academy was present to add context from the perspective of a secondary school Head. He confirmed the current impact on schools which was being felt especially by children, by parents and by staff. He believed that Omicron had been the perfect storm, impacting on schools, parents, children and teachers who at that stage, were all already "frazzled."

The Chairman thanked Mr Marshall for his report and invited questions from members.

Councillor Crosby referred to reports she had read regarding the transition to secondary school, where schools were finding that an increasing number of children were starting their secondary education with a reading age of around 6 and the schools were having to undertake remedial work to help them get up to speed. Mr Airey explained the work undertaken by Venerable Bede with regard to transition and emphasised the importance of adopting a whole family approach involving not only the pupils but also their parent's and carers. With regard to literacy, it had always been the case that there would be a number of children who would not be up to the expected reading standard and programmes had been established to help them. However as result of Covid's impact over the last 2 years they were needed now more than ever. The greater the catch-up requirement, the greater the impact on staff.

Councillor Tye thanked Mr Airey and all the city's school staff for their hard work over the last two years stating that the city and its leaders owed them a huge debt of gratitude for everything that they had done. He believed it had been an absolutely phenomenal task in managing the impact of Covid and felt it was something that people outside of education didn't fully understand. With regard to the catch-up funding, he asked if it was allocated directly schools or whether it was distributed via local authorities giving them the opportunity to top slice. Mr Airey replied that it was allocated directly schools at rate of approximately £80 per pupil. Whilst very welcome it equated to only 95% of costs.

Councillor Noble echoed Councillor Tye's commendation and expressed her concern for the staff who without doubt would be physically and mentally exhausted. She welcomed the catch-up support being provided but asked Mr Airey if he believed it would be enough? Mr Airey replied that 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 had been the last full school day prior to the first national lockdown. Venerable Bede had suffered 295 days of lost teacher time and since September had employed 55 different members of staff

on a supply basis. The school tried to use positive language around the recovery, but he believed the impact of Covid would be felt for a long period of time, and would possibly take a good 10 years to wind itself through the system.

Mr Marshall stated that if a positive could be identified it was that schools in Sunderland had never been closer. This was remarkable in that the Education system was almost designed to be fragmented with its different funding regimes, different age groupings and different structures of governance. However, the ability to meet by via Teams had made a massive difference allowing people to come together and communicate very effectively. The feedback from schools in respect of communications, workshops and meetings had been brilliant.

With regard to communications, Councillor Samuels advised that the school she was involved with spoke extremely highly of the work undertaken by Mr Marshall and his Team and also their involvement in the SARA project in Southwick. In response to enquiries from Councillor Samuels, Mr Marshall and Mr Airey confirmed that with regard to the National Tutoring Programme and identifying children eligible for support, there was a standardised criteria to be followed. They also explained the flexibility and creativity that schools had been able to demonstrate in utilising the catch-up funding.

Ms Blakey informed the Committee of her experiences from the view of the Primary School Sector. In contrast to secondary schools a higher proportion of hard copy was provided for pupils given their younger age. Timetables were planned for where a pupil would be and when there would be an adult present. It was worrying to think that for a child currently about to go into year 6 at aged 10 or 11, the last time they would have spent a whole year in full time education would have been during year 3 when they would have been 6 or 7. This was a real concern for them and was not something that would disappear in a couple of years. Every child had been impacted to varying degrees however the best thing that had happened recently was getting every child physically back in school. Trying to simultaneously operate a virtual classroom and a physical one had been a nightmare. Ms Blakey was proud to say that whatever the costs, the Head Teachers in Sunderland had kept every one of the city's schools open during every day of the pandemic.

Councillor McKeith referred to the schools' partnership work undertaken with Together for Children and in particular the creation of a working party to identify what could be done jointly as a family of Sunderland schools to assist parents and pupils with transitions. With regard to this he asked if there had been an issue in schools regarding engagement and if there was anything local councillors could do to help. Mr Marshall advised that that all schools were involved in the working group and that some had needed more help to engage than others. This was not because they didn't want to engage but rather that at that time, they were over-burdened with other aspects of their work load. He didn't feel there was a need for local councillors on governing bodies to offer any additional encouragement at this stage.

In response to any enquiry from Councillor Dunn regarding additional support schools could provide for families at the transition stage, Mr Airey advised the transition stage should start as early as possible in years 4 and 5. Open evenings, transition days and summer schools would all be utilised. Bespoke transitions would be organised for vulnerable children, sometimes involving small groups to be less intimidating. The aim being to help parents demystify the process of transition and be

able to communicate this. If a parent was reticent about something this would be picked up automatically by the child.

Mr Airey stated that communication was the key and that this had been recognised early during the onset of the pandemic. Staff had developed a needs must attitude. It was quickly found that the use of Teams had the ability to provide really rich conversations allowing parents to engage with the school very easily. It also enabled the school to quickly identify families that were struggling to engage and target support appropriately.

Mr Marshall explained that TfC's main role in transitions involved providing support for SEND pupils and effectively wrapping the Team around the family.

Councillor Noble suggested that it would be great if Head Teachers such as Mr Airey and Mrs Blakey and TfC reps could attend Area Committees to meet local councillors and VCS reps to share information. Ms Colbert suggested that it might present significant capacity issues for Head Teachers however there would not be an issue in sharing area data with schools

The Chairman referred to a recent report which showed that nationally, 128,000 children had withdrawn from state education during the course of the pandemic and asked if it was known how many were from Sunderland? Ms Colbert advised that while it was true that nationally there had been a significant increase in parents electing to remove their children from state education in favour of home schooling, as a region, the North East was actually reversing that trend. She did not have the figure for Sunderland to hand but she would seek out a copy of the regional report and if it was not embargoed, would circulate it to Committee members. The Committee had recently received a report on elective home education from Elaine Matterson and it would probably be useful to bring back a revised version to the Committee later in the year.

There being no further questions or comments the Chair thanked Mr Marshall and Mr Airey for their presentation and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted;

### **Consultation with Representatives from the Change Council**

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on a meeting held with young people belonging to the Change Council, hosted by Nikki Donaldson at the Sandhill Centre on 19 January 2022 and attended by members of the Committee including Councillors Pat Smith, Josh McKeith, Margaret Crosby and Alex Samuels.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Council McKeith stated that the meeting had been very beneficial and extremely informative. He welcomed the recent motion agreed at full Council to strengthen the engagement between the Council and the city's young people and hoped it would be a positive step forward. He also welcomed that the Youth Council allowed Councillors to drop in for a 15 minute spell during its meetings. Ms Colbert reminded

the Committee that in the this regard the young people had a busy schedule of meetings and that this would need to be respected.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby, Ms Colbert and Mr Marshall provided the Committee with an update on progress being made regarding apprenticeships within TfC and also those provided by Howdens in Blyth, South Shields and Team Valley including positions for 5 cared for young people.

Councillor Samuels had found the meeting very useful and she didn't want to be in a position where she sat and listened but then failed to act. Some of the issues raised by the young people were very valid. In particular she referred to a request for flexibility in public transport travel passes to allow cared for young people to use them beyond 6pm. The Chairman replied that it was her intension that once the schedule of meetings with the Young People's groups had concluded, a list of the issues raised would be brought back to the Committee to be debated and agreed as to how they would be taken forward.

Councillor Paul Gibson believed the young people had raised some excellent issues especially in relation to apprenticeships, discrimination and transport. He believed careers lessons should be provided in schools at the earliest stage possible and also that young people were made aware of their rights.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked members for their input, and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that a report to consider the way forward on the issues raised by the Young People during the series of meetings be scheduled into the work programme.

### **Annual Work Programme 2021/22**

The Scrutiny 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 2021/22 and appended a copy of the programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Diamond presented the report and reminded the Committee that an additional meeting had been scheduled into the work programme for 9<sup>th</sup> February 2022 to consider the CCG's report in respect of Child Mental and Physical Health and also the update report in respect of the area wide SEND Inspection.

There being no further questions or comments, it was:-

4. 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 10 January, 2021.

(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 Chair closed the meeting having thanked members and officers for their attendance and contributions

Signed) P. SMITH,  
Chairman.