

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1 of the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 4th OCTOBER, 2018 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor B. Francis in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Hunt, Miller, F., O'Neil, Rowntree, Samuels, Scullion, and K. Wood together with Mrs A. Blakey

Also in attendance:-

Ms. Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children and Director of Children's Services, Sunderland City Council

Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr. Joshua McKeith, Sunderland Youth Parliament

Mr. Thomas Newton, Sunderland Youth Parliament

Ms. Kim Roberts, Independent Reviewing Officer Manager, Together for Children

Ms. Gillian Robinson, Area Coordinator, Sunderland City Council

Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr. Gavin Taylor, Independent Reviewing Officer Manager, Together for Children

The Chairman opened the meeting and welcomed introductions.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Smith, P. and Tye and on behalf of Ms. J. Graham

Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 6th September, 2018

Councillor Bell asked that his concerns be recorded over the Members access lift which had been out of order and had prevented him from attending the last meeting of the Committee, whereby he had to submit his apologies, and it was:-

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 6th September, 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Councillors O'Neil and Rowntree made open declarations as they were both members of the Foster Panel which were referred to in items for consideration on the agenda.

Change in Order of Business

The Chairman advised that with Members agreement he would re-order the agenda to allow Officers to leave once they had presented their report and answered Members' questions. Therefore, the items would now be considered in the order of Item 6 – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Team, Item 5 – Annual Report of the Designated Officer and then Item 4 – Together for Children Performance Monitoring Update.

Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Team 2017/18

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which asked the Committee to consider the progress and performance of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service for the period 1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018 and highlighted future action for the year ahead.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Taylor and Ms. Roberts, Independent Reviewing Officer Managers, presented the report advising the Committee of the wide range of key statutory roles and functions that the Children's Independent Review Team (CIRT) undertook and the impact that work had upon the children and young people in the city. The annual report included areas of service improvement, emerging themes, examples of good practice and the priorities for the service for the next twelve months.

Mr. Taylor referred Members to the pie chart at paragraph 9.7 of the report which set out the child protection dispute resolution procedure (DRP) themes for conferences not going ahead and advised that 32% were due to no Social Worker, issues with the Social Worker Report or a Late Social Worker Report. Mr. Taylor explained that the conference panel had to ensure they had all of the correct information to consider before they could proceed in putting a plan in place for a child; although he explained that they could always hit potential difficulties on the day the conference met as there could always be unknown factors that could become apparent on the day, e.g. if the case was dealing with an unborn baby then the parent could go into labour or have emergency appointments on the same day or they had incidents in the past where family members had passed away.

Mr. Newton referred to the 32% identified in the pie chart as being in relation to issues with either the Social Worker or their report and asked why this was not split down further to clearly identify what the issue had been. Mr. Taylor commented that this information was readily available and they could look at the way in which they report the information in the next annual report to allow Members to clearly see the more specific issues and any trends.

Councillor Scullion referred to the reasons Mr Taylor had given as examples as to why the conference may not have gone ahead and commented that these must not

by typical occurrences and were more likely to be in the minority. Mr. Taylor explained that the service dealt with a high proportion of unborn baby cases so they did find themselves in the situation where the baby may have been born early, or there were appointment clashes which arose at the last minute but agreed that these were more monthly, rather than daily, occurrences.

Councillor Wood referred to the increase in numbers of children and young people looked after and commented that this could be a knock on effect as to why Social Worker reports may have been late or not complete and asked if the increase in demand on services had identified a need in an increase in the workforce to support that. Mr. Taylor commented that in relation to CIRT there had been a definite increase on demand for the services and when requests had been made for extra resources this had been accommodated. He advised that he was aware that partner agencies were also suffering the same issue of increased demand on services with limited capacity and resources.

Councillor Bell commented on the impact the changes in the benefits system and the introduction of Universal Credit could be having on family groups; causing possible increases in incidents of domestic violence and volatilities and raised concerns as to how long services could continue to cope with the pressure and demands put upon them.

Councillor Hunt commented that it was apparent from the statistical data contained within the report that there were capacity issues in relation to the resource of Social Workers, Ms. Colbert commented that she would look to respond to this issue during consideration of her performance monitoring update later on the agenda.

Councillor Hunt also commented on the level of support being offered to children, perpetrators and / or victims of domestic violence. She referred to a visit Committee Members had undertaken with the Early Intervention Team where they had discussed the gap in support being offered to children who were the victim of; or had witnessed, domestic violence. Ms. Colbert advised that the domestic abuse intervention service came under the Council remit and not Together for Children but agreed that there was a greater level of provision needed and they would help in influencing the support being offered across the city.

Councillor O'Neill referred back to the pie chart on page 72 and commented that she was unable to identify what the 20% related to. Mr. Taylor commented that the chart appeared to have removed some of the table, possibly due to the pdf converting, and advised he would send copies of the original to Members directly.

Councillor Francis referred to the pie chart on page 73 of the agenda identifying the children looked after DRP themes and issues and asked if there could be more than one theme identified for an individual child and was informed that this could be the case, with a number of themes relating to a child or young person.

In response to a question from Councillor Bell regarding the placing of children and young people from Sunderland in secure accommodation in Scotland, and the legal implications due to the differences in legislation between countries, Ms. Colbert advised that cases had to be put before a national gateway who would allocate placements for young people requiring secure accommodation. There was a significant and constant pressure on secure accommodation places and they were always subject to direction from a Judge but they had to comply with the placement

they were allocated. Mr. Taylor commented that it was an absolute last resort to make the decision through the IRO panel to place a child in secure accommodation but at times it was the right and necessary action to take.

When asked by Mr. Newton if Officers would prefer to have children and young people from the city placed in secure accommodation closer to home, Ms. Colbert agreed that it would be preferable but explained that Officers had no say in where allocations were made and there were very limited beds available overall so they had to accept the places which were allocated to them.

Councillor Bell asked what education provision was given to young people whilst in secure accommodation placements and was advised that they would be provided with education services on site and that they would be taught at the relevant level to them individually. The provisions within placements were regulated by Ofsted in the same way as any other educational establishment.

Councillor Rowntree asked how much family contact the children and young people would have when placed in secure accommodation facilities and was advised by Mr. Taylor that it would be considered as part of the review process and they would consider the best way for the individual as to how family contact should be arranged. The decision could be determined by the parental request but the service looked to facilitate and offer contact with family and helped them to access this. This could be by providing overnight accommodation close to the placement site so that the family could get the best quality of contact possible or offering transport solutions to the venue.

There being no further questions or comments the Chairman thanked Mr. Taylor and Ms. Roberts for their report and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that:-
 - i) the information contained within the report be received and noted; and
 - ii) the Independent Reviewing Officer Manager provide Members with copies of the pie charts contained within the Annual Report directly.

Annual Report of the Designated Officer 2017-18

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which asked the Committee to consider the progress and performance of the Designated Service Officer (DO) service between April 2017 – March 2018 and highlighted future action for the year ahead.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Taylor and Ms. Roberts, Independent Reviewing Officer Managers, took Members through the annual report advising that it set out key findings from the Designated Officer activity through data analysis and commentary and explaining that case studies had been used to provide an illustration of the complex and diverse nature of the role. Mr. Taylor advised that since the production of the last annual report there had been a change in personnel and a new Designated Officer had been appointed and that they continued to promote the service which continued to see an increase in referrals being made.

Councillor Miller referred to the use of the Leisurewatch scheme in the Gateshead area, where she worked, and asked if Sunderland were a member of the scheme or used anything similar. Officers advised that they were not aware of leisure facilities in Sunderland using the scheme but that they could have conversations with colleagues in the arm's length leisure company to follow this up further.

Councillor Francis commented that it was important to have a central hub, linking organisations together and being able to share information and Ms. Roberts advised that in some respects that was the role of the Designated Officer. Recently they had developed a quite robust system that identifies when a referral has been made in relation to an individual on more than one occasion. Any use of leisurewatch or a similar scheme would need to be heavily managed due to privacy laws, etc whereas the Designated Officer was very clear in their role as to what they could and could not legally do. Officers agreed to happily pick up the comments around the leisurewatch scheme and ask the Designated Officer to look at the possibilities with leisure colleagues. Ms. Roberts advised that she was aware that the Designated Officer presently offered training to colleagues in leisure in identifying risks to young people using their facilities.

Councillor Wood commented that she felt that the increase in the number of referrals being made was a positive thing as it showed that more people were aware of the service. She was pleased to see that of the 406 enquiries made, 226 did not meet the threshold and were given advice and guidance, and only 60 of the remainder were substantiated.

Councillor Hunt commented that it was really important for Members to have further information as to why the 60 cases had been substantiated and what the breakdown of reasons for each was so that they could identify any areas of concern. Councillor Scullion also commented that it would be beneficial for Members to be given information as to which referral enquiries were progressed through for further action so that they could see cases complete the whole process.

Councillor Rowntree referred to paragraph 8.4 of the report and the referral from education which often involved the use of Team Teach, a method of physical restraint, she understood the model was used to minimise the use of physical restraint and asked what services were doing in partnership. Ms. Roberts advised that the Designated Officer was intending to sit a Team Teach course and then work alongside two schools to look at the way in which they manage referrals so that they would have a slightly different impact on the numbers of referrals being made through the way in which they were recorded. This would not necessarily see any reduction in the number of referrals but ensure they were recorded with more information; such as how many people were present at the incident, and gathering more detail so that they could make sure they could assess referrals in the best way.

Mr. Taylor also advised that within schools where it was identified that there may be issues in the number of referrals being made they would be giving advice and guidance support to them.

There being no further questions or comments the Chairman thanked Mr. Taylor and Ms. Roberts for their report and attendance and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the information contained within the report be received and noted.

Together for Children Performance Update

The Executive Director of People's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with performance information in relation to Together for Children and the commissioning arrangement in the Council, offering assurance over progress and any issues that had arose, in the context of the scope of service and performance indicators as set out in the service contract.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms. Jill Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children and Director of Children's Services, presented the report advising that she was currently in discussions around how the performance update report should be presented in the future and what information should be included. The report in this format provided a lot of data for Members but she felt it was important that they had the narrative behind the data to give a clear picture. Negotiations were ongoing around a new data set of targets and once agreed they would be addressed in future reports.

Ms. Colbert then took Members through the report picking out the key messages and advising that overall there was a significantly improving picture across the Key Performance Indicators and invited questions from Members.

Councillor Wood referred to County Lines criminal activity and asked if training was provided for social work staff who may have to work with a family at threat of or being involved in activity. She referred to families who may have been exploited and commented that she had seen them offered support from Northumbria Police services but not necessarily from Together for Children. Ms. Colbert commented that they did have some members of staff who were worked at a much higher level and were more experienced in areas such as this than others and advised that training was being offered through regional resources, namely, by the Home Office and Organised Crime Units. Ms. Colbert explained that the remit of safeguarding adults in the city would fall under the Council and Adult Services but advised that she could look to have discussions with them to raise the Committee's concerns and as it could be such a large issue, look at ways in which Members could be provided with wider reaching briefings in the future.

Councillor Samuels referred to the case file audits and commented that she was shocked that there were only thirteen audits completed in total and asked how many this was out of? Ms. Colbert commented that the thirteen would be proportionate to where work was with particular families and explained that there was a limited audit resource so they had invited in internal auditors to progress audits. Numbers of audits were quite small as they involved a lot of detailed work and they were looking to bring in external agencies so that actions could be followed and monitored to ensure the findings of audits were acted upon.

Ms. Colbert explained that there was an ongoing national debate around audits as they could be a quite critical merit of case files and workloads. Within the quality assessment framework there would be a column which shows the outcome of audits undertaken. The quality assessment framework would allow all information to be in

one dashboard and therefore information would not be considered in isolation. Improvement in audit findings was increasing but the service would rather know where there were any issues than to see a false picture of quality. Progressing the outcome of audits was a priority for the service but the information needed to be seen in its entirety and this meant that partners needed to be brought in to share information also.

Councillor Francis commented that he appreciated the format of the performance reports but felt it would be helpful for Members if tables and graphs had the population or the number of people involved shown so that they could better understand the information.

In response to a comment from Councillor Bell regarding the numbers of referrals into the system and where services were being overwhelmed, Ms. Colbert advised that trends showed that the number of open children with plans was reducing, and to have a successful children's service they had to be just as good as stepping children down through the system at the appropriate times also. Ms. Colbert advised Members that the numbers of looked after children were stabilising and although there were still a large number of children in the system, data was showing that growth was stable.

Councillor Rowntree stated that it was notable the number of case file audit which required improvement and asked if there were any particular themes pinpointed, such as timeliness, which had been identified. Ms. Colbert advised that she had not seen the audits at that time but commented that she would be happy to look into the matter further and provide information back to Members.

Councillor Francis asked if Social Workers were learning from case file audits where they had been found that they required improvement or were inadequate and Ms. Colbert informed the Committee that an implicit part of the process was working with staff so that they could understand what a case file with a rating of good looked like. Exemplar copies of what good and outstanding assessments of case files were available and shared with social workers to take away and understand how those reports were wrote and what they could take from them within their own workloads. Staff had lost a lot of confidence from previous outcomes and they were continuing to work with staff who needed to improve case files further.

Councillor Hunt referred to the percentage of children looked after who were adopted being at 10% and asked if this meant that the other 90% were waiting to be adopted or if some children were in care and hoping to return to the family home or another permanent placement and Ms. Colbert explained that reporting on adoptions contained rolling data so it would be dependent upon where any child was on the route to adoption. She confirmed that it would be children who were either waiting for the final steps in the process to be completed or with a matched placement.

In response to further comments from Councillor Hunt that only 10% of looked after children had been adopted, Ms. Colbert commented that there would be a combination of factors that would have to be looked into for each individual child. What was important to note was the decrease in the number of carers available, for example, it could be difficult to place larger sibling groups and keep them together.

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

4. RESOLVED that the contents of the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2018/19

The Head of Member Support and Community Partnerships submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work for the 2018/19 municipal year.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Members were advised that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee had been rearranged due to member commitments and would now be held on 5th November, 2018. Unfortunately, representatives from mental health services who were scheduled for the original meeting date would not be available on the new date and therefore there would need to be some discussions around the agenda content for the next meeting with the Chairman.

Councillor Bell referred to previous comments he had made regarding nursery provision in the city for two year olds and how the offer differed between providers in the city. Ms. Colbert commented that she could discuss the best way to provide information to the Committee, as all providers recorded data in differing ways, but advised that they would aim to bring a report back to Committee in 2019 at a time deemed suitable following conversations with the Chairman.

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme be received and noted and that the items as discussed be included following discussion with the Chairman.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Head of Member Support and Community Partnerships submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from the 18th September, 2018.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

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

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

(Signed) B. FRANCIS,
Chairman.