At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the MAYOR'S PARLOUR, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 27th NOVEMBER 2025 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Williams in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Curtis, Elms, Gibson and Graham-King.

Also in attendance:-

Mr Kevin Brown, Director of Transformation, Innovation and Strategy, TfC
Ms Nicola Burn, Head of Safeguarding Services, TfC
Mr. Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Smart Cities and Enabling Services, SCC
Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Strategic Services Manager, Customer Feedback, TfC
Mr. Simon Marshall, Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, TfC
Mr. David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Smart Cities & Enabling Services, SCC
Ms. Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Coordinator, Smart Cities & Enabling Services, SCC

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Clinton, Snowdon, Stewart and Thornton.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 23rd October 2025

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 23rd October 2025 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Together for Children Meaningful Measures Report

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with performance information as of the end of October 2025 in relation to the following Meaningful Measures:-

i) I feel safer and supported.
ii) I feel happy at home and feel connected to people that matter to me.
iii) I take a lead in my plans and TfC makes sure workers can support me and my family.

iv) I feel healthier, join activities that are fun, and my ideas help TfC to be creative, improve and make changes
v) I have opportunities to learn and achieve my goals, and I feel positive about my future

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Strategic Services Manager, Customer Feedback, TfC, presented the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding the percentage of children subject to repeat Child Protection Plans, Ms Hodgkinson confirmed that none of the cases involved children where the repeat plan was a result of the same circumstances as the initial plan. Ms Burn advised that dip sampling would be undertaken to spot any occasions arising where this was the case, and this would be treated as a red flag. Case files would be reviewed to try and understand whether or not the original plan had been closed too early, and check that interventions had been undertaken appropriately.

With regard to the figure for the percentage of cared for children that have a missing incident, Mr Marshall provide the Committee with some context on the definition of a 'missing incident' which could be simply missing a curfew by 10 minutes or an incident lasting a number of days. The definition was a statutory one rather than being a discretionary local measure and would in some cases include a child sitting at the bottom of garden refusing to come inside. The definition was wide ranging and covered a multitude of scenarios.

Ms Hodgkinson and Mr Marshall then provided some context around the percentage of cared for children who had experienced 3+ moves within the last 12 months. Mr Marshall advised that TfC had opened a new facility called Claremont, located opposite St Anthony's school, which provided short break care for up to 5 young people aged between 11 and 18. This was aimed at young people who were in danger of being placed permanently into care, and provided a short break for the young person while wider support was sought for the family who were beginning to struggle. However, in attempting to be innovative and do something different and better, there would potentially be a negative impact on the meaningful measure. Ms Burn then provided the Committee with a case study on the positive impact Claremont was having in helping with the relationship between a young person and his grandmother who cared for him.

Councillor Elms noted that some of the indicators had targets attached to them and others did not. Ms Hodgkinson advised that the application of targets would depend on circumstances, whether it was right to do so and whether there were meaningful comparators. For example, targets would never be applied to indicators concerning 'rates' which reflected demand.

Councillor Gibson noted the strictness around some of statutory measures regarding cared for children and asked whether they were too rigid? Mr Marshall replied that he did not believe that was the case. The rigidity of the measures prevented issues from being overlooked. Ms Hodgkinson replied that while the measures were what they were, Ofsted would allow the submission of comments that provided context.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding the measure, ‘percentage of cared for children living 20+ miles from home’, Mr Marshall replied that care closest to home would be default position for TfC, however legal rulings may require that a child was placed a certain number of miles from home in domestic abuse cases etc. In cases not subject to such requirements TfC would keep a young person’s placement under constant review to ensure it provided what was best for the child. For example, there were two young people placed outside the city who would not be brought back as they were thriving, and the placement was right for them. Whilst the policy would always be to place a young person as close to home as possible, there would be occasions, particularly if a child had complex needs, where specialist provision outside of the city would be required. It was pleasing to note that Sunderland was performing much better than both the national and regional figures in terms of this indicator.

With regard to the complaints received, the Committee noted that there had been a rise in the number of stage 2 complaints and Ms Hodgkinson advised that there was no rhyme or reason for this and there had been a similar rise in the regional figures.

With regard to Meaningful Measure 5, Mr Marshall advised that if there was one indicator that the Committee would like to pay special attention to, it would be the ‘percentage of young people who are NEET or whose activity is not known.’ He stated it was an indicator that had been ‘stuck’ for some considerable time. It was a complex issue and one that was not solely in the gift of the Council to solve. It was dependent upon factors such as employment opportunities, training provision, apprenticeships etc and also linked to the adult skills agenda.

The Chair asked if this was something the Committee would like to look at, and this was agreed accordingly.

Councillor Graham-King asked if there was an issue around the changing scenario requiring 16–17-year-olds to be in education, which was the underperforming indicator, compared to the 19–21-year-olds who were not being flagged and who’s position was unknown. Mr Marshall replied that it was a brilliant question, and highlighted the issue he believed the Committee should be driving. He didn’t know who the right person would be to provide an answer, but it would require input from a variety of stakeholders including the College, the city’s training provider network and young people who were NEET themselves. Ultimately young people needed to be aware of what they needed to do and what the pathways were, and relevant organisations needed to understand how they could enable and manage that, particularly with regard to how young people attained the basic skills to follow their chosen pathway.

Councillor Graham-King added that while the indicators in the report referred to cared for children it was an issued pertinent to all demographic groups. Mr Marshall agreed and added that the majority of young people took careers advice from the people they lived with. However, the jobs market and career pathways had changed completely compared to the position experienced by the people from whom advice was sought when they were young. The Chair added that it would be key to talk to those young people who currently felt that they had nowhere to go.

With regard to Meaningful Measure 5, the Chair stated that she was intrigued by the 53 children electively home educated who had returned to school and how it would

operate for them. Mr Marshall replied that he would be happy to provide a report to the Committee in due course. It was still early in the process as the young people had only just returned to school and it was a relatively small cohort.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chair thanked Ms Hodgkinson for her report, and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Social Care Prevention Agenda – Family First Model

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation that aimed to provide the Committee with an update on the Social Care Prevention Agenda and the Family First Model.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Children's Services, introduced Ms Nicola Burn, Strategic Services Manager, who took Members through a presentation that :-

- Outlined the recent national changes to social care practice
- Described the work of the Early Help and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams
- Highlighted the Family Group Decision Making as already being a key strength across Together for Children and the pledge to continue to utilise it at the earliest possible stage in all its work with families
- Outlined the implementation of a small Families First pilot in the Coalfield Area to develop models of practice, tools, resources and training for practitioners, (Signs of Safety would continue to be used as TfC's practice model).
- Provided an overview of the Next Steps.

The Committee was informed that the pilot had been launched on 22nd September 2025. The Coalfield had been deliberately chosen as the pilot area. The numbers in the area were manageable; it benefitted from the presence of HALO and partner organisations such as Gentoo, enabling the provision of a multi-agency wrap around support.

Regular Reviews were being undertaken to allow TfC to understand what worked well and what it might want to do differently. Focus groups were being utilised to shape the delivery of the pilot model through the development of a single assessment, the provision of child protection conferences, systems development and defining the roles of partners etc. During the pilot phase, there would be no changes to service delivery across children's services other than in the pilot area. Staff had been identified to be part of the Family Help and Multi agency Child Protection teams however there would be no permanent changes to contracts until the pilot had concluded. Task and Finish Groups were being established with TfC staff and partner agencies to develop and review the new ways of working.

Mr Marshall advised that a data driven exercise would be undertaken to identify a second pilot area with a view to ultimately rolling out the model on a city-wide basis.

There being no questions or comments from the Committee the Chair thanked Ms Burn and Mr Marshall for their presentation and looked forward to receiving update reports in due course.

3. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted and that update reports be submitted in due course.

Update on Apprenticeships for Care Experienced Young People

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which updated members of the Committee on apprenticeships for Sunderland care experienced young people.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Kevin Brown, Director of Transformation, Innovation and Strategy, TfC, presented the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

Councillor Gibson expressed how important he believed it was to develop apprenticeship pathways for Sunderland's care experienced young people and asked if the Committee could continue to receive update reports. In reply, Mr Marshall outlined the planned reporting lines for the matter into the Corporate Parenting Board and onto the Scrutiny Committee. The Chair noted that an item on Corporate Parenting was scheduled on the Committee's Work Programme for its January meeting.

Councillor Curtis stated that it was brilliant that TfC and Gentoo had both taken on 3 apprentices each and asked if there was a particular reason why Sunderland Council were yet to do so. Mr Marshall replied that the intension and commitment was there as evidenced by the passing of a Council motion to that effect. The TfC model would be used as a training tool for Council Directorates in advance of it taking on its first apprentices. This would be implemented slowly as it was important to get it right. The TfC model had been established deliberately on a small scale to allow TfC to make mistakes, so others did not have to. In addition, Councillor Curtis welcomed the move to establish apprenticeships in relation to Youth Work for which there was a desperate need. Councillor Elms added that it was really great to see how passionate Mr Brown and his colleagues were about providing apprenticeships for care experienced young people.

Councillor Graham-King stated that the most important exit point for a young person was onto a pathway to achieve long term growth and success. Given this she asked if there were plans to support them into a permanent role at the end of their apprenticeship. Mr Marshall replied that ultimately no one could guarantee jobs however the intension was to find permanent roles for the young people. Councillor Curtis stated that help was out there and in particular highlighted the ability of the digital hubs to signpost young people onto the most appropriate pathways.

There being no further questions or comments the Chair thanked Mr Brown for his report and presentation and it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2025/26

The Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the development of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2025/26.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report highlighting the key issues to be addressed by the Committee during the remainder of the municipal year and providing Members with a timetable of work.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Support Coordinator 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 12th of November 2025.

(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.

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

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

(Signed) L. WILLIAMS,
Chairman.