

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 OCTOBER 2016

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF AREA ARRANGEMENTS, SCRUTINY AND MEMBER SUPPORT AND DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

CONSULTATION WITH SOCIAL WORK STAFF – NEXT STEPS TEAM

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To consider feedback from the Committee's visit to meet social work staff based in the Next Steps Team.

2. Background

- 2.1 In setting its work programme for the year, the Committee requested that members be provided with an opportunity to meet and receive feedback from social work staff.
- 2.2 To this end, arrangements have been made for a rolling programme of meetings with staff involved in each stage of a child's journey through social care; including:-
 - a) Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Assessments Teams - this is where referrals into social care are screened and, if appropriate, assessments are undertaken;
 - b) Locality Teams - these teams work with children who are subject to child protection plans and those children who were looked after while subject to court proceedings;
 - c) Permanence Team - this team is responsible for children who are looked after permanently and have no plan to return home;
 - d) Next Steps Team – who are responsible for our care leavers.

3. Current Position

- 3.1 On 21 September 2016, Committee members met with social work staff belonging to the Next Steps Team. The meeting was held at the offices based at 32 West Sunnyside, Sunderland. Members in attendance included Councillor Pat Smith, Councillor Norma Wright, Councillor Bob Francis, Councillor Paula Hunt, Councillor Julia Jackson and Councillor Alex Scullion.
- 3.2 The meeting involved an open discussion between members and staff on the issues facing the service. In summary these included:-
 - Staff considered that they have been properly consulted on the formation of Together for Children and that their voice was being heard. It was felt that the new management approach was open and accessible and that they were willing to respond to queries and views. For example there had been thorough consultation prior to the recent Ofsted monitoring visits and

staff had felt well briefed and prepared. It was considered that the meeting with Ofsted had been a very positive experience with an open dialogue and a focus on their work with young people. It was felt that in the past staff had not been kept informed as well as they could have been and that it was important for Together for Children to consult with staff in a real and meaningful way on their plans for the future.

- While still early days, staff viewed Together for Children as a potential opportunity to improve the service. It was considered important for the Council to be committed and supportive of the Trust if it was to prosper. The Council still retains a key role in promoting the well-being of young people in the city and must continue to work actively with Together for Children.
- A key consideration for staff was the need to maintain continuity. It was hoped that recent leadership changes would stabilise the situation and allow staff to focus on their work with young people. It was important that the momentum for change was sustained and built upon.
- Staff recognised that there had been substantial investment in the service which had been lacking in recent years. The last year had seen a fall in case load which was now at a more manageable level. It was felt that a lack of administrative support had diverted staff from their key role of working with young people.
- For a number of years, the service had operated with an archaic and inefficient IT system which was not fit for purpose. It was understood that the new system (Liquid Logic) should be operational within the next 10 months and this was welcomed.
- It was felt that the relocation of the service from the Sandhill site to its present location in the city centre was as a major improvement, allowing staff to be closer to clients and promoting greater informal contact.
- It was considered that the morale of the team was good. The makeup of the team had remained fairly stable with less reliance on agency staff than other areas of the service. Future staff turnover rates would depend on securing the commitment and support of staff and properly valuing their contribution.
- Staff noted that the social and economic problems facing the city were increasing the demand on the service and the complexity of their work. However it was felt that the team had the skills and expertise to meet these demands.
- In terms of the priority issues for staff, there was concern at the lack of options available for young people with behavioural problems requiring emergency accommodation.

- Staff also hoped that more could be done to secure apprenticeship opportunities within the Council for young people leaving care. It was felt that the Council, as the young person's corporate parent, should do everything in its power to help that young person find employment. Access to meaningful employment was considered essential to the long term welfare of a young person leaving care; reducing the risk of them experiencing problems in the future. It was recognised that apprenticeships were increasingly difficult to access and highly competitive.
- Staff felt it was important to raise the profile of the looked after children service and within the Council and in the city.

3.3 It was suggested that members may be interested in visiting the centre on an informal basis as a way of hearing the voice of young people themselves. Details were provided of regular Drop in Sessions held at Sans Street Youth Centre on Wednesday's 4-6pm.

4 Conclusion

4.1 The meeting with staff from the Next Steps Team was the first in a rolling programme of meetings with social work staff. The meeting provided the opportunity to seek the views of staff on the development of the service.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider and comment on the feedback from social work staff based in the Next Step Team.

6. Glossary

None

7 Background Papers

None