

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1 of the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on WEDNESDAY 28<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2018 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Francis in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Hunt, F. Miller and Scullion together with Mrs. A. Blakey

**Also in attendance:-**

Ms. Karen Davison, Director of Early Help, Together for Children  
Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council  
Ms. Jayne Ivory, Director of Performance and Quality, Together for Children  
Mr. Thomas Newton, Sunderland Youth Parliament  
Ms. Debra Patterson, Director of Safeguarding, Together for Children  
Ms. Joan Reed, Strategic Advice Services Manager, Sunderland City Council  
Mr. Liam Ritchie, Sunderland Youth Parliament and Sunderland Youth Inspectors  
Ms. Gillian Robinson, Area Coordinator, Sunderland City Council  
Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Foster, Jackson, Smith, Stewart and Tye and on behalf of Mr. S. Williamson.

**Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2018**

Subject to the inclusion of Councillor F. Miller in the recorded attendance, it was:-

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

**Universal Credit Potential Risks and Mitigations**

The Strategic Advice Services Manager, People Directorate, submitted a report (copy circulated) and gave a presentation which provided the Committee with information on Universal Credit and the potential risks and mitigations.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Joan Reed, Strategic Advice Services Manager, gave the presentation and took Members through the report which had been requested at the last meeting of the Committee in respect of on-going activity to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform. The report and presentation also provided information specifically around the timeline and issues associated with the Universal Credit Full Service rolling out in the city.

Ms. Reed advised that Universal Credit had originally been planned for implementation from October, 2013 and was now running 4-5 years late and that roll out for Sunderland had been expected in May, 2018 but had now been pushed back to July, 2018, at this stage.

Councillor Hunt sought clarification around customers being paid in arrears who were currently paid on a weekly or fortnightly basis and Ms. Reed advised that when the system went live in July it would only be for new claimants in the first instance; before being rolled out to the remainder of claimants at a later date but explained there were two solutions to the problem. Customers could request advance payments and have longer to repay them or they could ask for alternative payments to be made, where payments could be made direct to their landlord.

Ms. Hunt asked if the alternative payments were new as she was aware that previously with Gentoo, only those tenants who were already in arrears with rent payments would be considered. Ms. Reed advised that previously it had been if the tenant was in arrears of eight weeks or more but that in certain circumstances alternative payments could be requested to be made sooner than this.

Ms. Blakey referred to families who may be seen to be struggling; either by professionals in schools or other partners; and asked if it would be clear for professionals as to where or who to signpost these families to. Ms. Reed advised that information was to go to Members giving advice of where families could go for advice and support. The Community Hub on the website would provide all of the information necessary and would be kept up to date and customers would be directed towards this in the first instance as it would have the most current information within it. The Department of Work and Pensions site also provided a good level of information on their website.

Ms. Blakey commented that the school environment was the ideal place to make contact with a lot of families and to share information as they could advise parents/families in a more informal manner when they saw or perceived a family may be struggling. She suggested Officers should look to utilise as many points of contact with families as they could.

Ms. Reed advised there was a meeting to be held in April where they would be discussing the pooling of resources, training and the toolkit which was to be created. Other support services and how to best communicate as far and wide as they could to get information to residents would be part of those discussions. She commented that with the roll out expected in July, 2018 it may be difficult to utilise schools as it would start just as the school summer holidays begin. She reiterated that the first roll out would be for new claimants only but agreed that it was imperative to get the information regarding Universal Credit and the changes which were to be introduced to as many people who may be affected as possible.

Councillor Bell thanked Ms. Reed for the informative presentation but raised concerns around the introduction of the changes. He commented that it could cause issues such as extra pressures on family's resulting in family break ups; a lot of family's receiving less money; sanction problems, which was especially worrying for those individuals who have learning difficulties or mental health issues; and commented he had first-hand experience of the transfer of Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independent Payments and the errors which were still being made in relation to that so it did not fill him with confidence that the roll out of Universal Credit would be without its problems.

Ms. Reed agreed with a lot of the issues Councillor Bell had raised and assured the Committee that Officers would be working to try and alleviate as many issues that they could that were under Council control. Services would be looking to support as many people as much as they could through the transition process and ensure that people knew where to go for help and advice.

In response to a query from Councillor Miller around part time employment hours being taken into account, Ms. Reed advised that the Department for Work and Pensions were looking to move away from the idea that people would be sanctioned and more towards convincing them to ask more questions and look for more support and advice as to what work/benefit allowances there were available to them. Information needed to get out to people that it was okay to ask questions and seek advice and that a lot of Universal Credit was about changing the culture of claiming benefits and getting back into work.

Councillor Scullion asked if information was being shared between local authorities to share best practice that may have worked when Universal Credit was introduced in their areas. Ms. Reed advised that impact analysis was difficult to carry out at the moment due to the different position each authority was in although a lot of anecdotal cases were being shared and Officers were trying to listen to experiences from neighbouring authorities. The roll out of Universal Credit in Sunderland would not be exactly the same as other areas but hearing what had and had not worked elsewhere would be useful. Councillor Francis commented that it may be useful for Members of the Committee to receive examples of cases, fully anonymised, to allow them to better understand some of the issues that were being faced and how they were addressed.

Members having no further questions and having fully considered the report, it was;-

2. RESOLVED that information provided within the presentation and the report on the potential risks and mitigations in relation to Universal Credit be received and noted.

### **Together for Children Performance Update**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with performance information in relation to Together for Children and the commissioning arrangement in the Council, offering assurance over progress and any issues that had arose, in the context of the scope of service and performance indicators as set out in the service contract.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Jane Ivory, Director of Performance and Quality, Together for Children, presented the report advising that the Operational Commissioning Group and Chief Executives Clinic met on a monthly basis to consider information and progress made and the information contained within the report included all nine of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), the supporting measures that were not meeting target and some areas of management information. The tolerance level for each of the measures was also included in the report as previously requested by the Committee. The performance information contained within the report submitted at this meeting related to the period April – December, 2017.

Councillor Hunt referred to paragraph 3.7 of the report and advised Officers of a very interesting meeting the Committee had recently with a number of Social Workers and commented that it would be beneficial for Members to have a full breakdown of the figures similar to that which had been requested by the Operational Commissioning Group but also including how many of the plans were for unborn babies or for children referred on from the Early Help Service. Ms. Patterson advised that she could ensure that a copy of the analysis could be forwarded to the Committee Members once it was complete.

Mr. Newton asked if the increase in the number of children being subject to a child protection plan could be seen as a positive as it could be due to services being more proactive and children benefitting from available support and services. Ms. Ivory advised that meetings had been held and Officers had been informed that from evidence provided they looked to be making the right decisions for the right children in relation to the level of support and intervention they required so some of the increase could be due to children being offered the right level of help at the right times. Ms. Patterson agreed and commented that Early Help Services were now helping to identify levels of need in children and young people much sooner than in previous years and that this would have an impact on numbers.

Ms. Blakey commented that statistics could only tell so much of the story and it was more about ensuring that children were on the most appropriate plan and level of support and asking if they were getting this right for children in the city. With regards to the increase in the numbers of children being subject to plans she asked if this was due to Sunderland doing something better than neighbouring authorities to identify those children or if all authorities were comparing different figures. Ms. Patterson advised that they did meet with colleagues from neighbouring authorities and she had found that where there were spikes in the number of children being referred to the services it seemed to tie in with spikes in their authorities. She advised that child protection plans were not just the decision of Together for Children Officers but would be agreed upon as the right action following involvement from a number of multi agency partners.

Ms. Patterson commented that more could be done to reduce the number of children in the city who were subject to child protection plans but they had to understand the needs of the individual child for being subject to the plan. Officers would continue to work with families to minimise the risk to children and young people and look to keep them in the family home and off a plan where they could; but she assured Members that she would prefer to come to a scrutiny committee and explain the reasons behind an increase in the figures than to allow children in the city to be at risk.

Members having fully considered the report and having no further questions for Officers, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the information contained within the report in relation to the Together for Children performances be received and noted.

## **Early Help Update**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an update on the Early Help Service since its launch on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2017.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Karen Davison, Director of Early Help, Together for Children, presented the report advising that the new Early Help Service was established on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2017 to replace the previous arrangement which was known as 'Strengthening Families'. It had been recognised that the model had become inefficient and was not working in the way it was originally set up, and the new Early Help service was developed to address this.

Councillor Bell commented that working with children from a younger age could make a real difference and sought the Officers views on the provision of nursery hours for children from two years old. Ms. Davison advised that the take up of the provision in Sunderland was in line with the national average but that they continued to work to increase the numbers as children generally benefited from being in a nursery from a young age.

Ms. Davison went on to comment that there were many advantages to young children having nursery placements as it helped them to begin to socialise and helped professionals identify any delay in development which could then be picked and supported. The aim in Early Help was to work to get more children into nursery placements and they would continue to work with parents to get them to take up these places.

Councillor Hunt referred to a recent meeting with Early Help staff and commented that it had been really positive to hear how enthusiastic the team were and that the barriers in communication and information sharing had improved massively. She advised that there had been concerns around issues for young people with mental health issues and ensuring that the service and resource could support the level of need that there could be. She asked that her thanks be forwarded to the team for the open and honest discussions they had with Members but stated that some of the issues which had been raised, which would be referred to in the report back to the Committee, could be areas for the Scrutiny Committee to add to the work programme for consideration.

Councillor Francis referred to comments from Ofsted around the inconsistencies in the quality of assessment, planning and management and Ms. Davison advised that this was already an area that had been identified for further action. She advised that Ofsted had commented that the quality of self-assessment was very good and for a very new service there would be some members of staff who may take longer than others to adapt to the new ways of working. It was expected that the introduction of

the Liquid Logic system would correct any inconsistencies due to the order of processes that had to be worked through within the system. Management staff would look to work with those members of staff who needed further support and/or training to continue to drive forward the improvements in consistency to the acceptable level.

Members having fully considered the report and having no further questions for Officers, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the information contained within the report in relation to the Early Help Service be received and noted.

### **Connexions Update**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an update on the Connexions Service.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Karen Davison, Director of Early Help, Together for Children, presented the report advising that schools and academies were responsible for students from Year 8 upwards (age 13+) and that they were free to commission their independent careers education, information advice and guidance (CEIAG) from any organisation or agency with appropriately qualified staff, although they were not obliged to purchase this from their local authority.

She explained that the local authority had a statutory duty to provide CEIAG for groups of students considered to be vulnerable and in Sunderland this had been provided historically by the Connexions service. On 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2017 this duty had passed to Together for Children together with the staff in the Connexions service.

Ms. Blakey asked what the uptake of the service from schools had been like and was advised by Ms. Davison that schools decided on their budgets and service level agreements on a year by year basis. Schools had the ability to buy in for smaller amounts of the service and then look towards funding their own careers service in-house across the mainstream school.

In response to a query from Councillor Francis as to how the service was provided to schools, Ms. Davison advised that if a school bought in to the service then the levels of support and how that service was to be provided would be agreed through a service level agreement. The service was very much being used to concentrate on those pupils who may not be expected to achieve the minimum number of qualifications needed in helping to provide them with a more individual route and supporting them in the right way through their education.

With regards to the level of NEET's (Children not in employment, education or training), Ms. Davison advised that you would never get the number to zero as there would always be pupils who may not be able to engage for their own reasons, such as being ill or young mums for example. The service, supported by the wider Early Help Service, would continue to focus on the numbers of NEET and Not Known population to drive further improvements in this area.

Members having fully considered the report and having no further questions for Officers, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the information contained within the report in relation to the Together for Children performances be received and noted.

### **Annual Work Programme 2017/18**

The Head of Member Support and Community Partnerships submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work being undertaken for the 2017/18 municipal year.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report advising that the Chairman had requested that an update on teenage pregnancies be added to the work programme; and it was:-

6. RESOLVED that:-
  - a) The topic of teenage pregnancies be added to the work programme; and
  - b) the information contained within the work programme 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 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2018

(for copy report – see original minutes)

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

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

(Signed) B. FRANCIS,  
Chairman.