

Children, Education & Skills Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Pat Smith

Vice Chair: Cllr Bob Francis

Committee Members: Councillors Margaret Crosby, Paula Hunt, Pam Mann, Joseph McKeith, Fiona Miller, Claire Rowntree, Alex Samuels, Lynda Scanlan, 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. The Committee has received regular monitoring reports on the performance of Together for Children and 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.

Another means of overseeing improvement has been to monitor the progress being made in implementing the TfC Learning and Development Plan which has recently been refreshed. It is hoped that this 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 "front door" of children's services. Members of the Committee received a detailed presentation on the operation of the new MASH system as well as a demonstration of the Liquid Logic IT system.

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.

Last year the Committee raised a number of concerns relating to the increase in exclusions at a number of schools in the city and the significant variations that exists from school to school. This year, members have taken the opportunity to visit a local school in order to see at first hand the kinds of measures that can be taken to reduce school exclusions and improve educational attainment.

Following an update last year, the Committee agreed to receive updates on the action being taken in the city to reduce the risk of child sexual exploitation and develop the services available to the victims of domestic abuse. The Committee heard about the progress being made and the range of initiatives being developed.

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.

The Committee also received a report on the parenting offer in the city and met with the partners involved in the delivery of the service in the city. 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.

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.

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