

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

AGENDA

**Meeting to be held in City Hall, Committee Room 1 on Thursday 8
January 2026 at 5.30 p.m.**

Membership

Cllrs Chapman, Crosby, Clinton, Curtis, Elms, Gibson (Vice Chair), Graham-King, D. Snowdon, Stewart, Thornton and Williams (Chair).

ITEM		PAGE
1.	Apologies for Absence	
2.	Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 27 November 2025 (copy attached)	1
3.	Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)	-
	Part A – Cabinet Referrals and Responses	
	No Items	
	Part B – Scrutiny Business	
4.	Support for Young Carers	7
	Report of the Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator (copy attached)	
5.	Together for Children – Customer Feedback Report	8
	Report of the Director of Children's Services (copy attached)	

6.	Annual Work Programme 2025-2026	21
	Report of the Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator (copy attached)	
7.	Notice of Key Decisions	24
	Report of the Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator (copy attached)	

E. WAUGH,
Assistant Director of Law and Governance,
City Hall,
SUNDERLAND.

19 December 2025.

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the MAYOR'S PARLOUR, CITY HALL on THURSDAY 27th NOVEMBER 2025 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Williams in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Curtis, Elms, Gibson and Graham-King.

Also in attendance:-

Mr Kevin Brown, Director of Transformation, Innovation and Strategy, TfC

Ms Nicola Burn, Head of Safeguarding Services, TfC

Mr. Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Smart Cities and Enabling Services, SCC

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Strategic Services Manager, Customer Feedback, TfC

Mr. Simon Marshall, Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, TfC

Mr. David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Smart Cities & Enabling Services, SCC

Ms. Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Coordinator, Smart Cities & Enabling Services, SCC

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Clinton, Snowdon, Stewart and Thornton.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 23rd October 2025

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 23rd October 2025 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Together for Children Meaningful Measures Report

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with performance information as of the end of October 2025 in relation to the following Meaningful Measures:-

- i) I feel safer and supported.
- ii) I feel happy at home and feel connected to people that matter to me.
- iii) I take a lead in my plans and TfC makes sure workers can support me and my family.

- iv) I feel healthier, join activities that are fun, and my ideas help TfC to be creative, improve and make changes
- v) I have opportunities to learn and achieve my goals, and I feel positive about my future

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Stacy Hodgkinson, Strategic Services Manager, Customer Feedback, TfC, presented the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding the percentage of children subject to repeat Child Protection Plans, Ms Hodgkinson confirmed that none of the cases involved children where the repeat plan was a result of the same circumstances as the initial plan. Ms Burn advised that dip sampling would be undertaken to spot any occasions arising where this was the case, and this would be treated as a red flag. Case files would be reviewed to try and understand whether or not the original plan had been closed too early, and check that interventions had been undertaken appropriately.

With regard to the figure for the percentage of cared for children that have a missing incident, Mr Marshall provide the Committee with some context on the definition of a 'missing incident' which could be simply missing a curfew by 10 minutes or an incident lasting a number of days. The definition was a statutory one rather than being a discretionary local measure and would in some cases include a child sitting at the bottom of garden refusing to come inside. The definition was wide ranging and covered a multitude of scenarios.

Ms Hodgkinson and Mr Marshall then provided some context around the percentage of cared for children who had experienced 3+ moves within the last 12 months. Mr Marshall advised that TfC had opened a new facility called Claremont, located opposite St Anthony's school, which provided short break care for up to 5 young people aged between 11 and 18. This was aimed at young people who were in danger of being placed permanently into care, and provided a short break for the young person while wider support was sought for the family who were beginning to struggle. However, in attempting to be innovative and do something different and better, there would potentially be a negative impact on the meaningful measure. Ms Burn then provided the Committee with a case study on the positive impact Claremont was having in helping with the relationship between a young person and his grandmother who cared for him.

Councillor Elms noted that some of the indicators had targets attached to them and others did not. Ms Hodgkinson advised that the application of targets would depend on circumstances, whether it was right to do so and whether there were meaningful comparators. For example, targets would never be applied to indicators concerning 'rates' which reflected demand.

Councillor Gibson noted the strictness around some of statutory measures regarding cared for children and asked whether they were too rigid? Mr Marshall replied that he did not believe that was the case. The rigidity of the measures prevented issues from being overlooked. Ms Hodgkinson replied that while the measures were what they were, Ofsted would allow the submission of comments that provided context.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair regarding the measure, 'percentage of cared for children living 20+ miles from home', Mr Marshall replied that care closest to home would be default position for TfC, however legal rulings may require that a child was placed a certain number of miles from home in domestic abuse cases etc. In cases not subject to such requirements TfC would keep a young person's placement under constant review to ensure it provided what was best for the child. For example, there were two young people placed outside the city who would not be brought back as they were thriving, and the placement was right for them. Whilst the policy would always be to place a young person as close to home as possible, there would be occasions, particularly if a child had complex needs, where specialist provision outside of the city would be required. It was pleasing to note that Sunderland was performing much better than both the national and regional figures in terms of this indicator.

With regard to the complaints received, the Committee noted that there had been a rise in the number of stage 2 complaints and Ms Hodgkinson advised that there was no rhyme or reason for this and there had been a similar rise in the regional figures.

With regard to Meaningful Measure 5, Mr Marshall advised that if there was one indicator that the Committee would like to pay special attention to, it would be the 'percentage of young people who are NEET or whose activity is not known.' He stated it was an indicator that had been 'stuck' for some considerable time. It was a complex issue and one that was not solely in the gift of the Council to solve. It was dependent upon factors such as employment opportunities, training provision, apprenticeships etc and also linked to the adult skills agenda.

The Chair asked if this was something the Committee would like to look at, and this was agreed accordingly.

Councillor Graham-King asked if there was an issue around the changing scenario requiring 16–17-year-olds to be in education, which was the underperforming indicator, compared to the 19–21-year-olds who were not being flagged and who's position was unknown. Mr Marshall replied that it was a brilliant question, and highlighted the issue he believed the Committee should be driving. He didn't know who the right person would be to provide an answer, but it would require input from a variety of stakeholders including the College, the city's training provider network and young people who were NEET themselves. Ultimately young people needed to be aware of what they needed to do and what the pathways were, and relevant organisations needed to understand how they could enable and manage that, particularly with regard to how young people attained the basic skills to follow their chosen pathway.

Councillor Graham-King added that while the indicators in the report referred to cared for children it was an issue pertinent to all demographic groups. Mr Marshall agreed and added that the majority of young people took careers advice from the people they lived with. However, the jobs market and career pathways had changed completely compared to the position experienced by the people from whom advice was sought when they were young. The Chair added that it would be key to talk to those young people who currently felt that they had nowhere to go.

With regard to Meaningful Measure 5, the Chair stated that she was intrigued by the 53 children electively home educated who had returned to school and how it would

operate for them. Mr Marshall replied that he would be happy to provide a report to the Committee in due course. It was still early in the process as the young people had only just returned to school and it was a relatively small cohort.

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

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Social Care Prevention Agenda – Family First Model

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation that aimed to provide the Committee with an update on the Social Care Prevention Agenda and the Family First Model.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Simon Marshall, Director of Children's Services, introduced Ms Nicola Burn, Strategic Services Manager, who took Members through a presentation that :-

- Outlined the recent national changes to social care practice
- Described the work of the Early Help and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams
- Highlighted the Family Group Decision Making as already being a key strength across Together for Children and the pledge to continue to utilise it at the earliest possible stage in all its work with families
- Outlined the implementation of a small Families First pilot in the Coalfield Area to develop models of practice, tools, resources and training for practitioners, (Signs of Safety would continue to be used as TfC's practice model).
- Provided an overview of the Next Steps.

The Committee was informed that the pilot had been launched on 22nd September 2025. The Coalfield had been deliberately chosen as the pilot area. The numbers in the area were manageable; it benefitted from the presence of HALO and partner organisations such as Gentoo, enabling the provision of a multi-agency wrap around support.

Regular Reviews were being undertaken to allow TfC to understand what worked well and what it might want to do differently. Focus groups were being utilised to shape the delivery of the pilot model through the development of a single assessment, the provision of child protection conferences, systems development and defining the roles of partners etc. During the pilot phase, there would be no changes to service delivery across children's services other than in the pilot area. Staff had been identified to be part of the Family Help and Multi agency Child Protection teams however there would be no permanent changes to contracts until the pilot had concluded. Task and Finish Groups were being established with TfC staff and partner agencies to develop and review the new ways of working.

Mr Marshall advised that a data driven exercise would be undertaken to identify a second pilot area with a view to ultimately rolling out the model on a city-wide basis.

There being no questions or comments from the Committee the Chair thanked Ms Burn and Mr Marshall for their presentation and looked forward to receiving update reports in due course.

3. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted and that update reports be submitted in due course.

Update on Apprenticeships for Care Experienced Young People

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which updated members of the Committee on apprenticeships for Sunderland care experienced young people.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Kevin Brown, Director of Transformation, Innovation and Strategy, TfC, presented the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

Councillor Gibson expressed how important he believed it was to develop apprenticeship pathways for Sunderland's care experienced young people and asked if the Committee could continue to receive update reports. In reply, Mr Marshall outlined the planned reporting lines for the matter into the Corporate Parenting Board and onto the Scrutiny Committee. The Chair noted that an item on Corporate Parenting was scheduled on the Committee's Work Programme for its January meeting.

Councillor Curtis stated that it was brilliant that TfC and Gentoo had both taken on 3 apprentices each and asked if there was a particular reason why Sunderland Council were yet to do so. Mr Marshall replied that the intension and commitment was there as evidenced by the passing of a Council motion to that effect. The TfC model would be used as a training tool for Council Directorates in advance of it taking on its first apprentices. This would be implemented slowly as it was important to get it right. The TfC model had been established deliberately on a small scale to allow TfC to make mistakes, so others did not have to. In addition, Councillor Curtis welcomed the move to establish apprenticeships in relation to Youth Work for which there was a desperate need. Councillor Elms added that it was really great to see how passionate Mr Brown and his colleagues were about providing apprenticeships for care experienced young people.

Councillor Graham-King stated that the most important exit point for a young person was onto a pathway to achieve long term growth and success. Given this she asked if there were plans to support them into a permanent role at the end of their apprenticeship. Mr Marshall replied that ultimately no one could guarantee jobs however the intension was to find permanent roles for the young people. Councillor Curtis stated that help was out there and in particular highlighted the ability of the digital hubs to signpost young people onto the most appropriate pathways.

There being no further questions or comments the Chair thanked Mr Brown for his report and presentation and it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2025/26

The Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the development of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2025/26.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report highlighting the key issues to be addressed by the Committee during the remainder of the municipal year and providing Members with a timetable of work.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny, Members and Mayoral Support Coordinator 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 12th of November 2025.

(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.

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

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

(Signed) L. WILLIAMS,
Chairman.

**CHILDREN EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 8
JANUARY 2026**

SUPPORT FOR YOUNG CARERS

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY AND MEMBERS' SUPPORT COORDINATOR

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To provide the Committee with a report on the support available for young carers in the city.

2. Background

- 2.1 In setting its work programme for the year, the Committee agreed to receive a report on the challenges facing young carers in the city and the support that is available.

3 Current Position

- 3.1 Chris Ranson (Young Carer and Engagement Team Lead Sunderland Carers' Centre) will be in attendance to provide a presentation.
- 3.2 The presentation will cover the challenges of being a young carer in the city, what our current offer is and the future vision for young carers in Sunderland.

4. Recommendation

- 4.1 The Committee is recommended to consider and comment on the report and presentation.

Item 5

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 8 JANUARY 2026

TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN – CUSTOMER FEEDBACK REPORT

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To consider the Together for Children Customer Feedback Report for the period April – September 2025.

2. Background

- 2.1 Together for Children is committed to listening to those who use its services, and learning from compliments, complaints and feedback in order to improve those services.
- 2.2 The Customer Feedback report provides an overview of customer feedback received, identifying topics and trends in relation to complaints information and areas of organisational learning that have taken place in response to feedback received.

3 Recommendation

- 3.1 The Scrutiny Committee is recommended to consider and comment on the information provided regarding the feedback report.

**Together for Children
Customer Feedback Six Month Summary Report
April 2025 - September 2025**



HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

What are our key achievements?

- We have received 101 compliments so far this year from children, young people, families, and professionals.
- We have successfully helped 71 customers to receive satisfactory resolutions to their queries, issues or concerns informally, without having to initiate a complaint.
- We have seen much improved timeliness for Stage 2 complaints responding to 88.9% of complaints within timescale compared with 53.8% in the same period last year.

What are our areas of focus?

- Working with services to explore potential reasons for the increase in the number of complaints received.
- Continued focus on improving the timeliness of complaints at stage 1.

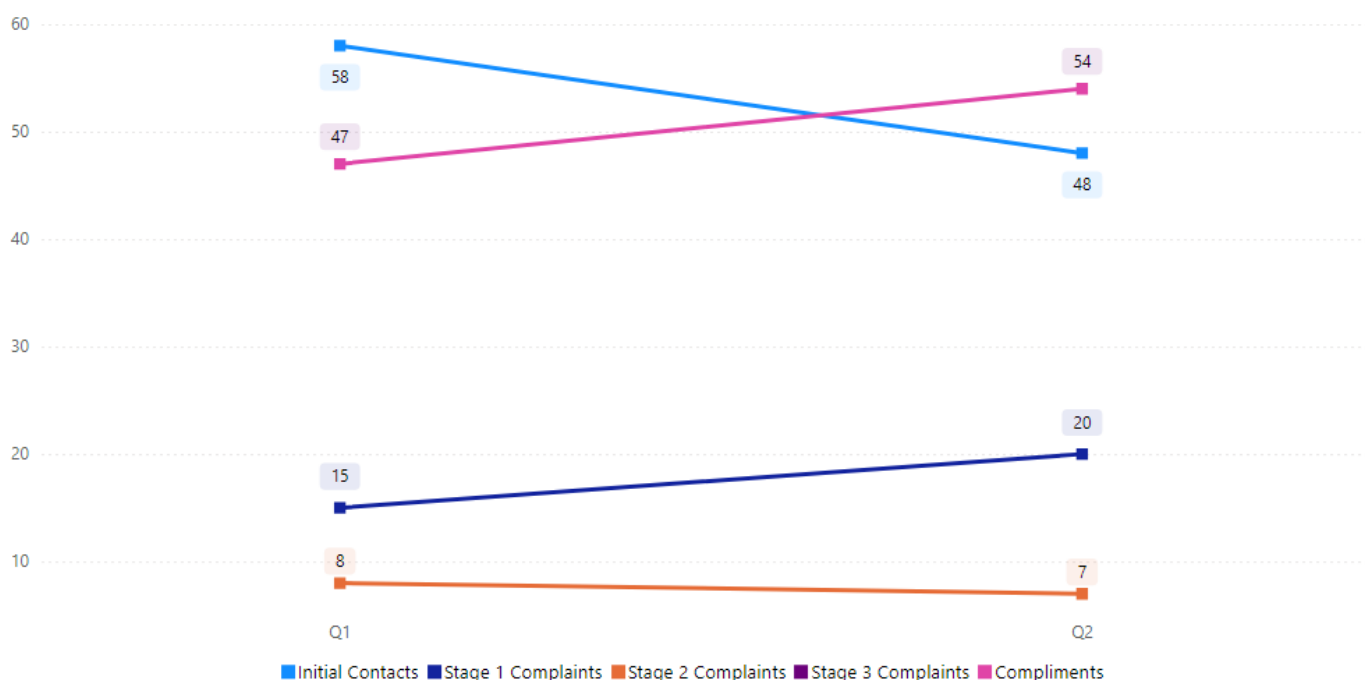
1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1. This report covers the period 1st April to 30th September 2025. Together for Children (TfC) welcomes all forms of feedback as a way of improving service delivery to children, young people and families. The report provides an overview of customer feedback received in the last six months, identifying topics and trends in relation to complaints information and areas of organisational learning that have taken place in response to feedback received.

2. SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

2.1. The Customer Feedback Team are responsible for receiving, recording, and responding to feedback received from children, young people and families regarding services delivered by Together for Children. The following graph shows the different types of feedback received in quarters one and two.

Feedback Summary



3. COMPLIMENTS

3.1. We have received 101 compliments in the last six months from children and young people, parents and other family members, foster carers, external professionals, and staff within TfC. Compliments are communicated to workers and management structures of the relevant teams and they are used to congratulate workers and teams and to inform service developments and best practice. Compliments are also shared more widely with the Senior Management Team, so all staff can be recognised for their dedication and hard work. Below are some examples of the compliments we have received in the last six months:

Assessment Team

The social worker from the assessment team was really thorough. She got a good understanding of the worries and had a really clear and direct approach with the family whilst still being empathetic and supportive.

Social Care Business Admin

I wanted to share that Marc has been very helpful in arranging a reasonable adjustment for a disabled member of staff. Kind and proactive as ever.

Business Intelligence

The report looks so good and very exciting for what more we could have in the future, thanks Sarah for all your hard work on this.

Cared for Team

X was spoken to as part of the audit moderation process. When asked about his social worker Trina he responded 'aye, she is cushty', he said she is a really good social worker and he gets on well with her. X said that Trina helps him by taking him to his appointments with CYPS and other people that he wouldn't have gone to before. X said that she helps him understand things which he hasn't understood before. X said that his life is now loads calmer and he is getting on loads better with his Mam and family.

Child Protection Teams

This has been a very life transforming journey for me. A few months ago I was broke, broken, homeless, rejected by all, ashamed, failed, very depressed, lost, hopeless, helpless, worthless, abused, and taken advantage of by people I loved. I lost the essence of living when I lost my only joy left, my child. I decided to take my life, before I was reassigned to these beautiful souls who saved my life.

You all gave me guidance, encouragement, and a shoulder to lean on. Most of all, you all gave me hope that I can have another chance to live again.

This amazing team worked their way through with me in putting up an amazing support network for me, who were willing to care and support me from baby steps to big steps. Thank you so much. You believed in me and refused to give up on me. Thank you so much for your encouragement, support and care for me and X. I am still a work-in-progress, healing and being an awesome mam to X. Thank you all for the outstanding team effort. You all are the real deal. TFC Rocks!

Children with Disabilities

Mam wanted to share that she thinks social care have been amazing. She said it really irks her when people complain online and she knows that often we get negative feedback, so she wanted to give a positive. She said we're all lovely!

CIRT

I just want to share some lovely feedback from Mam. She was understandably anxious about the RCPC today as she always feels uncomfortable in meetings like this however I spoke to her afterwards. Mam shared that she is really pleased that Emma has been the IRO as she has found her to be really supportive and understanding. Mam found the meeting went well and it relieved some of her anxieties, the way it was managed particularly with the difference in recommendations from the professionals. Mam said "Emma is amazing" and she wanted me to feed this back, how lovely!

Clinical Psychologist

I just wanted to say a huge thank you for all of your support throughout X's time with us. We really appreciate you giving up your time to offer advice and strategies to help us to guide her through some difficult times. I am sure our paths will cross again in the future but I just wanted you to know how much we have appreciated you and how much of a difference you helped make.

Fostering

I got excellent support from my Fostering Social Worker and advocates have been great for the boys as well as keeping me in informed and asking my views.

X reports having a strong working relationship with Mick Gifford who has been her Fostering Social Worker for 8 years and appreciates the consistency of support this has provided which Jean described as "brilliant".

Kinship Team

Kirsten is my social worker who has done all of my assessments and I would just like to say what a social worker she is - she's amazing. She is very friendly and down to earth. She made me feel really comfortable from her very first visit and X just loves her. She is very professional and gave me some great advice. She was always on the other end of the phone and I did need to ring her a few times for advice. We will really miss her.

Next Steps

Thank you card received from Grandad for Julie. 'Just to say thank you for all your support. We appreciate how difficult your role is when working with such difficult young people.'

Supported Lodgings

I would like to compliment and congratulate the team working at Marlow Drive. Their dedication and hard work have seen the person they support thrive. They have gone above and beyond in their roles, they have ensured person centred care and support that is kind, compassionate and the young person is at the fore of all they do. The team have experienced some tough times; but their strength, care and dedication has got them through. They have remained focussed on the success of the young person, supported one another throughout, this has included SALT, CYPs too; as well as a great management team too.

Early Help

I just wanted to say a huge thank you — today I visited the children's sensory room at the Bunnyhill centre with my toddler for the first time like you recommended, and it was absolutely amazing! I'm honestly so impressed. X loved it too — he was so excited and happy. It was very easy to find, and the staff there were incredibly friendly. Honestly, just wonderful. I asked at the pharmacy where it was, and a lovely girl from there actually walked me straight to the place. I have no words — truly, thank you so much again. X came home full of joy and went to sleep peacefully, without a fuss. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart. I always get quite anxious when I go to a new place because of the language barrier. I worry about how I'll communicate and how people will react to the fact that I don't speak English well — in fact, I barely speak it at all. But this time, I didn't face any difficulties at all. Everything felt so welcoming and kind. Even during my pregnancy, I had a few issues at the clinic before, but here it was completely different.

Everyone was so helpful. For example, I didn't even ask for help, but the lady at reception noticed I wasn't sure where the sensory room was — and she kindly took me by the hand and guided me there herself. It was such a small gesture, but it meant a lot to me. I really didn't feel any discomfort, and I'm very grateful for that.

Targeted Youth Services

Mam has praised the support offered from Andy and felt going through this difficult time since December has made things easier with the support Andy has offered. X has no male role model in his life and he speaks positively of the support and training Andy has offered, he has built up a positive professional relationship with Andy and I think this has really helped him build upon his self-confidence and esteem.

Education

As a parent, I wish to recognise the outstanding support and guidance that one of your caseworkers, Julie Armstrong, has consistently provided. Julie has supported my daughter as her caseworker, on and off over a number of years due to placement changes. Throughout this time, she has been consistently courteous, professional, and—most importantly—genuinely human in her approach. She takes the time to truly understand challenges, offers thoughtful guidance, and always sees my child as an individual rather than just a name within the system. Her modesty, true integrity, and selfless commitment to supporting others shine through in all she does. Julie remembers key details, recognises struggles, and works proactively to find solutions—where in the past, some might have seen only barriers. Most recently, she also stepped in to support my son's EHCP after a colleague left. True to form, she immediately made things happen, communicated effectively, and followed up with care and diligence. Julie is an exemplary caseworker who represents Sunderland SEN Department in the very best light. Her professionalism, empathy, and dedication are deeply valued, and I feel it is important that her contribution is acknowledged at a wider level. With thanks and appreciation.

Customer Feedback Team

Compliment from member of staff - Thank you Dawn for making me feel comfortable when sharing my views.

4. INITIAL CONTACTS

- 4.1. Initial contacts presented by customers can be queries, concerns, information requests or issues that require a resolution. Whilst customers are provided with information about the complaints process and their rights to complain, we aim to achieve informal resolution at the earliest opportunity so that the customer receives a quick resolution and has a better experience. The table below shows the initial contacts data for quarters one and two:

Initial Contacts	Q1 (Apr - Jun)	Q2 (Jul - Sept)	Totals	
			No	%
Number Received	58	48	106	-
Resolved as Initial Contact	43	28	71	67%
Progressed to Stage 1	15	20	35	33%

- 4.2. We have received 106 initial contacts in the last six months compared to 123 for the same period in the previous year. Through responding to contacts at the outset, we have helped 71 (67%) of our customers to receive satisfactory responses and resolutions informally with 35 contacts (33%) progressing to a formal stage one complaint.

An example of an initial contact:

A parent was aware of the recent changes relating to the care of the sons of her ex-partner. Although she did not have parental responsibility, her daughter was missing having contact with the boys as they had a close relationship. The Team Manager made contact and followed up with arrangements to attempt to facilitate family time and maintain communication. The parent was satisfied with the response and the complaint did not escalate.

5. COMPLAINTS PROCESS

- 5.1. **Children's Social Care Complaints** - follows statutory guidance and is a 3-stage process as follows:
- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within 10 working days, however an extension of up to 20 working days can be requested for more complex cases.
 - **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this stage, an Investigating Officer will be appointed to investigate the complaint and an Independent Person who will be involved in all aspects of consideration of the complaint. The investigation can take between 25-65 working days to complete.
 - **Stage Three** – if the customer remains unhappy with the outcome of the stage two complaint, they have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage three. The review should take place within 30 days of the request. At stage three, a review panel will be appointed to review the complaint. This will consist of three independent people who will make recommendations to the Director of Children's Services.
- 5.2. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
- 5.3. **Corporate Complaints** - any complaints that do not relate to Statutory Children's Services, are handled under the corporate complaints procedure which consists of the following two formal stages.
- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within 10 working days: however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases to 20 working days.

- **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this stage, an Investigating Officer will be appointed to investigate the complaint within 20 working days: however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases up to 40 working days.

5.4. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

6. COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

6.1. The table below shows the number of complaints we received across each stage of the complaints process:

	Social Care		Total Q1		Corporate		Total Q2		Overall			
	Q1	Q2			Q1	Q2			Q1	Q2	Total	
Stage 1	7	11	18	+5	8	9	17	+3	15	20	35	+8
Stage 2	5	5	10	+4	3	2	5	-	8	7	15	+4
Stage 3	0	0	0	-1	N/A	N/A	-	-	0	0	0	-1
Totals	12	16	28	+8	11	11	22	+3	23	27	50	+11

6.1. **Overall Total (all stages)** - In the first six months of the year we received 50 complaints compared with 39 in the same period of 2024/25, which is an overall increase of 11.

6.2. **Stage One Complaints** – we have received 18 Children’s Social Care stage one complaints compared with 13 for the same period in 2024/25. We also saw an increase in the number of corporate stage one complaints, receiving 17 compared with 14 in the same period last year.

6.3. **Stage two Complaints** – we have received 10 children’s social care stage two complaints compared with 6 in 2024/25. We also received 5 corporate stage two complaints compared with 5 in 2024/25.

6.4. **Stage three Complaints (Children’s social care)** – no complaints have progressed to stage three.

Number of Complaints by Young People:

6.5. There were no complaints received by young people in the first six months of the year.

7. STAGE ONE COMPLAINTS

7.1. The table below shows the number and percentage of stage one complaints received by service area.

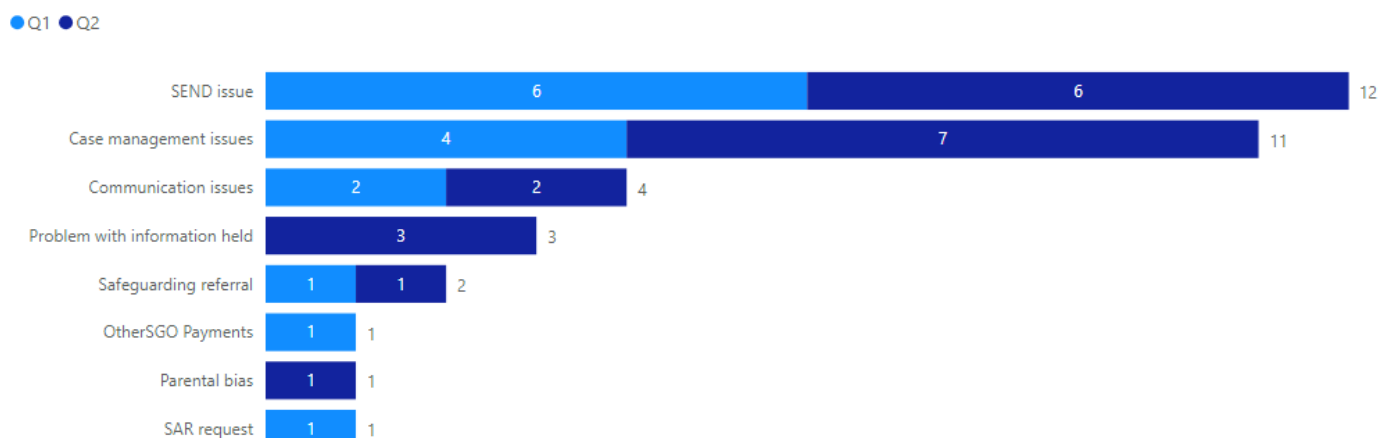
TEAM	No Stage 1 Complaints	% Stage 1 Complaints
SEND Team	13	37.1%
Assessment Teams	4	11.4%
Kinship Team	3	8.6%
Adoption Team	2	5.7%
Cared for Teams	2	5.7%
Child Protection Teams	2	5.7%
Children with Disabilities Teams	2	5.7%
Early Help	2	5.7%
Education	1	2.9%
Fostering Team	1	2.9%
ICRT	1	2.9%
Pre-Birth Team	1	2.9%
Education - Transport	1	2.9%
TOTAL	35	100%

7.2. 13 complaints received in the first six months relate to the SEND team with 4 complaints following for the Assessment Teams. Overall, we have seen some new areas of complaint within the first 6 months of this year which accounts for the increase in overall complaint numbers. Work will be undertaken with services to understand the reasons for the increase.

Themes:

7.3. The main themes of the complaints received at Stage one are shown in the table below:

No. of Stage 1 by Theme



7.4. The largest area of complaint relates to SEND issues. The second highest theme relates to case management issues where customers have issues with our actions or non-action or a disagreement with decisions made.

Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:

7.5. In the first six months of 2025/26, 28 of the 35 stage one complaints were concluded. 43% were completed in timescale which has decreased from 56.52% the previous year. Out of the 16 complaints over timescale, 10 were completed within a further 10 days.

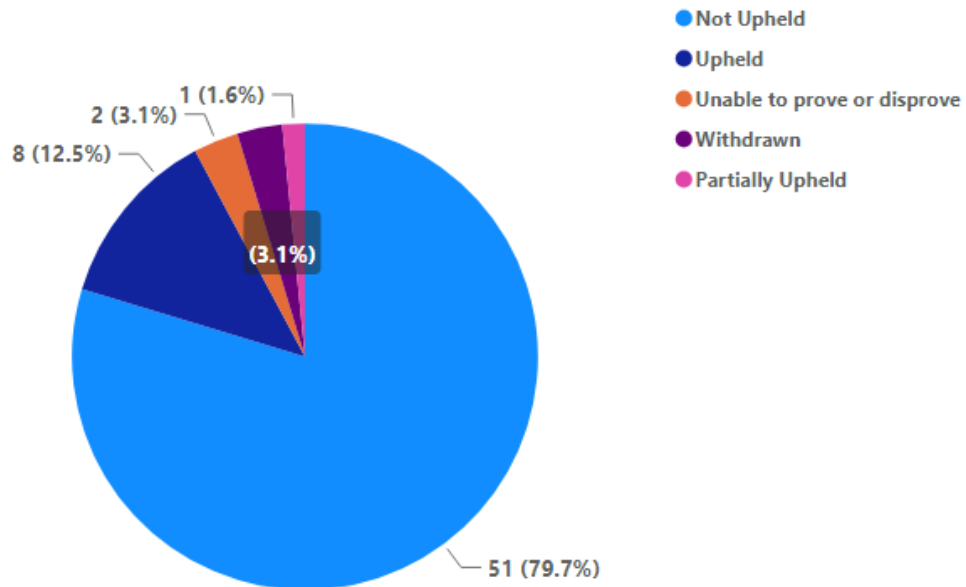
% of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	Overall
	56% (5 out of 9)	37% (7 out of 19)	43% (12 out of 28)

7.6. Stage 1 complaints are managed within the Customer Feedback Team with a greater focus on customer conciliation, mediation, and resolution e.g. offering opportunities for customers to meet with workers and managers so they can listen, discuss, and resolve their issues rather than moving to the lengthier stage two process (where this is possible). This increases customer satisfaction by resolving issues at this stage however it has consequently taken some stage one complaints out of timescale. So far this year, we have received eight more Stage 1 complaints than during the same period last year, which has affected our quarter two response times. We continue to work closely with the Tfc teams to identify ways to meet the 10 and 20-working-day timescales, even during periods of peak demand.

Stage One Complaint Outcomes:

7.7. There were 64 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that were concluded in the first six months of 2025-26. The outcomes of those stage one complaint elements are shown below.

Stage 1 Complaint Element Outcomes



- 7.8. Of the 64 elements of complaint, 51 were not upheld (79.7%). Only 8 elements (12.5%) were upheld, a further 1 element (1.6%) was partially upheld. Of the 8 upheld elements, 4 related to SEND issues, 2 were communication issues, 1 was a case management issue and 1 related to advice regarding SGO payments.

An example of a stage one corporate complaint:

A parent made a complaint that Together for Children had advised her to continue with a tribunal to challenge a school placement decision. Other elements to the complaint included that the child had not been in a school placement for a few months and the parent felt there was no explanation given by the SEND Team as to why a school had been suggested which was not suitable for the child's needs. The matter was discussed with the SEND Team Manager and it was deemed that the information provided by the SEND Team about the tribunal process was not given inappropriately or done in a way to suggest that it was compulsory. The tribunal process includes discussions around why the school named in the EHCP was chosen and this had been discussed in this case. The decision for the child to be out of school was deemed to have been the parent's decision and not to do with the decisions made by the SEND Team. All 3 elements to the complaint were not upheld.

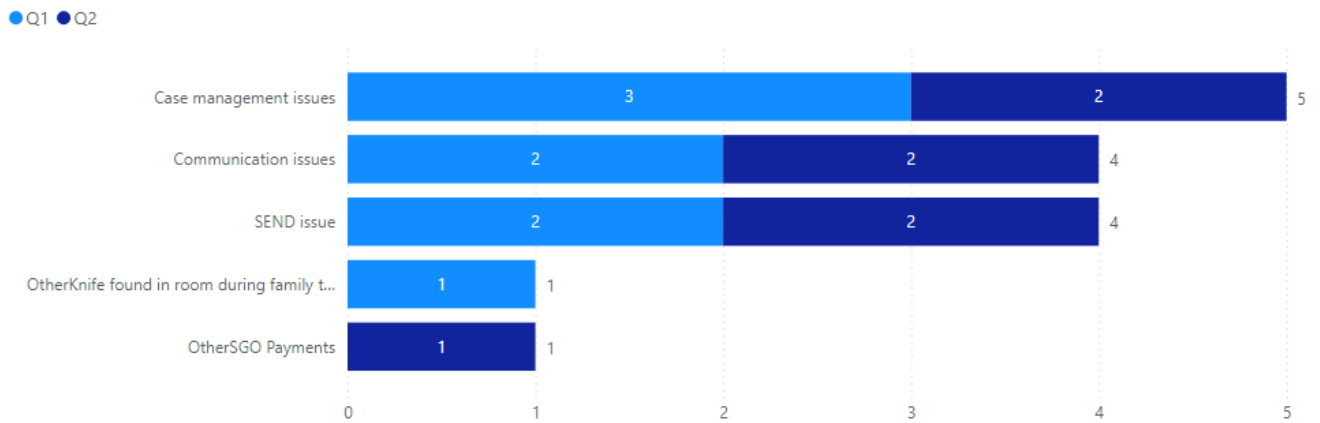
8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS

- 8.1. In total 15 stage two complaints were received in Q1 and Q2. 5 of the complaints related to the SEND team and 3 complaints related to the Assessment Teams. 2 of the complaints related to the Adoption Team and 2 related to the Kinship Team. The other 3 complaints were 1 each for the Early Help Team, Pre-Birth Team and Cared for Team.

Themes:

- 8.2. The main themes are shown in the table below:

No. of Stage 2 by Theme



8.3. 5 out of 15 complaints relate to case management issues, 4 relate to communication issues and 4 relate to SEND issues.

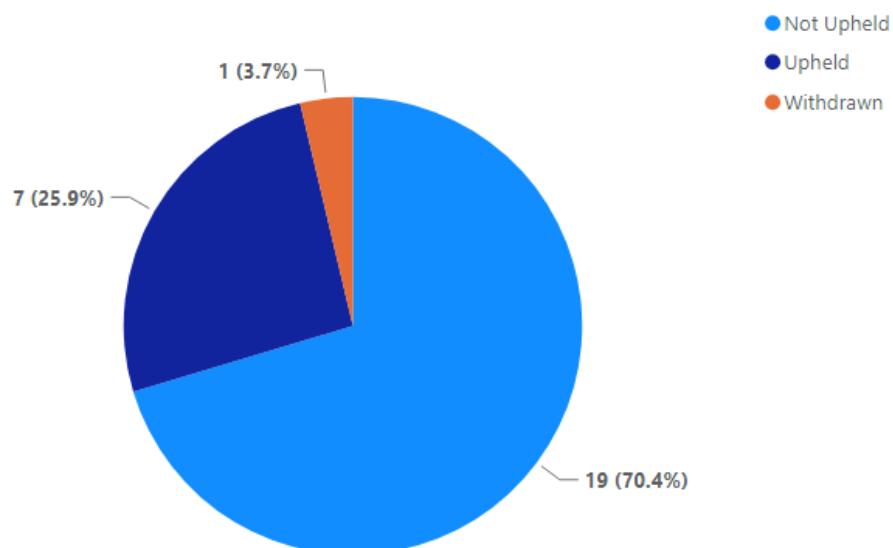
Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

8.4. In the first six months of 2025-26, 9 stage two complaints were concluded (*figures differ to numbers received, as there were complaints open at the start of the year from 2024/25 and complaints that remain open moving into 2025-26*). 8 of the stage two complaints were completed within the 65-day timescale (88.9%). The average number of working days taken to complete stage 2 complaints in the first six months of this year is 41 days compared with 55 for the same period last year. The 1 complaint that went out of timescale was a corporate complaint and this was completed 7 days over timescale.

Stage Two Complaint Outcomes

8.5. There were 27 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in the first six months of 2025/26. The outcomes of the stage two complaint elements are shown below.

Stage 2 Complaint Element Outcomes



8.6. At stage two, most complaint elements equating to 19 (70.4%) were not upheld and 7 (25.9%) were upheld. The 7 elements of complaint that were upheld related to communication, safeguarding concerns and case management issues.

An example of a stage two complaint (statutory):

A parent made a complaint regarding ineffective communication and inaccurately recording information. TfC acknowledged the frustration around not being contacted by a service area when others were able to make contact separately. The service reflected on better practice for future efforts, and a reminder was sent to staff to double check information held on our internal management system.

It was found that information recorded in an assessment was correctly taken from a referral and captured the children's views appropriately and that parent's views were also accurately captured as part of the assessment. TfC were however quick to amend an error highlighted within a parent's family tree.

An example of a stage two complaint (corporate):

Parents complained that TfC failed to consult straight away with their parental preference for a school within the local area and failed to issue an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) within timescale. The service explained that as per the SEND Code of Practice 2015, it states that if the school is found to not be suitable for the needs of the child, then Together for Children do not have to consult immediately with the parental choice. TfC did go on to consult with a number of schools, including parental preference, which ultimately was not suitable for the child. TfC did confirm that they went beyond the statutory timescale for issuing an EHCP and a remedy was offered in line with Local Government Ombudsman guidance.

9. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

9.1. There have been 5 complaints highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team by the Local Government Ombudsman so far this year:

- 3 complaints were not investigated.
- 1 complaint was upheld identifying fault and injustice caused. TfC issued an apology in writing, paid £5,500, and provided a summary report to the LGO of the action taken to ensure alternative support is provided when a placement breaks down.
- 1 complaint was upheld identifying fault for causing a delay when deciding the support needed for the child's special educational needs. The LGO agreed that Together for Children had offered suitable remedies at Stage 2.

10. COST OF COMPLAINTS

10.1. The total cost of investigating claims in the first two quarters of 2025/26 is £955 compared with £3,921 for the same period in 2024/25. All complaints are managed internally by the Customer Feedback Team with no external allocations.

10.2. So far this year the compensation costs paid in relation to upheld complaints has totalled £8,200.00 in relation to 6 SEND complaints, compared with £8,360.54 paid in the same period last year in relation to 2 SEND complaints.

11. ABUSIVE, UNREASONABLE PERSISTENT OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINANTS

11.1. In the first six months of this reporting period the Customer Feedback Manager has issued two letters to parents in relation to unreasonable persistent communication.

12. LEARNING & IMPROVEMENT

12.1. Below are some areas where learning has been taken from complaints and messages or processes have been reinforced following the resolution of complaints:

- A senior manager led on the implementation of an emergency protocol in the event children suffer accidents or sudden illnesses during family time sessions. A representative of Together for Children is identified to take appropriate action in the event a child is injured and report the matter to both parents immediately.
- The message was reinforced with Social Care Team Managers that teams should provide parents with copies of Child and Family assessments in a timely manner and offer to discuss the contents with them to ensure transparency and understanding.
- Social Care Team Managers reminded Social Workers of the importance of recording all details of direct work with children.
- Social Care Team Managers reminded Social Workers of the importance of including relevant family in all meetings related to their child.

13. SUMMARY

- 13.1. Together for Children are committed to getting it right for the families in Sunderland. To do this we continue to drive improvement from learning from the complaints and compliments raised. An action plan is maintained by the Customer Feedback Team which includes actions and recommendations from stage two investigations and stage three panels. The action plan is closely monitored by the team. Reminders are sent to managers with responsibility for the recommendations each month and reported into Senior Management Team meetings to ensure that the learning is shared across the whole service.
- 13.2. We have been working with services with a view to improving timeliness and responding more proactively to customer concerns. There is still work to do to improve timeliness, in particular at Stage 1.
- 13.3. We are part of a local arrangement for the recruitment of Independent Persons (IPs) for Stage two Children's Social Care complaints, working with Gateshead and South Tyneside local authorities. As a result of this arrangement, we are seeing a reduced delay in instigating the investigation process through a quicker appointment process. We have our own small pool of IPs who can undertake the IP role in Gateshead and South Tyneside authorities where workers will be able to see practice in neighbouring authorities and add to their experience, learning and knowledge.
- 13.4. Work will continue to be carried out to look at the reasons for escalation from initial contacts to Stage 1, and from Stage 1 to 2 to see if any work can be done to resolve issues at an earlier stage. These reviews will consider the complexity of concerns raised by parents.

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 8 JANUARY 2026

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2025-2026

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY AND MEMBERS' SUPPORT COORDINATOR

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The report sets out for members' consideration the work programme of the Committee for the 2025/26 municipal year.

2. Background

- 2.1 The work programme is designed to set out the key issues to be addressed by the Committee during the year and provide it with a timetable of work. The Committee itself is responsible for setting its own work programme, subject to the coordinating role of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee.
- 2.2 The work programme is intended to be a working document which Committee can develop throughout the year, allowing it to maintain an overview of work planned and undertaken during the Council year.
- 2.3 In order to ensure that the Committee is able to undertake all of its business and respond to emerging issues, there will be scope for additional meetings or visits not detailed in the work programme.
- 2.4 In delivering its work programme the Committee will support the Council in achieving its corporate outcomes.

3. Current position

- 3.1 The current work programme is attached as an appendix to this report.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The work programme is intended to be a flexible mechanism for managing the work of the Committee in 2025-26.

5 Recommendation

- 5.1 That Members note the information contained in the work programme.

Contact: Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator

REASON FOR INCLUSION	5 JUNE 25 (INFORMAL MEETING)	3 JULY 25	4 SEPT 25	2 OCT 25	23 OCT 25	27 NOV 25	8 JAN 26	29 JAN 26	19 FEB 26	26 MARCH 26
Policy Framework/ Cabinet Referrals and Responses										Scrutiny Annual Report – 25/26
Scrutiny Business	Work Programme 2025/26 - Workshop	Work Programme – Feedback Report Short Break Service – Update (Helen Monks)	Sunderland Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP) (Jennifer Beer) School Exclusions and Suspensions (Kim Richardson)	SEND Inspection Preparations – Update (Pamela Robertson TfC and Michelle Thompson from ICB) FSM Auto Enrolment (Alan Rowan) Virtual Reality Kit - Demonstration (Anita Swales)	Child Poverty Strategy (Bev Poulter/Kirsty Robinson)	Apprenticeships for Care Experienced Young People (Sarah Kirk) Social Care Prevention Agenda – Family First Model (Simon Marshall/Nicola Burns)	Support for Young Carers (Chris Ranson Sunderland Carers Centre)	Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Complex Needs (Sarah Dean ICB) Review of Supportive Parenting (Simon Marshall)	Connected Carers/ Adoption and Fostering (Kathryn McCabe)	School Exclusions and Suspensions (Kim Richardson) School Attendance (Kim Richardson) Youth Strategy Update (Karen Davison)
Performance / Service Improvement		TfC Meaningful Measures (Stacy Hodgkinson) Children Services Customer Feedback (Stacy Hodgkinson)				TfC Meaningful Measures Report (Stacy Hodgkinson)	Children Services Customer Feedback (Stacy Hodgkinson)		TfC Meaningful Measures Report (Stacy Hodgkinson)	
Consultation / Awareness Raising		Notice of Key Decisions	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	Notice of Key Decisions Work Programme	

SEND Inspection Feedback (Simon Marshall)
 Youth Offending Update (Karen Davison)
 School Performance (Simon Marshall)

NEETs (Simon Marshall)

Consultation with Young People - Visit to Youth Parliament (Wendy Coghlan)

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

NOTICE OF KEY DECISIONS

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY MAYORAL AND MEMBERS' SUPPORT CO-ORDINATOR

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Holding the Executive to account is one of the main functions of Scrutiny. One of the ways that this can be achieved is by considering the forthcoming decisions of the Executive (as outlined in the Notice of Key Decisions) and deciding whether Scrutiny can add value in advance of the decision being made. This does not negate Non-Executive Members ability to call-in a decision after it has been made.
- 2.2 To this end, the most recent version of the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions is included on the agenda of this Committee. The Notice of Key Decisions is attached marked Appendix 1.

3. CURRENT POSITION

- 3.1 In considering the Notice of Key Decisions, Members are asked to consider only those issues where the Scrutiny Committee could make a contribution which would add value prior to the decision being taken.
- 3.2 In the event of Members having any queries that cannot be dealt with directly in the meeting, a response will be sought from the relevant Directorate.

4. RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1 To consider the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions at the Scrutiny Committee meeting.

5. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Cabinet Agenda
-

The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012

Notice is given of the following proposed Key Decisions (whether proposed to be taken in public or in private) and of Executive Decisions including key decisions) intended to be considered in a private meeting: -

Item no.	Matter in respect of which a decision is to be made	Decision-maker (if individual, name and title, if body, its name and see below for list of members)	Key Decision Y/N	Anticipated date of decision/ period in which the decision is to be taken	Private meeting Y/N	Reasons for the meeting to be held in private	Documents submitted to the decision-maker in relation to the matter*	Address to obtain further information
241127/950	Newcastle International Airport – Governance Arrangements and Related Matters	Cabinet	Y	In the period 1 to 31 January 2026	Y	The report is one which relates to an item during the consideration of which by Cabinet the public are likely to be excluded under Paragraphs 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, as the report will contain information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information). The public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251017/1023	To seek approval to assign funding and procure the necessary suppliers to deliver the Sheepfolds Millennium Way Car Park.	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk

Item no.	Matter in respect of which a decision is to be made	Decision-maker (if individual, name and title, if body, its name and see below for list of members)	Key Decision Y/N	Anticipated date of decision/ period in which the decision is to be taken	Private meeting Y/N	Reasons for the meeting to be held in private	Documents submitted to the decision-maker in relation to the matter*	Address to obtain further information
251028/1025	To provide an update and consider proposals in relation to the Government's Pride in Place Programme investment across Sunderland	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251031/1028	Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2024/2025	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk

Item no.	Matter in respect of which a decision is to be made	Decision-maker (if individual, name and title, if body, its name and see below for list of members)	Key Decision Y/N	Anticipated date of decision/ period in which the decision is to be taken	Private meeting Y/N	Reasons for the meeting to be held in private	Documents submitted to the decision-maker in relation to the matter*	Address to obtain further information
251103/1030	To seek approval for a decision relating to land transactions to facilitate the improvement of Sunderland's schools	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	Y	The report is one which relates to an item during the consideration of which by Cabinet the public are likely to be excluded under Paragraphs 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, as the report will contain information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information). The public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251114/1032	To seek approval for procurement of banking and pre-paid card services	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251208/1033	To seek Cabinet's approval of Sunderland Health and Wellbeing Boards Healthy City Plan grants awarded to external provider organisations over £50k	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk

Item no.	Matter in respect of which a decision is to be made	Decision-maker (if individual, name and title, if body, its name and see below for list of members)	Key Decision Y/N	Anticipated date of decision/ period in which the decision is to be taken	Private meeting Y/N	Reasons for the meeting to be held in private	Documents submitted to the decision-maker in relation to the matter*	Address to obtain further information
251208/1034	To consider the consultative draft Digital Inclusion Strategy	Cabinet	Y	12 February 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251208/1035	To seek approval for the procurement of a marketing services framework	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251211/1036	Capital Programme Third Review 2025/2026 (including Treasury Management)	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251211/1037	Third Revenue Budget Review 2025/2026	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk

Item no.	Matter in respect of which a decision is to be made	Decision-maker (if individual, name and title, if body, its name and see below for list of members)	Key Decision Y/N	Anticipated date of decision/ period in which the decision is to be taken	Private meeting Y/N	Reasons for the meeting to be held in private	Documents submitted to the decision-maker in relation to the matter*	Address to obtain further information
251211/1038	Council Tax Base 2025/2026	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251211/1039	Revenue Budget 2026/2027 Update and Provisional Settlement	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk
251216/1040	Delivery of Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure at Visitor Sites and Country Parks	Cabinet	Y	15 January 2026	N	N/A	Cabinet Report	Democratic Services City Hall Plater Way Sunderland SR1 3AA committees@sunderland.gov.uk

Note; Some of the documents listed may not be available if they are subject to an exemption, prohibition or restriction on disclosure.

Further documents relevant to the matters to be decided can be submitted to the decision-maker. If you wish to request details of those documents (if any) as they become available, or to submit representations about a proposal to hold a meeting in private, you should contact Democratic Services at the address below.

Subject to any prohibition or restriction on their disclosure, copies of documents submitted to the decision-maker can also be obtained from the Democratic Services team City Hall, Plater Way, Sunderland, or by email to committees@sunderland.gov.uk

***Other documents relevant to the matter may be submitted to the decision maker and requests for details of these documents should be submitted to Democratic Services at the address given above.**

Who will decide;

Councillor Michael Mordey – Leader; Councillor Kelly Chequer – Deputy Leader & Health, Wellbeing and Safer Communities; Councillor Michael Butler – Children’s Services, Child Poverty and Skills; Councillor Beth Jones – Communities, Culture and Tourism; Councillor Alison Smith – Corporate Services and Equalities; Councillor Lindsey Leonard – Environment, Transport and Net Zero, Councillor Kevin Johnston – Housing, Regeneration and Business.

This is the membership of Cabinet as at the date of this notice. Any changes will be specified on a supplementary notice.

Elaine Waugh,
Assistant Director of Law and Governance

17 December 2025