

Children, Education & Skills Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Pat Smith

Vice Chair: Cllr Joshua McKeith

Committee Members: Councillors Margaret Crosby, Tracey Dodds, Richard Dunn, Paul Gibson, Sam Johnston, Katherine Mason-Gage, Karen Noble, Alex Samuels, Lynda Scanlan, Philip Tye.

Co-opted Members: Ann Blakey (Roman Catholic Diocese) and Jackie Graham (Church of England Diocese)

Once again, the year has been dominated by the Covid pandemic and a good deal of our work has been directed at the long-term implications for the children and young people of the city.

In order to monitor the effect of the pandemic, the Committee has received regular reports across a broad spectrum of children's services. Of particular concern has been the consequences on child mental health. We heard from Sunderland CCG that children and young people's mental health providers have continued to deliver services through a mix of online and face to face interventions. Additional funding has been secured for extra staff resources and a service redesign project is underway to develop an improved service delivery model. However, there remains uncertainty over the potential long term impact of the pandemic on child mental health and the future demand for services. This is clearly an issue that will need to be closely monitored in the years ahead.

A further concern has been the effect of the pandemic on our schools and the use being made of Government funding to help children and young people catch up on missed learning. We heard from a local head teacher about the support being provided, including that made available through the National Tutoring Programme. We also heard about the measures being taken to improve primary and secondary school transitions, particularly for children with SEND. This has included the establishment of a transition working party of headteachers to help facilitate discussions and share best practice. While the impact of the pandemic will be with us for many years, it is felt that one of the positives has been to encourage a greater level of joint working between schools and it is hoped that this can be built upon in the years ahead.

The Committee paid tribute to the hard work of teachers and the school's sector generally for keeping schools open and continuing to provide an education for our children and young people during the intense challenges of the Covid pandemic.

Of continuing concern for the Committee has been the increase in elective home education. While parents have the right to home educate, we are concerned at the potentially detrimental effect on some children. At present, local authorities have only limited powers in this area and we feel that more powers should be made available. We also feel that more detailed, up to date information needs to be kept on elective home education and children missing from education.

The Committee places great importance of listening to the views of young people. At the start of the year, the Committee heard from a range of young people's representative bodies to discuss their priorities for the future. As a result of this session, a Members Working Group was established to allow for continued but more informal discussions. These meetings should play an important part in helping to shape the Committees work programme in the future and addressing any issues raised.

The Committee also received a report on the outcome of a survey into the health related behaviour of young people which contained a particular focus on the effect of the Covid pandemic on their lives. The survey sought the views of young people on a wide range of topics and highlighted their main concerns, including having enough money in the family, having enough food to eat, being lonely and struggling with schoolwork. The Committee was pleased to hear that the information derived from this survey will be shared with key stakeholders and will help inform the planning and delivery of future services. The information will also be useful to the Committee in planning its work programme for the years ahead.

The Committee heard more about two new engagement programmes that took place during the year. During the summer holidays, the Holiday Activity and Food Programme offered the opportunity for children from disadvantaged families to access nutritious food and a range of organised out of school activities. The Wear Here 4 You Mobile Prevention Bus project brought together staff from Together for Children and other partners to give advice and support to young people and their families. Feedback from both programmes has been very positive and the Committee thanked all involved for their efforts. It was felt that such activities are a highly effective way engaging with young people and their families across the city.

In setting its work programme for the year, the Committee was keen to consider the effect of Covid pandemic on incidences of anti-social behaviour. To this end, the Committee received an update report on the work of the Youth Offending Service. We heard that during the pandemic the YOS has continued to deliver services and remained in contact with all young people. This has often been through face-to-face visits, though a range of virtual methods of working directly with young people have been developed.

In response to concerns over the impact of Covid on levels of domestic violence, the Committee received a report on the delivery of domestic abuse service, together with planned improvements for the service. The Committee was provided with several individual case studies which graphically demonstrated the effect of domestic violence on children and families. The report highlighted the importance of this service for the city and again it was felt important that the long term effect of the pandemic is closely monitored.

Last year, the Council established a Regional Adoption Agency with Durham County Council and Cumbria County Council based on a host authority model comprising the areas of Sunderland, County Durham and Cumbria and working in partnership with five Voluntary Adoption Agencies. The Committee received a report on the progress made to date.

A further area of concern arising out of the Covid pandemic has been its long-term effect on apprenticeships and employment opportunities for young people. To discuss these issues, the Committee met with Principal of Sunderland College, the main provider of apprenticeships in the city.

However, it would be wrong not to recognise some of the positives we have seen during the year. We have heard repeatedly of how the Covid pandemic has helped to forge greater joint working between partner organisations in the city. We have also heard numerous examples of the hard work and commitment shown by staff across all sectors. But perhaps most importantly we should also recognise the achievements of our young people who have lived through a year of considerable challenge and adversity.

At the start of the year, the Committee received the feedback on the Ofsted Inspection of Children Services. We were delighted to hear that the service had received an outstanding rating; made all the more remarkable by being achieved during the Covid pandemic. The Committee would like to place on record its thanks and appreciation to all the staff involved. We look forward to the level of improvement being maintained and will continue to monitor the progress through our overview of performance monitoring information.

During the year, the Committee also received the findings of the Joint Ofsted report into SEND services in the city. Several areas for improvement were highlighted in the report. The Committee heard that an Action Plan for improvement had been developed and it was agreed that we should receive regular updates. The initial reports show good progress being made and we look forward to this continuing in the year ahead.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the members of the Committee for their contributions and to thank all the officers and witnesses who gave up their time to attend and provide insights into the services they provide and the challenges they face.

Councillor Pat Smith
Chair of the Children Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee