

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 31 MARCH 2022 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Dodds, Mason-Gage, McKeith, Noble, Samuels, Scanlan and Tye

Also in attendance:-

Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Ms. Paula Gibbons, Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast

Councillor M. Hartnack, Observing

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members Support Coordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors P.W.L. Gibson and S. Johnson and on behalf of Mrs. A. Blakey.

Minutes of the last Ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 3 March 2022

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last Ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 3 March 2022 be confirmed as a correct record, subject to an amendment to the spelling of Councillor Mason-Gage in the attendees.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Apprenticeships Update – Sunderland College

The Scrutiny Officer advised that due to Officers being unable to attend the item would be deferred to a future meeting of the Committee.

2. RESOLVED that the item be deferred.

Update on the Regional Adoption Agency – Adopt Coast to Coast – April 2021 to February 2022

The Director of Children Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members of the Committee with an update on the Regional Adoption Agency for the period April 2021 to February 2022.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Paula Gibbons, Head of Service, Adopt Coast to Coast, presented the report informing Members that the marketing activity for 2021-2022 Adopt Coast to Coast was all about brand recognition and getting the name out as far and wide as possible.

It was also very positive to note that the transition to Adopt Coast to Coast had not had a detrimental impact on the children who had moved to adoptive families or the recruitment of prospective adopters assessed by the Together for Children's adoption team.

The Chairman asked Ms. Gibson what had been the greatest impact of the regional adoption agency starting and if she could give an example of something that had happened that she had not expected. Ms Gibson advised that she had not expected the response to Adopt Coast to Coast, they had expected to receive 100 enquiries in a year but they had actually received 558 enquiries to date, There had been a challenge in the beginning with contacts not being responded to but this had been during the crossover and as time had gone on this had been rectified.

Ms. Gibson commented that the agency was a partnership model which was not an option for adoption agencies eighteen months ago as it had to be a hosted model and they had been on a learning curve with other authorities as to how the model works. She informed Members that she knew that staff would be able to run with the model as they were very passionate group of staff who's focus was on the best outcomes for children.

Ms. Colbert also commented that one of the areas that had proved to be most powerful was the shared recruitment function; with the recruitment of a Communications Manager who was not from a social care background and brought a high degree of commercial skill. Ms. Colbert encouraged the Committee to look at the social media presence and messages that were being shared which had made a massive difference and in turn saw a huge increase in participation.

Members were also informed that a number of the processes had been rationalised, such as now having one central telephone point, channelling all calls for the region through one route.

Councillor Tye commented that he felt that adoption was the most important function that Together for Children undertook and asked how any competitiveness between local authorities was managed and was informed by Ms. Gibson that each spoke

was responsible for assessing and approving adopters who would then become available to the three regions so that each agency was getting their fair share but during the first year they had seen that both TfC and Durham had seen an increase in the number of matches that they had made. There should be no boundaries for the children as some may benefit from being placed further away from their family home and they were now receiving applications from adopters who may not be able to adopt children from their local authority area.

Ms. Colbert advised that they had struck an exclusive deal with local voluntary sector adoption agencies through procurement so that children that could not be matched through the regional agency could look to be matched through that route. This meant that all children got the opportunity to look for the right adoptive parents for them before needing to go beyond that.

Councillor Noble commented that the adoption team in TfC was small and asked if they would be looking to expand to ensure that the resource could meet demand on the service? Ms. Colbert advised that if it became an issue they would look to put some short term resource in but at the minute it was manageable and the team was small, lean and efficient.

Councillor Crosby sought more information on the marketing activities that were being considered for the more difficult to adopt children and was advised that in addition to the mainstream marketing they were hoping to look at some targeted marketing for those who were waiting longer, which was a national issue, such as groups of siblings, children with additional needs or health uncertainties, etc. The Governance Board had given permissions to allow them to start social media messages about additional support and recognising those families who were willing to consider the more difficult to place children and how to support them in a realistic way which fit with the ethos of the Council.

In response to a further query from the Chairman regarding sibling groups, Ms. Gibbons informed the Committee that if the children's plan was to keep siblings together that was what they would aim to achieve but they were finding across the North East and Cumbria were sibling groups where was one was under two years old and the other around five or six year old which was not always the combination prospective adopters were looking for so they were looking to go to the Governance Board with a proposal to run a joint campaign with the voluntary sector provider.

Councillor Dodds asked if there were more adoptive parents looking for younger children and was informed that the majority of adopters are people who want to become parents for the first time and were therefore thinking of adopting a baby or very young child. The Committee were advised that they attended preparation groups and got to speak with adopters to understand what it was like to adopt siblings or older children so that they could make an informed choice on what was the right child for them.

In response to a query from the Chairman regarding schools and home education, Ms. Colbert advised that they would not know how many adoptive children were in which schools as there was no requirement for the parents to tell them and children could also be placed from other areas of the country. Additional support and resources were available post adoption should parents require it but not every family

requested this but there was no issue with adoptive children that was raised by schools or the Virtual Headteacher.

The Chairman asked if this would apply for home educated children also and Ms. Colbert explained that if the child had been adopted and parents decided to electively home educate then there was no statutory right to enforce any kind of engagement; but they were allowed to ask parents to confirm and assure that they were providing education for their children. She was not aware that there were any looked after children who were electively home educated but she would confirm this and advise accordingly.

Having fully considered the report and there being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Ms. Gibbons for her report and presentation, and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Consultation with the Youth Council

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which asked Members to consider feedback from a meeting with representatives from the Youth Council.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report which set out the feedback from a meeting with the Youth Council representatives held on 9 March, 2022, where a number of issues had been raised and recorded.

Councillor Tye commented that the report set out some really good feedback from the young people but did not state what the next steps were going to be and the Chairman advised that once all of the visits had been concluded, a report would be submitted with the concerns of the young people and Members could look to agree how to take those issues forward.

Ms. Colbert advised that some of the same issues would be considered at the State of the City Debate on Monday and once the Youth Council priorities were voted upon they would then work with Officers for the rest of the year. There were three key themes this year; jobs, emotional health and wellbeing, and the green agenda. Ms. Colbert also advised that she was consulting with all of the groups and preparing some of the content for the response to the joint motion so that they could see what was already available.

Councillor Noble also referred to the issues that were continually raised by young people and commented that there were some good, easy, quick fixes that could be implemented to see changes in the short term and if there were already things in place to address an issue why the young people were not being made aware of them. There was a need to ensure that they were being correctly promoted to young people so that they were able to access available services and support.

Councillor Samuels stated that she had asked a similar question after the first visit and asked if there was a timeline in place as to when recommendations may be

made? The Chairman advised that there were two more visits to groups to be undertaken which the Scrutiny Officer was currently arranging.

Ms. Colbert commented that the Committee could look to add an item to the work programme for next year on advice and guidance that was currently being provided in Year 11; whilst she could work with the Scrutiny Officer to make a summary of recommendations to the Executive on issues, at this point, that were consistently raised by young people, with the proviso that more work would be undertaken within the next year's work programme.

Mr. Diamond referred to an email he had received from Councillor Johnstone asking that he raise the issue of security on the metro system and Ms. Corbert advised that they had been doing a private piece of work with Nexus and the Youth Offending Prevention Workers and they would be looking to do more work possibly through the Police and Crime Commissioner as they had funded that piece of work.

Councillor Noble added that the PCC was currently working on an app for women's safety and commented that it may not take much to broaden the audience for a similar app for young people and it was considered that it may be beneficial to look to invite the PCC to a future meeting of the Committee to discuss this further.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Mr. Diamond for his report and it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the feedback from the meeting with the Youth Council representatives be received and noted and the items as set out above for next year's work programme be considered for inclusion.

Annual Report

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) seeking Members approval of their annual report as part of the overall scrutiny annual report 2021/22 that was to be presented to Council.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Diamond presented the report and advised the Committee that subject to the removal of the reference to having met with the Principal of Sunderland College, the report would be included in the Scrutiny Annual Report and presented to a future meeting of the Council.

There being no questions or comments, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the report be approved for inclusion in the Scrutiny Annual Report 2021/2022.

Annual Work Programme 2021/22

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the developed of the Committee's work

programme for the municipal year 2021/22 and appended a copy of the programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

There being no questions or comments, it was:-

6. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from the 21 February, 2022.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Committee was advised that if Members had any issues to raise or required further detail on any of the items included in the notice that were within the purview of the Committee, they should contact Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer for initial assistance.

Members having requested further information in respect of the following item:-

i) 220210/696 – Pupil Referral Unit (Cllr M. Crosby)

it was:-

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

There being no further items of business, the Chair closed the meeting having thanked members and officers for their attendance and contributions.

Signed) P. SMITH,
Chairman.