

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1 of the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 6TH OCTOBER, 2016 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Francis in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Hunt, Scullion, and Stewart and Ms. A. Blakey, Ms. R. Elliott and Mr. S. Williamson

Also in attendance:-

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer
Mr. Alex Hopkins, Director of Children's Services
Miss. Rachel Krajovska, Member of the Youth Parliament
Mr. Simon Marshall, Director of Education
Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Beck, Jackson, O'Neil, P. Smith, Tye and G. Walker

Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 8th September, 2016

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 8th September, 2016 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Sunderland Safeguarding Children Learning and Improvement Plan – Progress Update

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided progress that is being made on the Safeguarding Children Learning and Improvement Plan.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Alex Hopkins, Director of Children's Services took Members through the report advising that in response to a request from the Committee he had taken this opportunity to focus the update on recruitment and retention issues relating to the service. He also suggested to Members that he could look to focus on each of the remaining key priorities for improvement in turn over the future meetings through this item.

The Committee were advised of the workforce profile, accurate as of September, 2016, which included the numbers of permanent employees and agency workers currently in the proposed structure for children's social care. Members were also informed of the vacancy rates and in which areas these lay and how posts were currently advertised and targets for recruitment in the future.

Ms. Elliott asked about the case loads of social workers, as the Committee had previously been advised that work was being undertaken to reduce the numbers of cases each worker had. Mr. Hopkins advised that most social workers were currently carrying a case load of less than twenty, but explained that sometimes it was not just the numbers that were important but the complexities of the cases as each were different. He explained that in regional terms this figure compared well but that the aim was for case loads to be around 18-20 per social worker.

In response to a question from Mr. Williamson around quality assurances of agency workers, and whether they were the same as permanent staff, Mr. Hopkins explained that each member of agency staff would come with references and have the relevant checks and registrations. Unfortunately, there were poor agency workers and you would not always know until they were in position within the service but once identifies, steps would be taken to rectify that and look towards ensuring that person was deregistered and not moved on to become another authorities problem.

Councillor Francis asked what the ideal frequency was that a family should be visited by their social worker and the Director explained that whilst in an area of improvement you would set a high level of expectation, and a low level of trust. Therefore, if there was a family with a child protection plan in place they would expect to be visited every two week, which was very frequent. The expectation of visits from the social worker would be set intentionally high so that through compliance the number of visits would drop over time. With more serious cases, families would be visited more frequently and there was always a mix of announced and unannounced visits undertaken.

There being no further comments or questions for the Officer, the Chairman thanked them for their attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that report on the progress being made be received and noted.

Attendance and Exclusion in Schools – Progress Report

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with progress on attendance and exclusion figures for primary and secondary schools in Sunderland.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Chairman welcomed Mr. Simon Marshall, Director of Education to the meeting who presented the report which set out in detail for Members information on the referrals considered by the Central Provisions Panel and the level of permanent and fixed exclusions, together with data on the numbers of pupils involved within managed moves.

Councillor Hunt referred to the attendance figures over the autumn / spring terms and the huge spike in the percentage figures of persistent absences in 2016 in both primary and secondary schools. Mr. Marshall advised that following discussions across the region it looked as results were similar for the year 2016 and that there had been a 5% reduction in the baseline score for the figures. Although, in saying that he did think that the authority did have a problem with persistent offenders and that due to resources available to the service they had not been able in the past to place as much attention on intervention and prevention. The strategy moving forward was to provide support and advise at an earlier point of intervention and that schools and academies could buy into the service through a service level agreement.

Ms. Blakey commented that her school had bought into service level agreements with the authority and found them great value for money and very effective but with so many cuts being faced and lots of changes having being made at a local level she felt that this had to have had an impact. She referred to the level of internal exclusions schools may make, whereby a pupil could be removed from a classroom and placed elsewhere with another member of staff, but commented that this was always negated by the available resources at that time and although Headteachers tried their hardest to keep pupils in school sometimes it was not always an option.

Mr. Marshall advised that he had attended a meeting of secondary Headteachers recently and that they had discussed how schools were spending lots of little pots of funding in small areas, whereas if they could be combined they could find bigger, better service provision for larger amounts. He also advised that they had discussed the ways in which schools chose to spend their pupils premium and that this needed challenging to ensure that it was being spent in the best way for provision for pupils. He explained that they would continue to work collectively with schools to address the challenges and find the best solutions to them.

Mr. Williamson referred to the Central Provisions Panel (CPP) and advised that he had sat as a member of the panel previously. He commented that he had found it differed greatly in the way some schools could get their referrals into Link School placements and yet others could not and questioned if some Headteachers knew how to fill in the referral forms better to meet criteria and raised concerns over how requests for referrals from particular schools may be managed. Mr. Marshall advised that the CPP had set criteria and that some schools would absolutely know how to fill in the forms better than others but that the panel had to refer to the criteria and ensure referrals met it. He explained that it was more about encouraging schools to learn the process and understand what is needed when filling in the referral forms to ensure that all of the evidence the panel require to see that the school have tried all other strategies available to them is included, as if it is not then the panel are restricted in their decisions. He did not feel that there was any favouritism towards any schools but that there was a need for training and guidance on how to complete the forms so that the applications made to the panel were as thorough as they needed to make the correct decision.

Mr. Williamson went on to discuss fixed penalty notices for pupil absence from school. He advised that as a Headteacher of a primary school he had received nine requests for leave from parents in the two days of the first week of term, all of which would be refused. He commented that under Council policy only one of the nine requests would meet the criteria of unauthorised absence for ten school days and issued a fixed penalty notice, whereas in other authorities, such as Rochdale who only had a criteria of five school days or more, five of the requests would. He commented that under the current policy he was concerned that children may be potentially at the risk of harm and that schools could not be safeguarding pupils effectively if parents were not being penalised until after ten school days unauthorised absence.

Mr. Hopkins commented that it was for the Council to set the policy and that this could be an issue that the Scrutiny Committee may decide to look into further as part of their work programme, looking into what other authorities do in comparison to the Council's current policy.

Mr. Marshall commented that if the concerns regarding pupils missing from school were around potential harm of pupils during that absence, then there was the need to ensure work was undertaken in other areas to address those concerns in prevention and not just tackling the issue of unauthorised absences from school. Unauthorised absences have a big impact on schools and the pupil and needed tackling as he was very much aware that with some parents there was an impression that absence from primary school for their children did not really matter in the long run of their education.

Councillor Stewart referred to the number of permanent exclusions for 2014/15 as set out in the report and raised concerns that this number had previously been in single figures and had been drifting upwards, reaching the concerning number of 39 permanent exclusions and asked what was being done to challenge schools. He commented that for example, Red House Academy and Castle View Academy were two schools who would have pupils of a very similar nature and yet one school had no exclusions when the other had three? Mr. Marshall advised that it would be desirable to have those frank and open conversations with schools about what the thresholds were prior to the permanent exclusion of a pupil but that it was not as straightforward as it seemed. He commented that it was about understanding and sharing best practice within schools. He explained that with more managed moves and the provision of alternative routes to education it was offering the option for young people to stay in school as it had been found, once permanently excluded, that their future life chances did dramatically drop. Mr. Marshall advised that there was a need to unpick the data on permanent exclusions as it could be that there simply was no other option available to the schools.

He went on to advise that following any permanent exclusion, there would be a meeting of the governing body panel to support and uphold or dismiss the Headteachers decision and then following that parents had the right to request an Independent Review Panel should they feel that the decision to permanently exclude had been the wrong one.

Mr. Hopkins commented that he agreed that the support to schools in training them and providing guidance was imperative to ensure that good practice was shared between all schools and that it was about working together proactively to help

schools in their prevention strategies but that it was fair to say that schools were getting much more complex children admitted year on year.

In response to a query from Ms. Elliott regarding pupils with BESD (Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties), Mr Marshall advised that the Government had recognised that all schools need a clearer understanding of young people with mental health issues and the behavioural results that poor mental health can portray. Schools needed to be aware when to refer a young person towards the next steps that may be available to them should they be concerned. Areas such as attainment, poor parenting, and persistent absences can be behaviour characteristics of a pupil who may have issues around mental health and schools need to understand the reasons behind an end action of a pupil as they could be identified as a cry for help. He explained that the Government were making available funding to support local authorities in addressing these areas. He explained that some of the mental health provision within the city was some of the best in the country and that it needed to be shared throughout.

Councillor Scullion advised that he had previously been a governor who had sat on disciplinary panels and felt that it was important to identify that sometimes the classroom environment was not right for all pupils, which may have resulted in disruptive behaviour within the classroom. Some pupils may benefit more from practical learning, taking them out of school and placing them in a trade industry or with an instructor to prepare them for working life when the classroom environment is not right for them.

Mr. Marshall agreed with the sentiment that sometimes, particularly in boys, they were not able to access and embrace the school curriculum through traditional classroom methods. He explained that the problem was that there was a very narrow curriculum that counts towards performance measures and that this creates a conundrum for schools when needing to meet particular measures for their pupils.

Mr. Hopkins referred to the 14-19 year old vocational university technical colleges which was an option available to the local authority to look to provide further alternative provision if it was so desired but Mr. Marshall advised that the issue could be that you may then have pupils who would gain academic results opting for the vocational route instead so it came with its own issues.

Councillor Francis commented that this may be an area the Committee wish to build into the work programme to discuss further at a future meeting and there being no further comments or questions for the Officer, he thanked them for their attendance and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that report be received and noted.

Consultation with Social Work Staff – Next Steps Team

The Head of Area Arrangements, Scrutiny and Member Support and the Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with feedback on the Committee's visit to meet with social work staff based in the Next Steps Team.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, took Members through the report which set out in summary the issues facing the service which had been discussed at the meeting with social work staff held on 21st September, 2016.

Mr. Diamond advised that the feedback received from Members who had met with the staff of the Next Steps Team had been recorded and was presented for Members information and that this was the first meeting in a rolling programme of meetings with social work staff on the development of the service.

Councillor Francis commented that he had found the meeting uplifting and found that the staff were overall happy and understood the problems that lay before them to develop and improve the service.

Members had raised concerns over the provision of emergency accommodation and Mr. Hopkins advised that they were in the process of looking to set up a flat, staffed as needed from children's homes in the city, as and when required for emergency accommodation for a young person, when previously they may have been returned to the children's home which could be disruptive for other young people in the provision.

With regards to the securing of more apprenticeship opportunities for young people, Committee Members discussed how it could be difficult for potential employers to understand the issues that may arise for a looked after child and as corporate parent the Council had to do everything in its power to help them find employment. They discussed issues around the quality of apprenticeships and Mr. Williamson referred to the number of successful apprenticeships he had undertaken within his school. He also commented that an environment such as a primary school may be more understanding of the issues that other potential employers may not be, whilst also offering a familiar and safe surrounding to the young person.

Mr. Hopkins commented that it was important to share good experience stories with other providers to advise them of what is being offered by others and how they could possibly look to do the same. The challenge looked after children sometimes faced was that they were not always ready for a work / apprenticeship environment, whereas other young people of their age may be. He advised that conversations were being undertaken to look to provide care leavers to be personal assistants to future care leavers to share their experiences and views and also informed Members of a previous care leaver who was now a social worker so could share first hand experiences.

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

4. RESOLVED that report and comments made be received and noted.

Opportunities for Consultation with Young People

The Head of Area Arrangements, Scrutiny and Member Support submitted a report (copy circulated) which asked Members to consider Members' involvement in opportunities to consult with young people in the city.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Diamond took Members through the report which provided details on a number of meetings which Members were invited to attend in order to hear the voice of young people which included Sunderland Youth Parliament, the Change Council and the Children's Trust Advisory Service. Members were advised that the young people had suggested that no more than two Members of the Committee should be present at any one meeting and that any request for inclusion for an item on the agenda of the Youth Parliament should be made via a request form.

The report having been fully considered, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the following meetings be attended:-

Notice of Key Decisions

The Head of Area Arrangements, Scrutiny and Member Support 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 20th September, 2016.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

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

Annual Work Programme 2015/16

The Head of Area Arrangements, Scrutiny and Members Support submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work being undertaken for the 2016/17 council year.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

7. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme 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.