

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held REMOTELY on THURSDAY 26<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER, 2020 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Hunt, Mann, McDonough, McKeith, F. Miller, Mordey, Samuels and Scanlan together with Ms A Blakey.

**Also in attendance:-**

Ms Nicola Appleby, Senior Policy Officer, People & Neighbourhoods (observing)

Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Sir Paul Ennals, Independent Chair Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board

Mr. Luke Hall, Sunderland Youth Council

Ms Marianne Huison, Independent Scrutineer - Sunderland Safeguarding Children's Partnership (observing)

Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor K. Wood.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 22 October, 2020**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 22 October, 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

**Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)**

Councillor Mordey made an open declaration in respect of Item 5 on the agenda (Establishment of Regional Adoption Agency) as having been a member of Cabinet during the development of the proposals.

## **Sunderland Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP) Annual Report 2019/20**

The Chair of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board submitted the 2019/20 Annual report on the work of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) and the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Partnership which provided an update for members on the progress made during the last year and the changes that have been made since the introduction of the Partnership.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Sir Paul Ennals Independent Chair of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board presented the item briefing the Committee on the key issues arising from the Annual Report, the changes in arrangements following the move from a Board to a Partnership and in conclusion a reflection on his three years as Chair of the Board.

Highlights of the work detailed in the annual report included:-

- i) The Implementation of Operation Endeavour, a joint operation between SSCP, Northumbria Police and the Police and Crimes Commissioner to safeguard children and young people at risk of harm from going missing.
- ii) Influencing regional safeguarding developments by contributing to the development of a safeguarding children procedure manual covering the North and South of Tyne
- iii) leading the implementation of the regional Missing, Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking (MSET) Framework.
- iv) strengthening the multi-agency working of the Integrated Care and Referral Team (ICRT), and saw significant progress within a dedicated team.
- v) Overseeing the introduction of “Signs of Safety” a strength-based approach to working with children and families which had already brought real benefits to all. Although data suggested that the curve had been turned regarding the demand into the system, initial contacts remained high
- vi) Early Help Services had continued to expand and improve. Mental health services had been highlighted, attracting an increase in funding and a reduction in waiting times, despite seeing a continuing rise in demand

With regard to the changes in arrangements, the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board, became the Sunderland Safeguarding Children’s Partnership (SSCP) from September 2019 in response to Government’s legislation. The small change in name reflected much larger changes in structure and purpose. The statutory responsibilities for overseeing safeguarding now rested equally through a partnership of the three ‘Statutory Partners’ – the Council, the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Police. The role of the independent person would be undertaken by Ms Huison.

With regard to Covid 19, Sir Paul advised that it had provided the safeguarding arrangements with its ultimate stress test. It was an event that could be expected less than once in a generation and attacked areas in which you already knew you were weak. Covid-19 had hit Sunderland hard. There were high levels of deprivation within the city, and an age profile which had a higher than the average proportion of elderly people; these factors meant the city suffered high levels of infection and deaths. Nevertheless the city’s true nature was revealed, and the partnership within Sunderland had proved itself to be extremely strong. It brought out the best in

partners. Services adapted very rapidly to the new challenges, communications were fast and efficient, and partnership working flourished. The input from public sector workers across the city had been excellent. There was evidence that the Partnership in Sunderland was strong and there was much that it could be proud of.

In conclusion Sir Paul advised that he had taken up the Chairmanship of the Safeguarding Board shortly after Children's Services in Sunderland had received its first Inadequate rating. Sunderland had then received a second Inadequate rating which had surprised him. He believed that Children's Services were now in a much stronger position and the service in Sunderland deserved to be taken out of special measures. There was no room however for complacency. A crucial test when faced with adversity was whether a partnership turned on itself or held together. In 2015 the Partnership had turned on itself. "The Council hated everyone and everyone hated the Council." Sir Paul stated that the same thing could have happen when tested by Covid but it didn't. No bricks were thrown and instead people stood up and supported each other. This gave him confidence for the future.

Councillor Crosby referred to the mention of 4 rapid review meetings on page 24 of the agenda pages and asked if these were recent or historic meetings. Ms Colbert replied that they took place during the year in question (2019/20) and related to the death of a child.

Councillor Samuels thanked Sir Paul for his frankness and welcomed Ms Huison in her new role. She noted that Sir Paul had mentioned the stress test that Covid 19 had provided to the new Partnership arrangements and asked if any bench marking had been done with other areas in order to make comparisons and to share best practice in respect of where Covid had forced systems to change. In addition she noted that over the years Sir Paul had usually ended his presentation by sharing what kept him awake at night and wondered if he'd like to do so again?

Ms Colbert replied that Sunderland had its formally constituted Partnership but it contained partners who worked together every day, for example the Safeguarding Front Door, a multi-agency team that had had its response to Covid tested. Another example was paediatric health care. These partnerships were real and operational everyday, continuing to share best practice. At a strategic level the LA7 councils were working together to share and consider the learning arising from Covid 19. Sunderland was also part of the North and South of Tyne Safeguarding Forum which covered the footprint of the Northumbria Police Force Area which was also looking to share best practice and learning arising from the pandemic.

With regard to what kept him awake at night, Sir Paul advised that it was twofold and both had arisen from Covid. Initially his concern had centred on the worry that the additional pressures Covid was placing on families would result in a rise in domestic violence. He was cautiously optimistic that the preliminary evidence showed that this had not been the case. His major concern now centred on child mental health. Services in this area had been placed under enormous pressure and despite the receipt of additional resources, waiting lists and times remained too long and too high. He felt there were growing anxieties among young people facing the uncertainties of the future and revolving lockdowns and feared 'the lid was about to come off.'

Councillor Hunt referred to page 21 of the agenda regarding the evaluation of Operation Encompass and what had been done to overcome the lack of contact schools had had with children during lockdown. Ms Colbert replied that Operation Encompass had continued to operate during lockdown. The Police had continued to make the information available to the school and contact was then made by the school with TfC. It was important to note the difference between a notification and a referral. Not all lower level of notifications would be referred as they did not meet the safeguarding thresholds. The Safeguarding front door would work with the school in respect of an Operation Encompass referral to agree how to proceed with that particular child.

Councillor Hunt then asked Ms Colbert to expand on the statement on page 21 that 'Quality of school support and engagement with the child is variable' and in particular the challenges around identifying which school the child attended and the subsequent quality of the engagement from the school to the child. Ms Colbert replied that Operation Encompass was a Police led initiative but it was fair to say that the quality of the multi-agency work had improved during the Covid crisis. Arrangements had been added to and strengthened and work was continuing regarding where particular responsibilities sat with a school. Schools currently faced a massive problem in just keeping their doors open and it may be good to ask the question again in 6 months time to fully judge the effectiveness of the changes made.

Councillor Mann welcomed the preliminary evidence to show that the feared increase in domestic abuse levels during lockdown had not come to pass. With regard to child mental health, she referred to the various digital platforms that had been made available such as Kooth and asked if there had been a big take up, had it helped, and were children being well signposted to it? Colbert replied that she did not have the performance data to hand but had recently received a report on the operation of Kooth and would be happy to bring this to members.

Councillor F. Miller referred to the planned redesign of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and asked what form this would take? Ms Colbert advised that the re-design had been delayed by Covid 19. This in itself was not a bad thing as it had allowed time for an extensive forensic deep dive to be undertaken. The redesign would follow the provisions of the 'I Thrive Model' and it was hoped that a full summary would be brought to the Committee in the new year.

Councillor Mc Donough referred to Sir Paul's suggestion that children's mental health was a ticking time bomb and suggested that given its importance the Committee might wish to dedicate a session to looking at the issue in detail. Ms Colbert replied that with regard to this issue she 'wore the hat' of a commissioner rather than that of the service provider. She suggested that it would probably be beneficial if the Committee looked at current issues regarding access and the redesign of the service moving forward rather than focussing on historic issues.

Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that it was intended that a representative from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) would attend the January meeting to discuss CAMHS. Sir Paul advised that the Partnership were also scrutinising the matter and cautioned against the issue of duplication. He also added that the timing of any scrutiny was important. Previous periods of national crisis had

shown that the most resilient sector of society had been its children and he offered a note of optimism that the current generation would also bounce back.

The Chair asked Sir Paul if he was satisfied with the amount and quality of training that had been given to workers with a responsibility for safeguarding and was he confident that the learning had been taken onboard. Sir Paul replied that at first he believed that there wasn't enough multiagency training and that it tended to be very sector specific. This situation had gradually improved and he suggested that moving forward, multi-agency training in respect of safeguarding was provided on a regional basis rather than just a local authority level.

There being no further questions or comments for Sir Paul or Ms Colbert the Chairman thanked them for their presentations and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Establishment of Regional Adoption Agency - Update**

The Chief Executive of Together for Children submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an update on proposals to establish a Regional Adoption Agency following consideration of the matter by Cabinet on 17 November 2020.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children, presented the report confirming that the Cabinet had granted approval to the Full Business Case for the 'Adopt Coast to Coast Regional Adoption Agency' ("RAA") together with the proposed next steps. Members were informed that the proposals were in response to the Government's requirements to move to Regional Adoption Agency models where the aspiration was to have fewer organisations recruiting and assessing adopters and having organisations that were operating at much greater scale.

Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council and Together for Children / Sunderland City Council had been working together since December 2016 to consider how they could best develop a RAA and it had been agreed to establish a Partnership Model with a Hub and Spoke delivery.

It was envisaged that the proposals would deliver the following key benefits on a regional scale:

- i) Sunderland children would have the opportunity to be matched and placed with adopters from a wider pool, improving the quality of the match;
- ii) The ability to share best practice and resources across the Adopt Coast to Coast area to enhance the service for vulnerable children in their adoptive families; and
- iii) The establishment of a collaborative hub and spoke model which would secure the benefits of regional collaboration at a focused "hub" level, whilst allowing each authority to continue to operate at a local "spoke" level without service disruption and without any delegation of legal powers or transfer of existing staff required.

Councillor Mann asked why Sunderland had opted for the spokes that it had (Durham and Cumbria) rather than with other LA7 partners? Ms Colbert replied that there was a North and South of Tyne Adoption Agency but at the time it was being developed it was felt that it was not the right time for Sunderland to get involved as TfC had too many priorities of its own that it needed to deal with. It would have also meant that if Sunderland were to join it would have required the TUPE transfer of TfC's adoption social workers who had only just transferred from Sunderland City Council to TfC. In order to do this, the social workers would have first had to be transferred back from TfC to the Council in order for them to be TUPE transferred to the new adoption agency. At the time this was a level of bureaucratic change that could not be justified.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor McDonough regarding expected efficiencies, Mr Colbert advised that the recruitment of a greater number of adopters would lead to a decrease in the amounts paid out in respect of inter-agency fees.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair, Ms Colbert advised that Paula Gibbons of Durham County Council had been appointed to head up the RAA.

There being no further questions or comments for Ms Colbert the Chairman thanked her for her report and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Annual Work Programme 2020/21**

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided members with details of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2020/21

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report reminding Members that the January meeting would include the attendance of a representative from the CCG to discuss CAMHS and the impact of Covid 19 on child mental health

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 Notices of Key Decisions for the 28 day periods from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2020.

(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, they should contact Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer for initial assistance.

The Chair having asked for further details in respect of item 201013/526 (To seek approval to a proposal to Amend the Sunderland Council's Code of Conduct for the Issue of Penalty Notices Relating to Unauthorised School Absences) it was:-

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

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

(Signed) P. SMITH,  
Chairman.