

At a meeting of the CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY 10th JUNE, 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor P. Smith in the Chair

Councillors Crosby, Dodds, Dunn, P.W.L. Gibson, S. Johnston, Mason-Gage, McKeith, Noble, Samuels, Scanlan and Tye.

Also in attendance:-

Mr Martin Birch, Director of Children's Social Care, Together for Children
Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive, Together for Children
Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate
Mr Luke Hall, Sunderland Youth Parliament
Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Ms Anne Blakey and Ms Jackie Graham.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 26th April, 2021

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee held on 26th April, 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Ofsted Focused Letter to Children's Services

The Chief Executive of Together for Children submitted a report (copy circulated) on the outcome of Ofsted's focused visit to Children's Services in Sunderland undertaken on 24 and 25 March 2021, and which presented the Ofsted letter summarising the findings of the visit published on 11 May 2021, a copy of which was appended to the report for information.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Jill Colbert, Chief Executive of Together for Children, provided the Committee with an overview of the visit, placing it in the context of the impact of Covid-19, and introduced Mr Martin Birch, Director of Children's Social Care, who briefed the Committee on the key aspects of the letter both positive and less positive.

Members were advised that TfC were overwhelmingly pleased with the Ofsted letter and the fact it made no recommendations for action. Its recognition that TfC had continued to provide face-to-face services throughout the pandemic in order to support the most vulnerable children in the city was a massive pat on the back, as in the majority of other local authorities, children's social work had been undertaken remotely. Most Children's protection work was described as strong, staff enthusiasm and positivity was noted despite the personal and professional pressures they had experienced as a result of the pandemic. TfC's proactive work with schools during the pandemic was recognised along with the range of actions taken to better protect children and promote their attendance. The screening of referrals of children received from the public and other agencies by the Integrated Contact and Referral Team was described as thorough and most triaging was timely, with clear management oversight. The children at highest risk were responded to highly effectively.

With regard to the less positive aspects, Mr Birch informed the Committee that the observation with regard to the sometimes slowness of decisions made in respect of lower risk referrals was not a huge criticism. The letter described decision-making in relation to whether assessments were needed as inconsistent with some assessments being undertaken unnecessarily and also that the quality of assessments was inconsistent. Mr Birch advised that he would rather that too many assessments were undertaken than too few, however the matter of inconsistency was fair comment and it was an issue he was looking to address.

The letter also described that while decisions to bring children into care were appropriate, some decisions were made in an emergency and were not timely enough or planned effectively enough to respond to the known escalating risks while children remain at home. Ofsted contended that several of the children whose cases inspectors reviewed would have benefited from being taken into care sooner. Mr Birch advised that decisions of this nature were always balanced on a knife edge and the cases to which Ofsted were referring were usually the result of attempts made to keep families together.

The Chair thanked Ms Colbert and Mr Birch for their report and invited questions from Members.

Councillor Crosby referred to the Ofsted comments on page 10 of the agenda regarding the mental health support for Cared for Children and asked if Ms Colbert could expand upon them. Ms Colbert advised that an important distinction needed to be made between the responsibilities of TfC and services commissioned through the CCG. TfC and the CCG were working together on service improvement and a children and young people's mental health service redesign project was underway to develop a model for commissioned children and young people's mental health services in Sunderland. Ofsted were referring to cared for children and TfC would pay for additional psychological support as appropriate.

Councillor P.W.L Gibson welcomed the report. He referred to the Ofsted comment that 'the letters before proceedings were not sufficiently explicit about what the expectation is of parents and in what timescale.' He asked if new guidelines or proforma letters would be issued. What regard to the timeliness of decisions he asked what moves would be made to improve this, as prevention was better than cure, and in addition he asked if more resources would be devoted to reduce the number of NEETs.

In relation to the letters before proceedings, Ms Colbert advised they were out of necessity very long and detailed however efforts were being undertaken address this and devise templates that were more user friendly. Mr Birch confirmed that the letter was being looked at as part of the 'signs of safety' approach which encompassed the whole gamut of TfC's engagement with families. With regard to NEETs, Ms Colbert stated that it was important to make a distinction between all NEETs and those who were cared for. In the context of the region Sunderland had achieved a remarkable improvement in its numbers. There was still work to do with regard to the level of NEETs within the older young persons' age group, however it was much more difficult to drive improvements within this cohort. With regard to additional resources, Ms Colbert advised that no extra funding had been made available in respect of education and literacy despite the basic skills level in Sunderland being below the regional average.

With regard to the timeliness of assessments, Mr Birch advised that the visit had coincided with a particular spike in referrals at the front door and the extra work load had impacted on quality.

Councillor Tye stated that he broadly welcomed the letter. It was clear that improvements were being made and there was a good rational progression. It was also very pleasing that TfC's partners recognised and acknowledged this. The one aspect that he felt was confusing was Ofsted's comment regarding TfC's slowness over decisions to take a child into care, given that Sunderland had been criticised in a previous Letter for doing exactly the opposite. He believed that the key Ofsted comment in relation to the matter was that - "Decisions to bring children into care are appropriate." In conclusion he referred to the comment on the last page of the letter that - "too many children who enter care in an emergency, move quickly and not always to a settled placement." He believed this left TfC somewhere between a rock and a hard place.

Mr Birch confirmed that with regard to placements, TfC were in a difficult position. Accommodation could be expensive and sometimes didn't provide a good level of service. On occasion TfC were forced to look at a short term fit in order to search for a better solution for the long term.

Councillor S. Johnston congratulated Ms Colbert and Mr Birch on the positive progress being made. He referred to the fact that that NEETs accounted for 5% of the wider population but asked for the percentage in relation to care leavers and what was being done to try and reduce the figure. Ms Colbert advised that she did not have the most recent data to hand in respect of those leaving care. The age banding of this category extended to 25 years of age. TfC was grateful for the support provided by the Esh Group in awarding apprenticeships for care leavers within its construction business but a lot of additional support was required. There

was a saying 'that it takes a village to raise a child' and it was something that TfC could not do alone.

Councillor Dunn echoed the positive comments of Members regarding the tone of the letter but sought clarification regarding the comment that "although managerial oversight is improving, it remains too variable" Mr Birch replied that day to day management was felt by Ofsted to be good and this was a term that Ofsted did not use lightly. The specific reference related to an inconsistent approach to auditing activity by the social work managers. To try and rectify this position, TfC had moved to the use of peer group audits to improve managerial oversight.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Samuels, Ms Colbert confirmed that there was nothing in the letter that had come as a surprise as TfC had submitted its own self-assessment prior to the visit which had highlighted potential areas for improvement. Councillor Samuels referred to care leavers in the 19 to 25 year group who lived outside the City and asked about the ability of TfC to engage with them. Ms Colbert and Mr Birch advised that the greater the distance, the more difficult it was to offer help. It was also the case that this was the most difficult cohort to engage with. TfC would continue to seek to engage the young person and would remain in contact with their local authority but ultimately the young person would often cease to engage.

Councillor Noble welcomed the Letter and paid tribute to the work undertaken by Ms Colbert and her Team at TfC. The fact that the Letter contained no recommendations for action was extremely good. In particular Councillor Noble paid tribute to, and thanked the staff on the ground for their sterling work during the pandemic. She questioned whether the number of Sunderland's young people who were cared for outside of the City was an indication that Sunderland had a lack of provision. She also highlighted the need to publicise the new kick start scheme to employers. The Letter had outlined a lot of positives and it was also important to note that some of the problems were ones that did not fall at the door of TfC.

Councillor McKeith stated that he had been impressed with the proactive nature of the work undertaken by TfC with schools during the pandemic. He highlighted the range of actions taken to better protect children and promote their attendance, including developing a joint risk assessment to identify and better monitor and support vulnerable children. He asked if there were other examples of this partnership work. Mr Birch advised that other examples included the operation of the virtual school. Sunderland were very lucky to have a fantastic schools liaison officer to facilitate much of this partnership work. Meetings with Head Teachers were held on a regular basis and the conversation now was a very open one.

There being no further questions for Ms Colbert and Mr Birch, the Chair thanked them for their report and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Corporate Parenting Review

The Director of Children's Services presented a report (copy circulated) which at the request of the Chair, provided for the Committee's information, a copy of a report

considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 23rd March, 2021 on the outcome of an external review into the Council's corporate parenting arrangements together with proposals for a number of changes to the Council's approach on the matter.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Birch presented the report confirming that its recommendations had been approved by Cabinet and that work had already started in putting the new model together. Young people had been instrumental in the service development and especially with regard to the 'Change the Language' Campaign'.

The Chair referred to Recommendation 10 of the Review, namely, 'Each elected member has responsibility for leading a theme from the Corporate Parenting Strategy and works with a representative from the Change Council, Together for Children and a lead Executive Director to promote the theme.' She noted that similar recommendations had been made in the past about other issues which had ultimately fallen short because of difficulties in finding time for already busy people to meet.

In addition, the Chair welcomed Recommendation 14 under which the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Board would be shared with the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee and that the Board would provide it with a report regarding its work, identifying key issues for cared for children every six months. It was intended that this would provide greater oversight and challenge.

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

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2021/22

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the developed of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2021/22 and requested that consideration be given to the holding of a working group session in order to further develop the Committees work programme for the year

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report and advised that provisional arrangements had been made to hold the working group session on Thursday 17th June at 5.30pm via Microsoft Teams.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an opportunity to consider those items on

the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from the 17th May, 2021.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

The Committee was advised that if Members had any issues to raise or required further detail on any of the items included in the notice, they should contact Mr Diamond, Scrutiny Officer for initial assistance.

Members, as indicated, sought further information in respect of the following items:-

i) Item 210504/584 - To seek approval for the revised Sunderland Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education. (Cllr P. Smith, Chair)

ii) Item 210513/595 - To seek approval for the annual procurement process by which funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) will be awarded to providers for the delivery of Family, Adult and Community Learning (FACL) training courses in the academic year 2021/2022. (Cllr Crosby)

There being no further questions or comments, it was :-

5. RESOLVED that the Notices of Key Decisions be received and noted.

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

(Signed) P. SMITH,
Chairman.