

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 2nd MARCH 2023 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Mason-Gage in the Chair

Councillors Burrell, Crosby, PWL Gibson, Guy, S. Johnston, Samuels, P. Smith, and Tye.

Also in attendance:-

Ms Jill Colbert, Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, TfC
Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager, CIRT, Performance, Customer Feedback & Planning, Together for Children
Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities & Enabling Services.
Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Education, Together for Children.
Mr. David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities & Enabling Services Directorate.
Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities & Enabling Services.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Cllrs Dunn and McKeith and also on behalf of Anne Blakey (Co-opted member).

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 2nd February 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 2nd February 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Overall School Performance Data for the 2021/22 Academic Year

Simon Marshall Director of Education, TfC presented a report of the Director Children's Services which updated members of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee on the verified overall school performance data for the academic year 2021 – 2022.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Marshall advised that it was perhaps the most unusual set of verified school performance data he had ever presented. The DfE had made it clear that, performance data for 2022 should not be directly compared with 2019 and earlier, nor should comparisons be made between schools because they may have been affected differently by COVID-19. As a result, the data did not reflect the usual 3 year trends and instead comparisons were made against regional and national performance.

Arising from the performance data Mr Marshall suggested that there were 3 key lines of enquiry that the Committee may wish to consider adding to its work programme:-

- i) the impact of COVID-19 on the Early Years stage,
- ii) why, the older children become, the further away they get from the national average in terms of performance,
- iii) the performance of SEND.

The Chair thanked Mr Marshall for his report and invited questions and comments from Members. She advised that in submitting his apologies Cllr McKeith had also emailed the following question which she asked on his behalf. “What does the officer believe is the reason that Sunderland early years children have a 63.7% good level of development. Below the regional figure of 64.1% and national average of 65.2 %? Following on, of the actions taken by the school's improvement service, should this result in an increase in the local average?” Mr Marshall advised that historically Early Years performance in Sunderland in respect of language had been below that of the national average however had usually recovered by the end of Key Stage 1. Although it was still too early to know for certain, the indications were that COVID 19 had depressed this improvement. Likewise, autism appeared to be increasing rapidly in the under 5s which would have implications for Education Health Care Plans. It was too early to assess the situation clearly however, it could be the case that the under 5s had been suffering from a lack of regulated time in school.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Tye, regarding whether the changes to the Ofsted Inspection Framework had impacted the data, Mr Marshall advised that previously Ofsted viewed the school's results as the major contributor to its judgement on the overall effectiveness of the school. Now Ofsted's focus had moved away from the raw data and onto the more qualitative measures taken by a school to positively impact children. Councillor Tye stated that he sympathised with schools trying to deal with the changes in the Inspection Framework and noted that it appeared to be faith schools who seemed to be suffering disproportionately, which was in contrast to their traditional position as high performers. Mr Marshall added that a potential positive impact of the change in Framework was that if schools were now under less pressure in terms of the data, they may be freed up to take a more creative approach regarding the options offered in their curriculum.

With regard to Councillor McKeith's earlier question and in reference to the 3 Key Themes for consideration as Work Programme items, Mr Marshall stated that the Committee may also wish to consider looking at the impact of the family hubs in striving to narrow the attainment gap. There appeared to be a lot of evidence pointing to poor routines established by a child at an early age being extremely difficult to change later on once the behaviours had become established.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Crosby regarding how many children were currently studying for a T Level, Ms Colbert advised that the numbers were currently low but that it was a growing offer. She added that this was also something the Committee may wish to look at as part of its Work Programme. Mr Marshall stated that he would be happy to support any Sub-Group established to look at T Levels.

In addition to Councillor Crosby, Councillors Guy and Tye expressed an interest in sitting on the potential Sub-Group. Councillor Guy stated he had friends doing T Levels and noted that it would be interesting to see the impact the qualification had made on working class males in the longer term, once a number of cohorts had passed through. He also expressed the view that there was currently an issue regarding the standards of the placements on offer and a potential need to re-evaluate the skills being taught and whether they were in the right areas. Councillor Tye stated that it would be interesting to investigate the pros and cons of studying for a T Level as opposed to opting to go down the Apprenticeship route.

Councillor Samuels stated that she would be interested in sitting on any Sub-Group looking at the local curriculum offer. With regard to the vocational offer, she believed it was perhaps a good way to stop pupil disengagement from school as they grew older.

There being no further questions for Mr Marshall, the Chairman thanked him for his attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that consideration of the report be received and noted.

Together for Children Meaningful Measures

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an opportunity to consider Together for Children's new format 'Meaningful Measures' performance statistics for the period ending February 2023

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager together with Mr Marshall and Ms Colbert presented the report, highlighting the processes involved together with any trends or themes arising in relation to the following 5 key areas of measurement.

- i) I feel safer and supported
- ii) I feel happy at home and feel connected to people that matter to me.
- iii) I take the 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

The Chairman thanked Ms Hodgkinson for her report and invited questions and comments from Members. She referred to the measure regarding 'the % of cared for children that had a missing incident', and ask how was missing defined?

Ms Colbert replied that there were two categories (missing and absent). In both cases there was a criteria to follow and recording needed to be consistent. Historically TfC had always reported on and recorded missing young people as part of the return to home interview. That system had now been brought in house and was used in respect of all young people reported as missing not just those that were cared for. TfC cared for a number of young people who had led disrupted lives and would routinely go missing. In addition, under the National Transfer scheme, TfC now had responsibility for unaccompanied young people who had arrived in the UK as asylum seekers. As reported to a previous meeting, this added to the problem as overwhelmingly the children had a desire to be living in big cities, predominantly Manchester or London, and would try very hard to get there.

Councillor Tye stated that he had been critical about data in the past but in terms of this data regarding cared for children he had confidence that it and the reasons for it were correct. Ms Colbert added that whilst the red X on the report against this measurement did not look good, it was important that Members were able to see it and understand the reasons for it. The challenge was how do you risk manage the issue?

Councillor Thornton stated that her concern centred on whether there was anything more sinister lying behind the measurement, for example county lines activity? Ms Colbert replied that the simple answer was yes. Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficking (MSET) was a growing problem and TfC and partners including Northumbria Police were seeing an increased amount of targeted behaviour in this regard. She added that vulnerable adolescents was another potential topic that the Committee may wish to look at as part of its Work Programme.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Guy regarding the impact of the early years on key stage 4 performance, Ms Colbert replied that EYFS data was open to interpretation by providers, however Sunderland was not an area that saw a loss of providers during the pandemic and therefore a lot of children remained in nursery over this period. Mr Marshall added that elsewhere in the country a lot of providers were in the private sector and a number gone out of business as a result of COVID-19. He believed that Sunderland as a city, benefited from its high-quality early years provision.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Burrell regarding the average age of cared for children, Ms Colbert advised that this could shift at any point in time. 2018-19 had seen a significant increase in the number of children aged 9+. That had now shifted slightly since. TfC had robust protocols in place to support families in crisis however she was not worried about the age of the children concerned rather that too many were living in Children's Homes outside the City.

Councillor Thornton referred to the figure of 84.4% in relation to the % of established posts filled with permanent employees and asked what was being done to maintain a stable workforce. Ms Colbert replied that she believed the figure represented a data cleansing issue. The measure related to all TfC staff including business support and Legal. She was confident that there were no agency workers among operational staff. In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Thornton as to whether an agency member of staff could be employed in residential setting, Ms Colbert replied that it could be possible as it was an area that had struggled with recruitment previously. Mr Marshall added that TfC were currently engaged in a good piece of

work to identify future recruitment needs and planning workforce demands. In relation to the importance of workforce planning, Councillor Thornton advised that the UK only had 6 doctors who specialised in trans surgery, 4 of which were due to retire over the course of the next year. Ms Colbert agreed that this illustrated the importance of a robust talent succession plan.

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

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2022/23

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the development of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2022/23 and appended a copy of the programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report and briefed the Committee on the current position regarding those items already scheduled on the work programme and those waiting to be programmed in on a suitable date.

4. 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 15th February, 2023.

(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.

Ms Colbert referred to Councillor Crosby's enquiry at the previous meeting regarding item 221101/750 – ('To consider the outcome of the review of the governance and contract arrangements for Together for Children Sunderland Limited and approve the recommended next steps') and advised that the report on the item was due to be considered by Cabinet at its next meeting.

5. 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) K. MASON-GAGE,
Chairman.