

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY 4th NOVEMBER, 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor McKeith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Dodds, Dunn, S. Johnston, Mason-Gage, Noble Samuels and Tye.

Also in attendance:-

Joanne Brown, Early Help ATM with DVA Lead, Together for Children
Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children
Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate
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
Ms Gerry Taylor, Executive Director of Public Health & Integrated Commissioning
Ms Susan Toulson, Early Help Service Manager, Together for Children

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Paul Gibson, and Pat Smith also on behalf of Ms Anne Blakey.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 7th October 2021

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 7th October, 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Draft Sunderland Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy

The Executive Director of Public Health and Integrated Commissioning submitted a report (copy circulated) which placed in context the statutory duty of local authorities

to assess the need for accommodation-based support for adult and child survivors of domestic abuse and to put in place a strategy to meet the needs identified.

(For report – see original minutes)

Ms Gerry Taylor presented the report which also sought the Committee's views on the appended draft Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy and in particular its four priorities namely:-

'1. Ensure that what we do is underpinned by a robust needs assessment: to improve our knowledge of demand and capacity and to better understand and evidence the levels of unmet need (including needs of male victims-survivors) and the barriers that prevent victims-survivors with diverse and additional needs from accessing support.

2. Deliver quality service interventions which contribute to improving outcomes for survivors and children: to commission outcome-based services to meet needs identified giving priority to support services which address mental health and substance misuse and services which work directly with children.

3. Increase safe accommodation provision: to ensure victims and survivors achieve stable and secure accommodation with a minimum of moves which contributes to their recovery and ability to engage with specialist support services, including how pathways into accommodation for perpetrators could be developed.

4. Strengthen our approach in hearing the voice of survivors, and children and young people, including those with protected characteristics, to ensure their views are heard and influence what we do: to involve survivors-victims in commissioning processes to ensure support services are accessible, equitable and inclusive and outcomes for victims-survivors are understood.'

The Chairman thanked Ms Taylor for her report and asked if the city had sufficient levels of safe accommodation or was more required?

Ms Taylor replied that it was fair to say there were high levels of domestic abuse in the city and there were gaps in provision however it was something that was being addressed.

Chairman referred to the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board and asked if Ms Taylor believed it was working well. Ms Taylor replied that it was early days for the partnership as the arrangements were still very new. The overarching group had been established and to date had met twice to appoint its Sub-Groups. So far, the partnership was working very well, there was a strong engagement among the stakeholders towards developing the strategy.

Members having welcomed the report and the strategic priorities of the draft Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation and Support Services Strategy, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted;

Operational Delivery of Services to Support Children and Families Impacted by Relationship Difficulties, Domestic Abuse and Violence

The Service Manager Early Help and Early Help Assistant Team Manager with DVA Lead, submitted a joint report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation from Susan Toulson and Joanne Brown on the current approach to supporting families and children experiencing relationship difficulties, domestic abuse and domestic violence and outlined future aspirations for service delivery and improved outcomes for children and families. In concluding the presentation Ms Brown provided the Committee with a detailed case study to illustrate the practical impact of the support available.

(For report – see original minutes)

The Chair thanked Ms Toulson and Ms Brown for their presentation and invited questions and comments from Members.

Councillor Crosby asked if TfC liaised with legal services in respect of issues arising from domestic abuse such as divorce? Ms Colbert advised that issues such as divorce were a civil matter and that TfC would not become involved unless directed by the court.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Samuels, Ms Toulson advised that the Independent Domestic Violence Advisers were funded as part of a commissioned service provided by Wearside Women in Need (WWIN). With regard to the timescales in respect of the DVA Therapy Project, there was currently no waiting list. It was a newly established in house project which began in July and it was anticipated that a waiting list would be required if demand continued to grow. With regard to the Big Programme for male perpetrators, Ms Toulson advised that she didn't have any figures to hand regarding the impact or success rate of the programme but would hope to circulate details following the meeting. With this in mind, Ms Colbert drew members attention to 'Walking on eggshells' a report recently published by Sunderland University which provided an analysis of service-users' perspectives of domestic abuse support services in Sunderland. It was a public document, and she would send a copy to Mr Diamond to circulate to the Committee.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dunn, the Committee was informed that domestic abuse services were available in respect of children with special educational needs. TfC were committed to equality of access and aimed to provide a bespoke service for each family affected by domestic violence.

In response to a number of questions from Councillor Noble, the Committee was informed that the DVA Therapy Project was delivered in house and it was something Ms Toulson wished to see grow. The service did not have a dedicated worker for the BME community but would love to be in the position to appoint one.

The service wished to develop a range of interventions in cases where children were the perpetrators of domestic abuse and this was currently a work in progress. The 'Big Programme' for male adult perpetrators could also be adapted for work with female perpetrators. In response to a final question from Councillor Noble as to whether the Service had the resources to cope with demand and fund the services

required, Ms Toulson replied that if she was being honest, she would say that the Service could always do with a bit more.

Councillor Noble stated that she believed that TfC and WWIN did a fantastic job and wished to see the Council step up and take the provision further. She felt that this should be a priority for the Council and the Committee coming out of Covid.

Ms Taylor confirmed that there was a lot more work planned by the Council as part of the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board moving forward.

There being no further questions or comments for Ms Toulson and Ms Brown, the Chair thanked them for their presentation and suggested that the presentation slides were circulated to all Councillors or brought to their attention via the Area Committees.

3. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted;

Together for Children Performance Update

The Director of Children's Services 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:-

- TfC Contractual Key performance indicators (KPI) reported to the Council;
- TfC Supporting measures (SM) reported to the Council, and
- TfC Measures included within Sunderland Council's City Plan.

and provided a high-level summary of performance for each measure together with a service commentary for any rated amber or red.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager presented the report and together with Ms Colbert addressed questions and comments from Members thereon.

Councillor Crosby queried the graph regarding the 'Number of missing from care episodes (& children)' detailed on page 54 of the agenda. Ms Hodgkinson advised that it appeared to be an error on the labelling of the graph.

Councillor S. Johnston welcomed the report but referred to the slide detailed on page 53 of the agenda (% of young people who are NEET or whose activity is not known age 16 – 17). He stated he had slight concerns that the line on the graph for 2021/22 seemed to be following the same upward mid-year spike as 2020/21 and asked if there was a reason for this. Ms Colbert replied that the spike during the summer months reflected that period where TfC were unaware of the young people's activity during the summer having left the school system until they showed up elsewhere. She reassured Councillor Johnston that Sunderland now had the most improved performance in the region with regard to this metric.

Councillor Noble stated that there were no real surprises in the report although it was actual better than she had expected. She offered her congratulations to everyone involved.

There being no further questions or comments for Ms Hodgkinson, the Chair 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 2021 – September 2021.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Service Manager presented the report and addressed questions and comments from Members thereon.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding what had been done in house that had resulted in a decrease in the number of complaints, Ms Hodgkinson advised that in addition to service improvements, a focus had been placed on the learning gained from addressing complaints. This included tackling a complaint at the earliest possible stage and working with the complainant to seek a resolution and avoid any escalation. An action plan was maintained and closely monitored by the Customer Feedback Team. Reminders were sent to managers with responsibility for the recommendations arising from complaint resolution each month and reported into Senior Management Team meetings to ensure that the learning was shared across the whole service.

Councillor Noble referred to paragraph 10.2. of the report regarding a complaint dating back to 2017 whereby a large payment was made to remedy lost care provision over a three and a half year period. She asked if this was something that needed to be looked at for the future or if it was a one-off event. Ms Hodgkinson explained the circumstances of the case leading to the compensation payment and confirmed it was likely to be a one off.

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

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2021/22

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the developed of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2021/22 and appended a copy of the programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

There being no questions or comments, it was:-

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 18th October, 2021.

(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.

7. RESOLVED that the Notice 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) J. McKEITH,
Chairman.