

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

**Chair: Cllr Pat Smith**

**Vice Chair: Cllr Bob Francis**

**Committee Members: Councillors Richard Bell, Niall Hodson, Paula Hunt, Fiona Miller, Victoria O'Neil, Claire Rowntree, Alex Samuels, Alex Scullion, Philip Tye, Karen Wood.**

**Co-opted Members: Ann Blakey (Roman Catholic Diocese) and Ms J Graham (Church of England Diocese)**

During the year the Committee has focused much of its work on monitoring the progress being made in improving the delivery of children's services in the city following the outcome of a re-inspection of services by Ofsted in July 2018.

This has been achieved by a variety of means. Firstly, the Committee has received bi-monthly monitoring reports on the performance of Together for Children and closely reviewed progress across a suite of key performance indicators. Central to the success of this process has been the quality of the information and data provided and the Committee has sought to ensure that performance reports are focused, timely and in a form that allows an informed judgement to be made. Next year the Council and TfC will be adopting a revised performance management framework and it is anticipated that this change will better enable us to monitor progress.

Another means of overseeing improvement has been to monitor the progress being made in implementing the TfC Learning and Development Plan that was prepared in response to actions arising from the Ofsted recommendations. The 15 priorities and the associated actions attached to them should help provide a clear framework for improving the delivery of children's services into the future.

Based on this information provided in these reports, the Committee has focused on a number of key areas including the improvements being made to the operation of the ICRT service and the action being taken to ensure that the correct referral criteria is being used by our partners. We have also looked at the measures being taken to reduce the risk of child sexual exploitation, the services available to support the victims of domestic abuse, the support provided for looked after children and measures being introduced to bring greater consistency to social work practice. We also heard about the action being taken to reduce the dependency on agency workers among social work staff and it is pleasing to report that these are having a positive impact.

There is no doubt as to the challenging environment within which children's services operates in the city given the increasing demand for services and the financial constraints on the resources available. Nevertheless backed by the actions being taken by Together for Children and the Council, the Committee looks forward to seeing demonstrable improvements in children's services in the year ahead.

An on-going problem for the city has been the relatively high numbers of young people not in education, employment or work (NEET). To this end we received a report on the measures being taken to combat this problem. Clearly this is a difficult issue to address particularly in the current economic climate. We feel that it will only be through effective joint working by partner agencies that concrete and lasting progress can be made.

During the year, the Committee has met with representatives from the NHS Sunderland Clinical Commissioning Group in order to address concerns relating to the provision of mental health services for children and young people and in particular the waiting times for access to services. Once again the CCG has seen a dramatic increase in the demands placed upon the service. We

heard about the range of improvements that are planned for the future to make more effective use of the resources available and we look forward to these improvements making a significant impact on the quality and timeliness of service delivery.

The Committee has met with a range of partner organisations in order to review the progress being made on the safeguarding of children. The Independent Chair of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board took us through the progress being made by the Safeguarding Board and the challenges they face in the year ahead. The Committee has also received updates on the Corporate Parenting Annual Report, together with the report of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) on the number and type of complaints submitted by service users. A central theme of these discussions has been the importance of securing effective joint working and close cooperation between partners as we move toward improving children's safeguarding services in the city.

Last year, the Committee organised a number of visits to meet with staff in TfC to hear at first hand their views on the improvements being made to the service. This year we had the opportunity to meet with staff from the Early Help Team. The meeting raised a number of important issues including the growth in domestic abuse directed at parents and the need for greater support to young people who witness domestic abuse in the home. Reference was also made to the need for more support for young people with challenging behaviour and the need to provide more support and training for those young people who are not yet ready to access apprenticeships.

We feel that such meetings with staff provide a valuable insight into the challenges they face and I feel I speak for all my fellow members when I say how impressed we were with the positivity and commitment of people we spoke to during our visit.

A major priority of the Committee has been to make sure that we, and indeed the Council as a whole, listen to the voice of young people and take into account their views on the delivery of the services impacting upon them. During the year representatives from the Sunderland Youth Parliament have again attended meetings of the Committee and I feel that they have made a very positive and significant contribution to our meetings.

With regards to the schools sector, the Committee has continued to review the latest figures for educational attainment in our primary and secondary schools. Once again, these were encouraging in the primary school sector, though it is clear that more needs to be done to improve performance at secondary school level. These concerns have been relayed to the Regional Commissioner and arrangements will be made for a meeting of the appropriate bodies in order to discuss this issue in greater detail.

The Committee was also greatly concerned at the increase in the number of educational exclusions and significant variations that exists from school to school. In order to investigate these issues in greater detail the Committee intends to establish a task and finish group in the year ahead.

Clearly, the year has been an extremely challenging and demanding one for the Committee, though I hope positive and productive for those involved. I would like to thank all the members of the Committee for their contributions and also to thank all of 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 Pat Smith**  
**Chair of the Children Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee**