

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held REMOTELY on THURSDAY 7th JANUARY, 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Mann, McDonough, F. Miller, Noble, Samuels and Scanlan together with Ms A Blakey and Ms J. Graham.

Also in attendance:-

Ms Sue Carty, Director of Corporate and Commercial Services, Together for Children.

Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children

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

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager - CIRT, Performance, Customer Feedback & Planning, Together for Children

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 Councillors Hunt and Mordey.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 26 November, 2020

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 26 November, 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Child Mental Health Services – Update

The Chair informed the Committee that the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) had been in touch to ask if the report on Child Mental Health Services could be

deferred as all available clinical staff were being required to support the vaccination programme in Sunderland. They were hopeful that they would be in a position to be able to present the report at the February meeting.

The Chair advised that given the circumstances and the importance of the vaccine programme she had agreed to this and moved that consideration of the item was deferred to the next meeting.

2. RESOLVED that consideration of the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Committee.

At this juncture and prior to the consideration of the formal agenda items, the Chair asked Ms Colbert to update the Committee on the impact on schools of the latest lockdown announced by the Prime Minister earlier in the week.

Ms Colbert informed the Committee that following the Prime Minister's announcement, schools were now closed to universal attendance, both primary and secondary. Early years provision was to remain open with the exception of those nurseries that shared a school building. Ms Colbert outlined the significant challenges and pressures facing schools in managing the situation as the government had significantly expanded the criteria as to what constituted a vulnerable child. This included not having access to IT equipment or not having a quiet place to work. In addition throughout the first lockdown, a distinction had been made between key workers and critical workers. The key worker definition had been removed and the definition of critical workers expanded so a child now only had to have one parent in this category to be eligible for a school place. As a result, in some areas, schools had almost as many pupils attending as they did prior to being 'closed'. This provided additional pressures for Head Teachers as schools were experiencing reduced capacities with staff suffering from covid, at a time when in addition to providing 'physical' schooling they also had to provide an online curriculum for all children which may also be the subject of an Ofsted inspection.

Ms Colbert was then joined by Anne Blakey and Jackie Graham, Head Teachers and co-opted members of the Committee who briefed the meeting on the challenges they faced from the perspective and experiences of their own schools.

Ms Colbert, Ms Blakey and Ms Graham then addressed questions and comments from members in relation to:-

- The level of covid cases among school staff,
- The high standard of the zoom lessons being provided by schools,
- The current position regarding the provision of IT equipment for vulnerable children and the current position in respect of the provision of free school meals,
- IT support for schools providing on line learning,
- Lessons learned from the first lockdown and whether they could be used to inform contingency planning going forward.

The Chairman thanked Ms Colbert, Ms Graham and Ms Blakey for their update and drew members attention back to the substantive items on the agenda.

Together for Children Performance – Update

The Chief Executive of Together for Children submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an overview of performance against TfC's contractual indicators with Sunderland City Council for the period August to October 2020 and which set out the:-

- Six key contractual performance targets with the Council;
- Table of the supporting measures reported to the Council;
- Service commentary for any supporting measure reported as amber or red, and
- Summary table showing the RAG rating of all contractual performance targets and supporting measures.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Colbert was happy to report that with regard to KPI1 in respect of Early Help, TfC was still well above target despite the additional pressures placed on the early Help Service by the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on families. This KPI would face a challenge going forward as one of the metrics against which it was measured was school attendance. The impact of Covid had resulted in the DfE, at certain points, making changes to the way School attendances was monitored and at others, not monitoring it at all.

With regard to the rate of entry of young people into the youth justice system Ms Colbert reminded members that there was a lag in the timeliness of the figures as they were reliant on receiving data from the Police National Crime Computer. The trajectory however was positive in terms of reducing the number of children entering the system for the first time.

With regard to the timeliness of decision making within 24 hours, Ms Colbert advised that she had no real concerns. TfC had previously held long discussions with Ofsted on this indicator and their opinion was that it was better that TfC took its time to make the right decisions rather than rushed to make the wrong ones. However as an assurance to the Committee, Ms Colbert informed members that there was full management oversight of any decision that was not made within the 24 hour timeframe.

Members were advised that Ms Colbert had no worries with regard to children subject to a child protection plan who had received a statutory visit within the 20 working day window. She was confident that the indicator was performing well despite slipping slightly below target during October.

The indicator regarding Children with 3 or placements within the last 12 months was a rolling target measured over the period of a year and had shown a slight improvement. Children with 3 or more placements tended to be older adolescents with complex needs.

The 6th key indicator, Children cared for with an up to date Education Plan, had also shown improvement over the reporting period. The remainder of the report highlighted the supporting indicators, only one of which was RAG rated (orange) and which dealt with repeat referrals.

The Chairman then invited questions from the Committee on the report.

Councillor Mann referred to the effects of the pandemic on those children with an Education Health Care Plan transitioning from a primary special school such as Sunningdale to a senior school such as Portland and asked if anything was to be put in place to handle the transition period, which even under normal circumstances would be a difficult time for the children.

Ms Colbert replied that to fair, it was still too earlier to say what schools would be able to pull together in respect of transition plans. TfC and schools were waiting to see whether the DfE would provide any guidance on whether it would be prepared to reinstate the reasonable endeavours flexibilities. Currently the DfE expected all children with special educational needs or with disabilities in whatever setting to physically attend school. It was difficult to provide a definitive answer at the present time, however Ms Colbert assured Councillor Mann that the issue remained absolutely on TfC's radar.

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.

Learning and Improvement Plan – Update

The Chief Executive of Together for Children submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an update on the progress being made on the delivery of the Learning and Improvement Plan 2020/21 which was developed following discussion with Ofsted and which paid attention specifically to the areas that had been explored through monitoring visits or identified through the services' own audit and quality assurance activity.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Members were advised that whilst the plan had continued to be updated, there had been no Ofsted inspection in over year and therefore TfC were still awaiting comment from Ofsted on the updates.

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

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Together for Children Customer Feedback Six Monthly Report

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with information relating to the compliments and complaints received by Together for Children during the period April 2020 – September 2020.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Sue Carty, Director of Corporate and Commercial Services, presented the report and assisted by Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager, addressed questions and comments from Members thereon.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Samuels as to whether the Ombudsman's Office had continued to accept Ombudsman complaints during the pandemic, the Committee was advised that the presumption was that it did, however TfC had not been the subject of any such complaints during this period.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding what was meant by the term 'workers action', Ms Hodgkinson advised that it was difficult to explain specifically however in general it referred to the actions taken by an officer which generated the complaint or compliment or those actions taken by an officer in handling the complaint.

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

5. 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)

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator presented the report and confirmed that the Work Programme would be amended to provide for the attendance of a representative from the CCG to discuss CAMHS and the impact of Covid 19 on child mental health at the February meeting.

6. 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 14th December, 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.

7. 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.