

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1 of the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 4th JANUARY, 2018 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor B. Francis in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Elliott, Francis, Jackson, F. Miller, Scullion, Stewart and Tye

Also in attendance:-

Ms. Sue Carty, Director of Quality and Performance, Together for Children
Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Sir Paul Ennals, Independent Chairman of Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board
Mr. Thomas Newton, Sunderland Youth Parliament
Ms. Gillian Robinson, Area Coordinator, Sunderland City Council
Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms. Jane Wheeler, Participation and Engagement Lead, Together for Children

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Foster, Hunt and P. Smith and on behalf of Ms. A. Blakey and Mr. S. Williamson.

The Chairman announced that Councillor Pat Smith had submitted her apologies as she was due to go into hospital soon and that he would look to send a card and well wishes on behalf of the Committee to her.

Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 30th November, 2017

Councillor Tye commented that he did not feel that the minutes of the Committee adequately captured how strongly Members felt about performance levels of the Together for Children company. He stated that within the minutes of the last meeting the Committee had requested that the Chief Executive either attend this meeting or an extraordinary meeting to be arranged in December, 2017 to discuss their concerns and yet she was not in attendance.

The Committee had raised concerns around thresholds increasing, hence the number of referrals reducing and yet professionals were telling individual Members of the Committee that areas of concern were not being progressed in the same way as they were being reported to the Committee. Together for Children were reporting a huge deficit and there was no explanation as to how this had occurred so quickly since the creation of the company, or any explanation around the resignation of and recruitment to the Chief Executive post.

Ms. Robinson, Scrutiny Officer, explained that in terms of the Chief Executive's attendance, she had unfortunately been unavailable to attend this Committee due to prior commitments but had advised that she would be more than happy to attend the next meeting. She was aware that the Chief Executive had circulated an email to all Members advising that under the conditions of the contract with Together for Children and agreement with the Department of Education, a tripartite recruitment process involving representation from the three organisations would commence in January 2018.

Councillor Tye asked how and why the Committee were expected to scrutinise events after they had occurred. Members had been involved as part of the recruitment process of the previous Chief Executive of Together for Children and he expected that they would be included this time also and he did not think a 'round robin' email was adequate enough nor acceptable.

He advised that once he had finished addressing the Committee with his concerns he would be leaving and did not intend to come back until he had assurances that the Committee and Members requests were to be taken seriously.

By example, Councillor Tye referred to the topic of the Youth Offer and how it was on the work plan and discussed at almost every meeting yet he found it astounding that the last email he had received from the Director of Early Help had indicated that as there was no budget within the city towards commissioning youth services contracts she would not be attending a meeting of the Committee to discuss the issue. Councillor Tye accepted that there was no budget towards commissioned youth contracts within the city but youth services and provision for youths was still under the remit and accountability of Children's Services and the authority.

He reminded Officers and the Committee that they had been criticised by Ofsted for the scrutiny function in relation to Children's Services and stated that he did not feel like they were getting any further forward. He expressed that he would make his comments today and then make a stand by leaving the meeting, as well as making a further statement in relation to the matter at the next meeting of the full Council and he would expect that the Chief Executive would provide answers to the Committee as to what was happening within the Together for Children company, which was working as an arms-length company from the local authority.

Councillor Bell fully supported Councillor Tye's comments advising that he was finding out that services were being transferred to other parties away from the Together for Children company, and he had concerns that other areas of Children's Services were looking to go the same way, having recently found out about the transfer of the Sea View Road facility and asking if all of the children's homes were expected to go the same route.

Ms. Carty, Director of Quality and Performance, addressed the Committee advising that in relation to the previous Chief Executive's resignation there was no further information available to give Members. With regards to the recruitment and appointment of the position she informed Members that the process had not yet begun. A meeting was to be held with the Department for Education in January when the recruitment process could commence. In relation to Members' involvement in the process, the Scrutiny Officer could look to take Members' comments back and feed into the process and look to set up a meeting to get the ball rolling in that context.

Ms. Carty went on to say she was disappointed to hear Members say they were not happy with the performance information presented to the Committee and that they were hearing conflicting information, as they were continually looking at the evidence of what performance figures were telling them and not just the quality of the performance at face value. She explained that performance and evidence were consistently being validated externally by partners and other agencies and that these were the same which were being reported to Committee.

In relation to the commissioning of the facilities at Sea View Road, Ms. Carty advised that it had been the plan for some time to transfer those services and that they had been quite transparent about the process. She advised that the Company had a business plan in place which had been approved by the Council and that there were no plans set out within that to transfer any of the children's homes. She explained that Grace House was a similar provision to that of Sea View Road, offering short break and respite facilities for children with disabilities and special needs and that the two should sit together as it was within their interests to do so and the best way to provide the local offer.

Ms. Carty went on to address the comments around Youth Services and advised that she would pick up the issue with the Director of Early Help and look to bring a report back to the Committee should they wish to discuss this further but that in relation to the commissioning of youth contracts there was no further answer to that which had been discussed with the Scrutiny Committee at the time of the budget changes.

In relation to the financial situation at Together for Children, Ms. Carty advised that demand was increasing on services and thresholds were checked internally and by Ofsted and they would pick up individual cases and check them within the whole system to ensure that young people and families were receiving the right services for them in the most appropriate of places. Equally, there were a number of quality assurances in place which should offer some reassurances to the threshold levels. At the moment they were looking at fifty-six individual cases which had been identified as part of a thorough review taken over nine months, to ensure that those children were getting access to the right services and she was disappointed if that was the feeling of the Committee that performance was not as being reported.

Councillor Tye commented that the participation at Scrutiny was where he genuinely felt that they had continued to bring up issues month after month, asking for information and nothing they requested was being fed back to them and that this had been previously criticised by Ofsted in their findings. He commented that the Committee had requested the regional commissioner from the Department for Education to come to a meeting of the Committee and speak to them about their concerns in relation to the number of exclusions from a local academy and Members had no explanation as to when this was coming to the Committee. At this juncture, the Scrutiny Officer advised that there was to be a meeting with the Academy in question in the next few weeks and that the Director of Education had advised he would feedback to the Committee following this meeting.

In closing, Councillor Francis commented that he was sorry to hear Councillor Tye's concerns and stated that his input was valued as a Scrutiny Committee Member. He asked that Councillor Tye forward his availability to himself and the Chairman so that they could meet to discuss his concerns further; and it was:-

1. RESOLVED that further consideration of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 30th November, 2017 (copy circulated), be deferred to the next meeting.

Councillor Tye then left the meeting.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

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 have 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. Sue Carty, Director of Quality and Performance, 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 – October, 2017.

Ms. Carty advised the Committee that they were seeing an increase in demand on children's services at the moment and took Members through key issues set out in the report. She referred to paragraph 3.7 of the report, the rate of children and young people subject to Child Protection Plans per 10k of the population and advised that this figure had increased and was outside of the target and tolerance levels and that in recent months there had been a significant number of sibling groups of four or more. She also informed the Committee that the majority of Child Protection cases now had durations of between 12 and 18 months, with only one having gone longer than two years. Ms. Carty advised the Committee that the number of Looked after Children was currently 577 and this was the highest it had been and the trend continued to increase.

In relation to those figures, Councillor Stewart noted that both sets of data showed Sunderland performing significantly worse than the North East and national averages and commented that the report set out that an investigation and analysis of findings was underway but felt that this would be restricted as they were limiting the data source only to the last three months. Traditionally, this had been an issue and therefore how could Officers be confident they were getting the right information if they were limiting the review to only figures within the last three months. Ms. Carty explained that the reason for using the data from the last three months was that this

was when they had recognised the demand for services had increased. National figures were comparing data from 2015/16 and the gap between Sunderland and those figures had closed since then but in the last few months they had noticed that the figures were creeping back up and they were looking at this data range in particular to establish any reason for the increase.

In relation to children who were already subject to a child protection plan, Ms. Carty advised that they would continue to be reviewed at the relevant stages to make sure they should remain on the plan.

In response to a further query from Councillor Stewart, Ms. Carty advised that a child could be on a protection plan for a number of reasons and the question she preferred to be answered was 'is the child appropriately on the correct plan and was there anything that could have been put in place to have stopped it getting to that stage?' Another area Officers were seeing reductions was in the number of children in need which was a good thing, as either they were stepping down to engage with Early Help Services or stepping up to receive a child protection plan.

Councillor Stewart thanked the Officer and looked forward to the full outcome of the review.

Members drew the Officers' attention to the keys used within the charts, whereby the colour reference alternated between charts and asked if they may be universal in future, e.g. National average would always be shown in blue throughout the report and statistical neighbours in red, etc.

Councillor Elliott referred to paragraph 3.16 of the report and asked if there were timescales in place for the review that was to be undertaken and asked if the Committee could be assured that the findings would come back for their consideration. Ms. Carty advised that the timescales for the investigation would be set through the Operational Commissioning Group but that the findings would be submitted to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee and once the timescales were known she could email the relevant Scrutiny Officer that information.

Councillor Bell commented that he was a Governor at a Nursery School and was aware that there were more referrals of children and young people being made from discussions he had with the Head Teacher and stated that he had concerns around the welfare system and in particular the move over to Universal Credit, which he understood was expected to be July, 2018 in Sunderland. He commented that this move would see even more increases in the demand on services within Together for Children and that any problems families may have now with their benefits may worsen on the introduction of the Universal Credit system and he could foresee a difficult twelve months ahead for the services.

Sir Ennals informed the Committee that discussions had been held around the increase of referrals at a regional level and reminded Members that figures did vary month to month and that there were times of the year when sudden increases could be noted, such as during January and September. Almost every area was seeing an increase in children and young people subject to child protection plans and each authority were monitoring their situation.

In relation to comments made by Councillor Bell around the introduction of Universal Credit, Sir Ennals stated that in Newcastle and Gateshead they had seen a rise in

cases of domestic violence and it was a real risk when changes were made in the payment of benefits from being given to both partners to only be given to one adult in the family home. The introduction had also seen some issues in schools, whereby young people were not awarded free school meals during the transition of their benefits and schools had had to continue to provide the free school meals to cover the period until Universal Credits were paid to the family. He stated that the points raised were very valid ones of concern and the Council had to have plans in place and the Committee may want to ask relevant Officers what was expected to help families during these times.

Mr. Newton referred to paragraph 3.12 of the report and highlighted that the data went from a year's cohort to three monthly figures and commented that this may see the rate reduce because of the methodology used rather than being a true reduction. Ms. Carty commented that she understood how it may change the data but explained that they would still be able to compare figures on both sets of data if it was necessary.

In response to a question from Councillor Miller as to why it was so difficult to recruit and retain Social Workers, and if discussions had been held with the University of Sunderland to look to engage with newly qualified social workers sooner, Ms. Carty explained that the service had no problem in recruiting newly qualified social workers but that they could not look to have a full workforce of them. To have a successful workforce they needed more experienced social workers to be mentors to the newer qualified worker and offer a more experienced infrastructure to keep the workforce balanced. Equally, she advised that they had issues recruiting to certain teams within the service, as some were harder to recruit to, for instance recruiting to the adoption team in comparison to the assessment team. Some Managers had brought in team members from their previous roles to fill vacancies but there were still agency workers within the service, although they continued to work to attract the right people to those roles in a permanent position.

Members having fully considered the report, it was:-

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

Compliments, Complaints and Feedback

The Director of Quality and Performance submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with information regarding complaints and feedback received by Together for Children.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Jane Wheeler, Participation and Engagement Lead, Together for Children, presented the report advising that it presented an overview of complaints and feedback received by the Council for the quarters 1 and 2, April – September, 2017.

Councillor Stewart referred to the complaint outcomes and pointed out that around fifty percent of complaints investigated were either upheld or partially upheld, or at least had elements of the complaints which were, and commented that this would be of a significant cost to the company, specifically in relation to the stage two and three

complaints. He asked what kinds of decisions were being made at Stage 1 and if the outcomes of complaints were being monitored to ensure that any trends were being picked up and not missed, as although the numbers of complaints were small, when they were moving through to the next stages almost half were being upheld, or at least elements of them were.

The Officer advised that Ombudsman training had been offered to managers within the social work teams and advice and guidance shared on how to deal with and respond to complaints at stage 1 as it had been recognised that this was an area which could be improved. There was a direct team to deal with complaints now within the Together for Children company who were on hand to support staff and also work alongside them so that staff morale was not damaged by complaints that were lodged.

Ms. Wheeler felt that they were moving forward in dealing with complaints in a timely manner but that the very nature of the services would always mean that there would be those who were not happy with elements of the service and would already be focussed on taking their complaint through all stages of the process regardless of the responses they may receive.

Councillor Stewart commented that it would be helpful to have the previous years' trends for comparison so that Members could see that the number of complaints being lodged and investigated were reducing between comparative quarters. Ms. Wheeler commented that in future the reports would contain comparative data for Members' information as this was already an area which had been discussed to be included.

In closing, the Committee were informed that Officers were meeting with complainants to try and help build relationships with those complainants who had significant areas of concern and to help them understand that their complaints were taken very seriously within the services and that they were being listened to and their concerns being addressed.

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

3. RESOLVED that:-

- i) The information provided within the report be received and noted; and
- ii) The Director of Quality and Performance include comparative data from previous years in future reports to the Committee.

Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) Annual Report - April, 2016 – March, 2017

The Chair of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board submitted a report (copy circulated) which presented the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) Annual Report 2016-2017 to provide assurance on the effectiveness of the safeguarding arrangements for children in Sunderland.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Sir Paul Ennals, Independent Chairman of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board, presented the report advising that an annual report must be published in the effectiveness of child safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in the local area. Submissions of the annual report to the Committee should provide assurance that the SSCB is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities.

Sir Ennals introduced himself to the Committee advising that he had been appointed Independent Chairman of the Safeguarding Children Board at about the same time as Together for Children had been established and gave Members a brief overview of some of the key points which had been identified within the Annual Report and what actions had been undertaken since its publication.

Mr. Newton referred to the issue of domestic violence and commented that it was clearly a very serious issue in Sunderland and the North East and a current hot topic of discussion. He commented that it was a difficult issue to discuss and that it was important to deal with the issues that may cause extra pressure on families and with the introduction of Universal Credit he could not see how improvements were realistically possible during this time. Sir Ennals stated that there was never a bad time to try and tackle the issue of domestic violence but that sometimes it was best to try a different approach when other changes were being introduced. He commented that it was a difficult issue to address as improvements would only be made when people were being honest and could admit that there were problems and issues and that it was very much a cultural issue around victims of domestic abuse admitting that the problem existed and not just covering it up.

Councillor Miller advised that she was very optimistic following the presentation from Sir Ennals and although challenges ahead were evident it looked as though processes were being put in place to address them and move forward. Sir Ennals commented that Together for Children were scrutinised by many groups of people, and rightly so, but that the balance needed to be right to effectively scrutinise the work they were undertaking whilst still allowing them to get on with the job at hand.

Councillor Francis commented that it needed to be recognised that domestic violence was not always actual acts of violence and that it could be in many forms and just as harrowing.

Councillor Stewart commented that he was really encouraged by the comments from Sir Ennals and the reflections made on where the service was, particularly with regards to the agencies that were involved. In the past it had been raised that some agencies had had zero involvement and attendance at meetings of the Safeguarding Children Board and it had not been acceptable but had been the norm, and it was now encouraging to see that the structure had changed and as such, was much more strategic and improved at engaging with and bringing on board key stakeholders.

Sir Ennals commented that in the past there had been too many meetings held and often agency representatives had not been able to attend them all. The structure of the meetings now were to keep them short and focussed, ensuring that all participants had had sight of the papers for consideration beforehand. There were 10-12 bodies at the senior level, and not the 26-28 representatives that had been previously, and they came together on a regular basis and were used to being clear and decisive in their discussions. He advised that the Board would look to pull together groups of any further representatives and agencies that were needed to

contribute to more focussed areas as and when they were required. Should there be any concerns around non-attendance of representatives then the Chief Executives would be contacted to address the issue.

Sir Ennals stated that it was difficult as during times of austerity there had been a lot of change in staff resources and members of middle management who used to attend were not in post now, so they had to time manage the meetings much better to ensure their time was used wisely.

Councillor Bell commented that a lot of members of middle management with the knowledge and experience had been lost during staff cuts which had been budget led.

In relation to the introduction of Universal Credit he commented that families in receipt of these benefits could already be unstable family groups and when circumstances change it could upset the norm and see families self destruct and it was important to have support in place for them.

Councillor Stewart referred to the neglect toolkit and asked what was involved and if there would be anything within it which school governors could learn from. Sir Ennals advised that there would be information of use to Governors as well as training which was to be rolled out, but in the first instance all of the information was available on the website, www.sunderlandscb.com, which would be updated as work progressed.

Councillor Bell referred to his role as Governor of a Nursery School and the difference that was made through the introduction of two year olds into the nursery provision and raised concerns over how some nursery provision may not be adequate. Sir Ennals commented that he had been involved in the starting up of the Sure Start provisions and how it was disappointing that the provision was removed as he felt it had been one of the most important social innovations since the 1960's.

There being no further questions for Sir Ennals, the Chairman thanked him for his report which provided hope and positive expectations and he looked forward to further reports being submitted to the Committee for consideration, and it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the information provided within the annual report be received and noted and accepted as assurance of the current effectiveness of the local safeguarding children arrangements.

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, reminded Members that at their meeting in October they had agreed to consider the Committee's involvement in the formation of a working group to be established to overview the preparations for a local area inspection of special educational needs provision across the city. Following consultation with the Chairman it was suggested that up to two Members of the

Committee be nominated to the working group which would also include senior officers from the Together for Children Company, partner organisations and the Lead Member for Children's Services.

Councillors Bell and Miller expressed their interest in being involved with the working group, dependant upon the particular dates and times of meetings and Mr. Diamond advised he would email all Members of the Committee for expressions of interest and with further information.

5. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information contained in the work programme be received and noted;
- b) the Scrutiny Officer email Members of the Committee for nominations to the working group to overview special educational needs provision across the city.

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 12th December, 2017.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

6. 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.