

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1 of the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 9th SEPTEMBER, 2016 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Beck, Bell, Francis, Hunt, Jackson, O'Neil, Scullion, Stewart, Tye and G. Walker together with Mrs. A. Blakey, Mrs. R. Elliott and Mr. S. Williamson.

Also in attendance:-

Councillor N. Wright, Chairman - Scrutiny Coordinating Committee
Councillor D. Snowdon, Vice-Chairman - Scrutiny Coordinating Committee

Ms. Karen Brown, Scrutiny and Member Services Coordinator
Mr. James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer
Miss. Luwam Habte, Chairman Sunderland Youth Parliament
Mr Alex Hopkins, Director of Children's Services
Miss. Chloe Stedman, Sunderland Youth Parliament
Ms. Joanne Stewart, Principal Governance Services Officer
Mr Gavin Taylor, Deputy Independent Reviewing Manager

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 19th July, 2016

Mr. Diamond referred to the request for a series of visits being arranged during the year to reflect a child's journey through social care and advised that it was proposed that there would be approximately ten visits arranged through a rolling programme over the year with the intention to have the initial visit to the leaving care service on 21st September, 2016. Mr. Diamond advised that he would circulate the remainder of visit dates and to which services to Members of the Committee.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the of the last ordinary meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 19th July, 2016 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Sunderland Safeguarding Children Learning and Improvement Plan – Progress Update

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) advising that he would provide a verbal update at the meeting on the progress being made on the Safeguarding Children Learning and Improvement Plan.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Alex Hopkins, Director of Children's Services advised that the Learning and Improvement Plan had been developed by the Children's Services Improvement Board around seven key priorities for improvement; and gave the Committee an update against each.

With regard to recruiting, retaining and developing a skilled and confident social care workforce, Mr. Hopkins advised that they continued to work towards reducing the percentage of agency staff over time to ensure there was a stable workforce. He advised that this was not an issue Sunderland suffered alone as the use of agency staff was a national and regional issue. In response to a question from Councillor Walker, Mr. Hopkins informed the Committee that current agency workforce rates were at 38%, which was higher than the national average, but that these did tend to be in the higher risk workforce areas, such as assessments and child protection, with Team Manager posts also being difficult to fill.

Councillor Francis referred to 38% agency staff and asked for information around the turnover rate of staff, expecting that it would be quite high for agency staff who may move between roles quickly. Mr. Hopkins advised that the service had a cohort of agency staff who had been with the Council for some time but that sometimes they do have staff members, and not necessarily just agency staff, who may move on quickly which could always be problematic in managing case loads, etc. He suggested that it may be beneficial for him to come to a future meeting of the Committee with further detail around the retention of staff and he did not have specific, detailed information to hand.

Councillor Wright raised concerns that Members of Scrutiny had asked on numerous occasions if they may meet, in an informal setting, with young people so that the voice of the young person could be heard. She expressed that the issue to meet with young people had been raised with various officers within the Council and despite this meetings had still not taken place. Members had informed Ofsted previously that this was their intention and to date no action had been taken to undertake organise the meetings for Councillors. She pleaded and hoped that this would be the last time it would need to be raised. Mr. Hopkins advised that he would take it upon himself to ensure that young people groups were approached to ask them if they would allow and welcome Councillor participation at one of their future meetings or an alternative setting of their choice and come back to Members through the Scrutiny Officer with proposals.

Mr. Williamson referred to the Work Programme of the Committee and noted that the Corporate Parenting Annual Report was due for submission at the next meeting to be held in October and asked if it would be possible to have begun discussions with young people at least prior to this. Mr Hopkins advised that he had spoken with Ms. Jane Wheeler outside of the meeting, asking her to have those discussions with

youth groups and with groups such as the Change Council meeting on a weekly basis, he would expect this to be a possibility, dependant on their agreement.

Ms. Habte of the Youth Parliament advised that they would welcome Member participation at a future meeting and felt it would be a fantastic opportunity for them to build relationships and have input with Councillors.

Mr. Hopkins also referred to those wards where Councillors may have children's homes within them and advised that through the Corporate Parenting Board they could always request visits and speak with young people in that environment also.

Councillor Tye sought further information on the early help services conference Mr Hopkins had referred to as part of his update and was informed that it was a workshop which would include representatives from various services including Northumbria Police, the CCG, Schools, the VCS, etc and was being held to allow services to come together and discuss where they were now and how they may look to improve in the future. He advised that this was something that Councillors would need to be included and involved with but that at this stage it was the very first discussions to set the scene and they would be brought in at a more appropriate time in the future.

Mr. Hopkins went on to advise the Committee of the outcome of a recent monitoring visit made by Ofsted which had been the first since the authority had been judged to be inadequate overall in July 2015. He advised that two inspectors had undertaken the visit and had reviewed the progress made in respect of the experiences and progress of care leavers. They had considered a range of evidence including case records, observation of social work practice and performance data and had spoken with a number of care leavers and a range of staff.

He took Members through a summary of the key findings of the monitoring visit and agreed to forward a copy of the letter from Ofsted to them for their information. In summary, Ofsted had found that the Council were making significant progress to improve services for care leavers and based on the evidence identified areas of strength, areas where improvement was being made and some areas where it was considered that progress had not yet met the expectations as set out in the action plan. In closing he advised that there had been a lot of work undertaken but that there was obviously still a lot to be done and he would continue to bring back timely updates to the Committee.

With regards to the new ICT system, Mr. Hopkins advised that the previous case management ICT system had adapted and changed over time and was now difficult to use so the service had procured a new system which had been tried and tested and was much more intuitive and that they hoped to have the new system in place next year. All current records would need to be migrated to the new system and then it would be about a cultural change to how staff work with the system and keep records, etc.

Councillor Walker commented that it may be useful for the Committee to see a demonstration of the new system once it was up and running which Mr Hopkins agreed would not be difficult to arrange once they were at that stage.

Ms. Blakey pleaded for more partnership working and referred to times in the past when joint training had been provided for education and health professionals and

social services staff, giving them the opportunity to come together and share experiences and issues. She commented that she could give a couple of snapshots of experiences where particular agencies had felt that they had been ignored and by coming together it would allow all parties to have a better and similar understanding.

Councillor Smith advised that the Committee were keen to invite Ms. Jane Held, Sunderland Safeguarding Board to a future meeting and Mr. Hopkins advised she was very keen to come and suggested that she may be invited to the November meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Tye commented that he would have liked to ask a lot more questions around the Children's Company around funding, etc and asked that it be kept high up on future agendas as he was keen to have that opportunity. Mr. Hopkins suggested that this may be a topic for discussion at the next meeting of the Committee.

The Chairman welcomed the report and thanked Mr. Hopkins for his attendance at the meeting, and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report and actions as referred to within the discussion be received and noted.

Annual Report of the Local Authority Designated Officer 2015/16

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which invited the Committee to consider the progress and performance of the Local Authority Designated Service Officer (LADO) service between April 2015 – March 2016 and highlight future action for the year ahead.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Chairman welcomed Mr. Gavin Taylor to the Committee who explained he had responsibility for the Local Authority Designated Officer service and presented the report advising of developments and analysis data over the last year, highlighting any trends and themes which had been picked up and what this meant within the service.

Councillor Tye commented that he had experience of dealing with the LADO service and had not deemed the timescales to have been acceptable. He explained that when he had challenged the length of time taken, he had been informed it was down to the lack of resources available at that time and he would like assurances that these issues had been addressed and they could now deal with requests in a timely fashion. Mr. Taylor advised that there had been a number of changes in staffing and resources and that they had worked to recruit to posts permanently but could now report that they were back up to 100% of all recommendations being distributed within 24 hours.

Councillor Tye went on to comment that it would be beneficial for the Committee to see some specific example of cases in relation to the data within the report, so that they could thoroughly scrutinise the service and how it was dealing with cases, without identifying individuals. Mr. Taylor advised that in future they could look at the

structure of the report to see how to best present and provide the information required by the Committee.

Councillor Walker referred to only 8% of referrals being substantiated as set out in the report and Mr. Taylor advised that this was following an investigation, whereby there was no question of doubt that the case was substantiated. He explained that in some cases, once it was looked into, it was found that the action had been within the remit of the adult, i.e for instance within an educational establishment where an adult acted appropriately, and this could be why substantiated numbers looked so low.

When asked why there was no data for 2013-14, Mr. Taylor advised that there had been a gap in the annual reporting and data had not been collected at that time and therefore could not be reported.

Councillor Stewart asked how the service were working to ensure that all partner agencies were represented at meetings as this could cause meetings to be postponed at short notice, or on the day, when some were not in attendance who needed to be and was advised that the service worked closely with all partners to build strong relations and if it is critical for a representative from a certain agency to be in attendance they can ensure this happens. He advised that work was carried out prior to meetings to ensure that all necessary parties can be in attendance but if they can't then this is challenged. Mr. Taylor explained that they had adopted procedures set by the Sunderland Safeguarding Children's Board so that there is a route to escalate concerns should a partner agency not be engaging.

Mr. Williamson highlighted that the review of links to all faith groups had not been achieved by the deadline of December 2015 and was keen to ensure that the meeting proposed for September, 2016 was held as it was a really important review to be undertaken. Mr. Taylor agreed and confirmed that the initial meeting for September, 2016 was to go ahead and Mr. Williamson commented that he looked forward to a report back on that review being submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

In response to a query from Mr. Williamson as to any comments as to why referral rates were falling at primary school level, Mr. Taylor advised that there were no significant reasons, other than that services were more aware of the remit of the LADO service and adhered to the advice and guidance that was given to them as to what and when to refer. It could be that referrals in the past need not have been made or could have been dealt with in an alternative way than a referral to the LADO service.

In relation to guidance given, Mr. Williamson raised concerns over the good relations that were made with the Council in relation to offering that level of advice which could be lost as more schools chose to convert to academies and possibly lost that relationship by going to other providers for that service.

Councillor Smith referred to the LADO service having contacted independent schools in the city, asking them to clarify what processes they have in place and Mr. Taylor advised that this work had been undertaken now and that they continued to work with the only independent school remaining in the city.

Councillor Bell referred to only 1% of referrals coming from Northumbria Police, which he felt was low, and was informed that more often than not referrals were made jointly and Northumbria Police may have involvement through another partner, such as an educational or health professional, who would be the lead on the referral, although they have had some involvement.

There being no further comments or questions for the Officer, the Chairman thanked Mr. Taylor for his attendance and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that report on the progress being made be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Head of Scrutiny and Area Arrangements 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 23rd August, 2016.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor Tye sought further information be submitted to the Committee on Item no. 160104/48 – to consider the freehold acquisition of two properties to provide children's services accommodation, to better understand why the report would be submitted to a meeting of Cabinet to be held in private and not just the financial aspects.

4. RESOLVED that the Notices of Key Decisions be received and noted and further information as requested be sought.

Annual Work Programme 2015/16

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work being undertaken for the 2016/17 council year.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Williamson noted that levels of attendance and exclusion in schools was on the work programme for the next meeting of the Committee and asked that information regarding the number of referrals for and actually number of issued fixed penalty notices also be included.

Councillor Tye referred to the Youth Work Provision scheduled for 30 March, 2017 meeting and commented that this may be too late on the work programme as any changes would be implemented the following day and asked that it be brought forward to a more suitable date.

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme be received and noted and that the comments made be included.

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

(Signed) P. SMITH,
Chairman.