

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held REMOTELY on THURSDAY 9TH JULY, 2020 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Hunt, Mann, McDonough, McKeith, F. Miller, Rowntree, Samuels, Scanlan, Tye and K. Wood.

Also in attendance:-

Mr Martin Birch, Director of Children's Social Care, Together for Children
Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate
Mr. Luke Hall, Sunderland Youth Council
Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate
Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

The Chairman opened the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Ms Graham and Ms Blakey.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 5th March, 2020

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 5th March, 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

No declarations of interest were made.

Update from Together for Children – Covid 19

Mr Birch present a report of the Chief Executive, Together for Children, (copy circulated) which provided a summary of issues that had arisen during the Covid19 pandemic and the associated restrictions, together with the actions taken to

safeguard children by service area. The report also provided a summary of Together for Children's performance data from February 2020 to date.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Tye, Mr Birch advised that none of TfC's young people being fostered or adopted during the pandemic had been displaced. If Councillor Tye was aware that children had been displaced it was possible that these cases were ones involving private fostering agencies. Councillor Tye replied that this was probably not the correct forum to pursue the matter and he would contact Mr Birch off-line.

Councillor Crosby highlighted the reference in the report to 'Neighbourhood Teams' and asked how these were organised. Mr Birch advised that they were locality based so there were 2 teams covering Washington, 2 teams covering the Coalfield, 2 teams in North Sunderland and 4 teams covering the rest of the city.

Councillor Hunt referred to the rate of child safeguarding referrals and asked if it was likely to see an increase with the easing of lockdown and the return to school of all year groups in September. Mr Birch replied that this would probably be the case and TfC were preparing on this basis however it was educated guess work and nothing was predictable. In normal circumstances the referral rate from schools was around 6%. During lock down, referrals had continued to be received through the Police Force.

Councillor Rowntree highlighted the reference in the report to the 'Mind of Our Own' service and welcomed the increased levels of engagement during the period of lockdown. She asked how this level of engagement would be maintained and in particular how would the voice of a child without access to the internet be heard? Mr Birch advised that every disadvantaged child or a child TfC had concerns about in this regard had received a laptop as part of the Government sponsored roll out. With regard to the wider engagement TfC had promoted the 'mind of our own' as much as was possible. Where it was not possible Social Workers would use direct contact to alleviate any concerns. The app was less popular among older teenagers but this group were always quick to get in touch if ever they had any issues.

Councillor Mann referred to TfC's residential children's homes and acknowledged the seriously difficult, challenging and testing time that had been faced by the service. She was aware that some staff redeployment had taken place and asked how quickly this had been organised and whether staff and residents had been tested for coronavirus. Mr Birch replied that some staff had been redeployed. The service had anticipated that there could be problems in respect of the children's homes as not all young people fully understood the requirements around lockdown and social distancing. In some cases children had left their home and mixed with friends in the wider community and this had caused anxiety among some members of staff. There had been no serious issues however and there were only one or two members of staff who were self-isolating. Two members of staff had tested positive for the virus but this had been while away from the homes in which they worked. Mr Birch praised the commitment and flexibility of the staff in TfC which had allowed it to bring in staff from other service areas very rapidly to support its residential homes.

Mr Birch confirmed that staff were being tested. He was not aware that testing of children was being undertaken but he would check and advise the Committee accordingly.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Samuels Mr Birch advised that TfC had not been able to operate its direct family time service for its looked after children in the usual manner and that this had been undertaken virtually instead. This had been in line with the picture nationally as a lot of foster carers were in at risk groups however from this week TfC were looking to reintroduce face to face contact. This would be judged on a more or less case by case basis, with each being risk assessed based on the particular circumstances of the child, family, carer and social worker.

Councillor F. Miller advised that she worked at a food bank three days a week and it had become apparent that there were children there presenting with issues including drug abuse. She asked if members had a safeguarding concern about a child, how should it be reported. Mr Birch advised members to continue to use the normal reporting process. Concerns would be picked up at the 'Front Door' and addressed at the early help stage or via a social worker intervention. To do otherwise would circumvent the appropriate recording measures and would not be welcomed by Ofsted.

Councillor McDonough referred to the other agencies involved in the safeguarding process and whether joint working had been impacted because of the restrictions around the pandemic. He also referred to the re-referral rates and asked if it was likely that these would increase. Mr Birch advised that the partnership work with other agencies had remained strong. From the perspective of the MASH the various agencies had been in constant contact and maintained the dialogue throughout whether via face to face meetings or remotely. There had been no issues.

With regard to re-referral rates these were down to 22% and were remaining fairly static. This contrasted with the picture regionally with the performance indicator data for most local authorities showing a rise in re-referrals. This reflected well on the work being undertaken in Sunderland. A new system had been introduced which RAG rated every referral. Any re-referral was flagged as red and immediately picked up to assess the rationale behind it (why has it come back to us? how can we take action to mitigate any future concerns?). Mr Birch stated that if anything, he would expect the re-referral rates to reduce rather than increase going forward.

The Chair referred to section 3.9 of the report regarding the virtual school, which informed members that TfC had purchased laptops for all children in children's homes and had worked with schools on the use of pupil premium to buy laptops where this was necessary. The Chair having asked how many laptops had been purchased, Mr Birch advised that to date 1,100 laptops had been rolled out.

The Chair referred to the recent peer review which had identified consistency of recording as a key area for focus. She stated that members had heard this being identified as an issue year after year and asked what was being done to address it. Mr Birch replied that the service had recently changed its social work model to the 'signs of safety'. It was estimated that the model would take around 5 years to fully bed in and that TfC were still at the very start of that journey.

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

2. RESOLVED that the contents of the report and presentation be received and noted.

Annual Report

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator submitted a report which sought approval from the Committee for the report as part of the overall scrutiny annual report 2019/2020.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report, advising Members that as in previous year's the annual report would be a single combined report of all four Scrutiny Committees and would be presented to Council via the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee. The report would outline the development in the scrutiny function and provide a snapshot of their work during the last twelve months.

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

3. RESOLVED that the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee Annual Report be approved and included within the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2019/20.

Annual Work Programme 2019/20

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided members with details of the development of Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2020/21

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report, advising Members that the Covid-19 crisis had obviously impacted the work programme planning which would normally have taken place in May/June 2020, and with social distancing still in place a large-scale event would not be recommended currently. There was still the opportunity however to develop work programmes during July/August through individual workshops which would be more manageable through the processes that will be in place at this time to address the Covid-19 crisis.

The Chair having highlighted the need to retain a focus on the issue of apprenticeships within the work programme, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that approval be given to the development of the Committee's work programme through individual workshops organised and developed through the scrutiny function. Such workshops to take place during July/August with the aim of providing a number of relevant issues and topics for consideration and approval by the Committee.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator 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 15th June, 2020.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor Crosby drew members attention to item 200604/486 (to approve the first revenue review 2020-21) which was due to be considered by Cabinet on 14th July. She advised that papers for that meeting outlined that £10m was to be allocated to TfC. £8.6m as a response to COVID related issues, £1.5 to cover lost income and £0.6m to cover lost income at Derwent Hill. She stated that this highlighted the pressures being faced by Children's Services currently.

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

5. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked members and officers for their attendance and contributions.

(Signed) P. SMITH,
Chairman.