

**At a meeting of the SHADOW CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 28<sup>th</sup> APRIL, 2016 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor D. Dixon in the Chair

Councillors MacKnight, Gallagher, O'Neil, Waller and Waters together with Mrs A. Blakey and Mr S. Williamson.

Also in attendance:-

Councillor N. Wright, Chairman Scrutiny Committee  
Councillor L Scanlon

Ms Karen Brown, Scrutiny Officer,  
Ms Ann Goldsmith, Interim Director of Children's Services,  
Mr David. Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer,  
Mr Alan Rowan, Business Relationships and Governance Manager.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Francis and also on behalf of Ms R. Elliott

**Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Shadow Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 and of the extraordinary meeting held on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2016**

Mr Williamson referred to the meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> March with particular reference the item in respect of the SEND Local Offer. He advised that his concerns that Local Authority funding was being wasted (as while ASD places were full, those in respect of language were not) had not been recorded in the minutes. He recalled that Ms Parr had replied that the matter was being investigated and it was possible that language could be modified from 3 provisions to 2.

1. RESOLVED that subject to the above, the minutes of the of the last ordinary meeting of the Shadow Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 and of the extraordinary meeting held on 30<sup>th</sup> March (copies circulated), be confirmed and signed as correct records.

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

## **Pupil Place Planning 2016**

The Interim Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which:-

- i) provided an overview of the pupil place planning process used to project the requirement for school places in Sunderland,
- ii) set out the Council's key legal duties relating to pupil place planning, and
- iii) detailed the methodology used to project the demand for school places and an indication of need across the city in future years.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Alan Rowan, Business Relationship manager provided a lengthy commentary on the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

Mr Williamson referred to paragraph 6.4 of the report which stated 'In previous years the key difference between the admissions criteria of schools has focused on faith, with Catholic and Church of England schools identifying relevant baptism as the key admissions criteria.' He questioned whether this was the case as it was his understanding that Church of England schools in Sunderland no longer did so. In fact Church of England schools actively encouraged against the use of faith as a criterion as their schools were set up to serve their area as a whole.

Mr Rowan replied that he believed that one Church of England school still adopted such a criteria however he would check and advise the Chair and Mr Williamson accordingly.

(Mr Rowan subsequently confirmed that Mr Williamson had indeed been correct and that the last remaining C of E criteria featuring faith was changed for the current academic year)

With regard to paragraph 7, Mr Williamson commended Mr Rowan and Sunderland for their use of local data on which to base their calculations. He had first-hand experience of the problems caused in other areas by local authorities using national averages as a starting point.

Mr Williamson referred to paragraph 3.1 in respect of the increased demand for specialist school places from children on the Autistic Spectrum (ASD) at both primary and secondary level which had created significant pressure on local institutions. He believed that the point should be made to the Regional Schools Commissioner that she must take ASD into account in respect of the allocation of school funding, makes more places available for children with ASD and the funds the establishment of these places. The Chairman concurred and advised he seen the pressure that Barbara Priestman school was under and the anguish of the parents of ASD children who were unable to access the support they required. Mr Rowan stated that in an ideal world he could commission and fill 30 ASD places tomorrow. Mrs Blakey advised that the system placed so many obstacles in front of people that the child and its family did not receive the support they needed. Mr Rowan stated that Sunderland was very lucky to have such excellent schools in providing the support that they did.

Councillor Norma Wright stated that she found this aspect of the report very worrying. She relayed her personal experience of supporting a couple in her ward

who had fought long and hard to gain access to services for ASD. It was her opinion that people with ASD were not well served by the City of Sunderland and that this was something that Scrutiny should look at.

Mr Rowan having concluded his report, Mr Williamson congratulated him on his honest presentation of what was a difficult area and the debate it had engendered. The item had been generated by Scrutiny's approach to Neil Revely and was an indication of the teeth that the function possessed.

There being no further comments or questions for Mr Rowan the Chairman thanked him for his attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted:-

### **Improvement Plan – Monitoring Progress.**

Ms Goldsmith presented for members information, a copy of a report submitted to the Children's Services Intervention Board which detailed the key areas of progress since its last meeting.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

In response to Ms Goldsmith's update Councillor Gallagher contended that one of the major issues that impinged on the ability of social workers to manage a case load was the removal of their support staff. Ms Goldsmith replied that these posts had been restored.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Gallagher and the Chair in respect of recruitment, Ms Goldsmith advised members that the current focus was on filling the existing vacancies and trying to get agency staff to transfer to permanent positions. Going forward there would be an emphasis on workforce development and creating an environment where social workers could succeed. With regard to the current permanent staff, the number being retained was good. However almost 50 new permanent posts had been added to the establishment therefore until these could be recruited to on a permanent basis agency staff would continue to fill the void. The target was to fill these posts permanently at a rate of 10 per month however this was currently running at two per month. The authority was currently looking at how and where it advertised in an effort to speed up the process. It was apparent that recruitment had not been addressed proactively in the past. With regard to appointing the extra social worker managerial posts it was envisaged that this would be completed within 18 months.

With regard to accommodation for care leavers, Councillor MacKnight did not believe that the YMCA was a suitable placement for Sunderland's children. Ms Goldsmith replied that the YMCA had changed their focus, had tightened up on their criteria and now met the standards required as providers of accommodation for care leavers. There was no doubt that a range of provision was required and the Council was also looking at supported lodging for leavers.

The Chairman reiterated that the voice of the child must be heard throughout the process. Ms Goldsmith concurred stating that young people had to be given the opportunity to be heard and expect that their concerns would be addressed.

Councillor Norma Wright referred to the following two priorities where the timescales for some actions had not been met:-

‘Priority 3.20 - We have not yet managed to establish a Family Group conference service although models in use elsewhere are being reviewed.’

‘Priority 7.9 - (Procure and implement a new electronic social care recording system which enables effective case recording and data sharing and provides appropriate management information). The timescale for the development of the specification has been delayed and will now be completed in May.’

With regard to priority 3.20 she asked how long would it take to fulfil and in respect to priority 7.9 when would the upgraded system finally be up and running?

Ms Goldsmith advised that the Family Group Conference service would be located within the Early Help service. Simone Common the Council’s Head of Community and Family Wellbeing had been to view the operation of similar models in other authorities such as Leeds. The Service was currently at the stage of establishing job descriptions. With regard to priority 7.9 there had been a very challenging procurement process, the result of which would be known by the end of May. Both of the potential providers had indicated that there would need to be a 12month implementation programme however it was hoped that this could be negotiated downwards.

With regard to the statement in the report that ‘the standard of accommodation provided to care leavers was now good’ Councillor Wright stated that she still had some concerns and would like to see it improved. Ms Goldsmith advised that the service was encouraging as many young people to stay put with their foster carers for as long as possible. For those leaving residential care they may go into semi-independent living in order to build confidence. The greatest concern revolved around those young people who were in care placements that had broken down. Accommodation for care leavers sat in a range of different places and it was all about finding the right place to meet the needs of the young person. The Council would only put a young person in accommodation that was safe and with an improving quality of support. The use of the word ‘good’ was a relative term, however the standard in Sunderland was now a lot better than in many other local authorities.

Councillor Wright noted that Ms Goldsmith was leading the improvement journey for Children’s Services and asked if she felt that Sunderland was now in a better position than it was previously. Ms Goldsmith stated that it was definitely in a better position than last year however it would be difficult to have been worse. She advised that although improvement was being made her major worry was that it was not consistent. She was not therefore at a stage where she could feel satisfied yet. One child failed was one child too many.

Councillor Gallagher referred to the old system where there were regular member inspections of establishments to meet staff. She believed it was a system that worked and that it should be reinstated. Ms Goldsmith advised that there were

currently no plans to do so as the focus remained on make sure the service was safe first.

Councillor Wright reiterated the point that Scrutiny had repeatedly asked to meet with social workers and have the ability to follow example cases from start to finish. Members had also asked to be able to meet with some of the looked after children outside of the formal committee setting and had asked that investigations be undertaken to find a mechanism that would allow them to do so.

There being no further comments or questions for Ms Goldsmith the Chairman thanked her for attendance and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that subject to the above comments the report and presentation be received and noted.

### **Notice of Key Decisions**

The Head of Scrutiny and Area Arrangements 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 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2016.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

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

### **Annual Work Programme 2015/16**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Shadow Committee's work being undertaken during the remainder of the 2015/16 council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

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

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

(Signed) D. DIXON,  
Chairman.