

## **Children, Education & Skills Scrutiny Committee**

**Chair: Cllr Katherine Mason-Gage**

**Vice Chair: Cllr Joshua McKeith**

**Committee Members: Councillors Mark Burrell, Margaret Crosby, Richard Dunn, Paul Gibson, Logan Guy, Sam Johnston, Alex Samuels, Pat Smith, Melanie Thornton and Philip Tye**

**Co-opted Members: Ann Blakey (Roman Catholic Diocese)**

At the start of the year, the Committee received a report on the TfC Self Evaluation, a document setting out the performance, quality and impact of children's services in Sunderland. This document played an important part in highlighting our priorities for the year and establishing our annual work programme. Issues raised included early help, prevention and innovation, safeguarding, children in need and child protection, cared for children, fostering and participation and engagement.

The Committee received a highly positive report about the progress being made by the Early Help service. We heard that there had been a return to the pre-pandemic level of families being supported by an Early Help Plan, together with an 8% decrease in the numbers of children stepping up to statutory services. Three quarters of families supported through Family Group Conferencing stepped down to the universal services and required no further support and a further 8% required a lower level of support. The Youth Drug and Alcohol project (YDAP) recorded a positive outcome rate of 92%. Of the young people engaged as part of the Wear Kids (Anti-Social Behaviour) programme, 80% remained out of the youth justice system.

The Committee also heard more about the progress of the Holiday Activity and Food Programme which provides the opportunity for children from disadvantaged families to access nutritious food and a range of organised out of school activities. Feedback from the programme has been very positive and the Committee thanked all involved for their efforts.

The Committee heard from Louise Farthing, the Portfolioholder for Children, Learning and Skills on the renewal of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. This has involved working with the Change Council to focus on the priorities identified by young people, including health and care, stigma, employment, education, leisure, housing and transport.

The Committee also received a report on current training and apprenticeship access for care experienced young people, including Virtual School's support to reduce the number of NEET cared for young people. We heard that Sunderland Virtual School has been selected to participate in a one-year DfE pilot of Pupil Premium Plus Grant funding (PP+) for post 16 cared for young people, with a focus on improving retention in Education, Employment and Training and raising attainment in Maths and English.

We also heard how Virtual School works with employers and local training providers to identify suitable opportunities and apprenticeships for young people and ensure that the needs of the apprentices are met.

In October 2022, the Committee considered the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of Together for Children Fostering. The service was rated as Good in each of the three Inspection categories; overall experiences and progress of children and young people, how well children and young people are helped and protected and the effectiveness of leaders and managers. It was noted that the service was developing an action plan arising from the issues raised. The Committee commended the service on the outcome of the Inspection.

Building on our work last year, the Committee received a further update on SEND provision in Sunderland following an Inspection undertaken in June 2021. We heard that the process of joint commissioning had been improved through the use of improved information and working more closely with children, young people and families. Improvements also included the establishment of a new SEND Governance structure, a shared data platform to enable data to be shared across education, social care and health and the development of a range of co-production tools such as Mind of My Own.

We heard from Catherine Barnett, Headteacher Hylton Red House Nursery School / Chair of Thriving and Coping Group about the introduction of the Mental Health Charter Mark Award and the work going on amongst a network of schools to develop school based approaches to support resilience, mental health and emotional wellbeing. We heard that funding had been secured by Sunderland CCG to employ mental health workers who were trained teachers to work with a multi-disciplinary team in the delivery of low level interventions. This should help to reduce the pressure on the CAMHS and CYPS services by preventing issues escalating to a point requiring that level of intervention.

In setting our work programme, the Committee asked for an update on the demands facing the Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service focusing on the impact of the Covid pandemic and its future implications. We heard that while the period had seen an increase in numbers, the most striking factor had been the increase in the complexity of cases. The Committee commended the work and commitment of the Team in providing a service which not only supported the child but also families as a whole.

The Committee received an update on the level of childhood obesity and the approaches being taken nationally and locally. This issue falls hardest on children from low-income backgrounds, as obesity rates are highest in the most deprived areas and have been exacerbated further as a result of Covid. Living with obesity can significantly affect health outcomes for children, both in the short term and into their adult life.

We heard that tackling obesity was a complex issue which required joint working across national government, local authorities and a wide range of partners. On the positive side, we heard that recent data indicates that healthy weight prevalence has

improved following the increase in obesity during the 2020-21 and it was hoped this trend would continue.

The Committee received a report on the work going on to support children and young people who were unaccompanied and seeking asylum. We heard that TFC had developed staffing expertise and pathways to help meet the needs of these young people. However, the challenges and resource implications were considerable and continued to place very significant demands on the service.

Toward the end of the year, an update was provided on the verified overall school performance data for the academic year 2021 – 2022 and the key priorities for the school improvement service. Details were provided around Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, together with GCSE results. It was noted that the DfE had stressed that performance data for 2022 should not be directly compared with 2019 and earlier or comparisons made between schools, as different schools may have been affected differently by the Covid pandemic.

An on-going problem for the city has been the relatively high numbers of young people not in education, employment or work (NEET). The Committee received an update on measures being taken to tackle this issue and ensure that as a city that we are able to equip our young people for employment.

In 13 December 2022, HM Inspectorate of Probation published the outcome of its inspection of Youth Offending Services in Sunderland. Overall, the service was rated as Good. The Inspection found a skilled service, with strengths evident in the partnership's strategic approach to prioritising prevention and diversion. It was considered a well-led and well-managed partnership. The case management of out-of-court disposals was of a high standard, underpinned by clear policy and provision arrangements. YOS staff and senior leaders were found to have a shared commitment to ensuring that children receive the most appropriate services and interventions at the earliest stage. An improvement plan has been prepared in response to the recommendations detailed in the inspection report. The Committee commended the service on the outcome of the Inspection.

The Committee places great importance on listening to the views of young people. At the start of the year, members of the Committee met with young people from Cozmik 3piphany; a group for young people who identify as LGBTQ+ or are questioning their sexuality and/or gender identity. The meeting provided an opportunity to hear their views and priorities for the future.

Last year, the Committee received the feedback on the Ofsted Inspection of Children Services and were delighted to hear that the service had received an outstanding rating. The Committee has continued to receive periodic performance report in order to demonstrate that the level of improvement was being maintained and we will continue to monitor the progress into the future. The Committee has also received regular update reports on Children Services Customer feedback reports. I am pleased to see that these show a continuing reduction in the number of complaints.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the members of the Committee for their contributions and to thank all the officers and witnesses who gave up their time to attend and provide insights into the services they provide and the challenges they face.

**Councillor Katherine Mason-Gage**

**Chair of the Children Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee**