

**GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING**

**Thursday, 10 September 2020**

**PRESENT:** Councillor(s): M Hall, C Buckley, D Bradford, L Caffrey, P Craig, S Craig, C Davison, S Gallagher, L Kirton, K McCartney, E McMaster, M Ord, R Oxberry, J Reay and K McClurey

**CO-OPTED MEMBERS** Tim Kynoch, Rachel Walton and Jill Burrell

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Councillor(s): G Haley

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor(s): B Clelland

**F1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Clelland.

**F2 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

**F3 EDUCATION SERVICE RESPONSE TO COVID**

Committee received a report on the actions taken by schools and the Education Service in response to Covid 19.

It was noted that since 20 March 2020 all schools were partially closed, only remaining open for vulnerable children and children of key workers. Since that time the service has been working incredibly close with staff to ensure those pupils who needed to be in school were, children were fed and at risk families chased if it was felt their children were better off in school. The service continued with a skeleton staff in the Dryden Centre.

Daily briefing emails were sent to all schools and Governors and safe meetings were held weekly with Headteachers. Risk Assessments were put in place and schools planned for September reopening. Alice Wiseman, Director of Public Health, also held a virtual meeting with secondary school Headteachers around the use of masks in schools.

It was reported that to date no schools or classes have been sent home, although there have been some positive tests there has been no impact on any bubble yet.

There are concerns that at some point there will be teachers testing positive, when that happens the school will work with Public Health for a proportionate response.

Committee was provided with the Recovery Curriculum which is aimed at helping primary children to focus on mental health and wellbeing. This was developed with a lot of work from the Education Psychologist.

It was questioned what measures are in place to support children with SEN. It was confirmed that part of the recovery curriculum is applicable to Special Schools. Ann Muxworthy met with Special Schools on a weekly basis so that the voice of those schools was always heard.

It was questioned what the school's response has been to the recovery curriculum. It was confirmed that some schools are dipping into it whereas some schools are not using it. It was questioned why the recovery curriculum is only for primary schools and it was noted that this is because the service only has primary specialists now. For the secondary schools which are academies it would depend on who is leading them.

The point was made that the level of support and advice given to primary schools during Covid has been exemplary.

It was questioned whether Headteachers are aware of what to do should there be an outbreak in their school. It was noted that a lot of meetings have been held with schools and Public Health around what should be done in that situation so it is expected that schools should understand the process.

RESOLVED - That Committee was satisfied with the response to the partial closure of schools by the schools and education service.

#### **F4 CHILDREN SOCIAL CARE SERVICES RESPONSE TO COVID**

Committee received a report on the actions taken by Children's Social Care Service in response to Covid 19, in particular the response to managing safeguarding and supporting vulnerable children.

It was acknowledged that the majority of work within the service involves face to face meetings with families. Therefore, there was an immediate need to look at alternative arrangements whilst ensuring children and young people were kept safe. It was noted that there were some national changes to allow more flexibility to deliver service differently. These changes however are due to end on 25 September 2020 so officers are monitoring the situation going forward.

Committee was provided with Risk Assessments that were carried out for Children's Homes in the Borough. It was confirmed that respite care at Grove House was maintained, albeit on a reduced capacity, however other local authorities had to close their short term care completely.

It was also noted that there was a reduction in the number of court cases that could

be heard, along with an increase in applications to court.

Trackers were put in place to enable the service to monitor those at highest risk, establish who had to be seen in their home settings and which meetings could be held virtually.

A number of staff from other services were redeployed into Care Homes to support staffing levels and a number of those have gone on to apply for permanent roles there.

Links were made to national and regional groups which allowed a close eye to be kept on how services could be delivered differently and a lot was learnt from other areas with larger staff shortages.

It was noted that strong links continued between Children's Social Care and Education Services which worked well in terms of safeguarding issues and concerns.

It was noted that as the Borough moves out of lockdown some usual services have been delivered face to face, for example Family Time with birth families.

Committee was advised that there has been a significant increase in the number of Looked After Children and an overall increase of Child Protection Plans in place. LAC data shows that this is due to the speed that the service is able to move children out of care given the impact of the pandemic.

It was questioned whether Covid has impacted on children in terms of attachment issues and not being able to see birth families. It was confirmed that a number of surveys have been held around this and there has been a mixed response, for example some teenagers welcomed a more natural communication i.e. through technology – texting, phoning. It was also noted that a lot of work has been carried out around the emotional health and wellbeing of younger children and services are being developed to address that. It was acknowledged that some family time is directed by the Court and some young people actually welcomed the reduction in contact. In cases like these individual Plans are being looked at in terms of future family time.

It was questioned as to what arrangements were put in place for monitoring Care Leavers during Covid. It was confirmed that Care Leavers continued to be supported by the Leaving Care Team which remained fully functional throughout Covid. Virtual Forums were held and surveys carried out and positive feedback was received from the young people. It was noted that the Care Leavers offer has not changed massively except for the virtual platform instead.

It was suggested that the wearing of masks should be included in the risk assessments for Social Workers travelling in cars. It was confirmed that the risk assessments are updated weekly so there is a likelihood that has already changed and assurance was given that this would be changed if not.

Committee questioned whether there had been an increase of referrals in relation to

domestic violence, following the big campaign at the start of Covid, and whether this effected the number of children and young people in care. It was confirmed that the number of referrals actually reduced initially for children, this is linked to education colleagues being the biggest referrers, however there was a significant increase in the number of adults referred to the domestic abuse service. Two new staff have been appointed into the service to work with perpetrators of domestic abuse to look at the impact on families. It was noted that the service is planning for a surge in referrals when schools return and there is increased capacity within the team to deal with this.

It was questioned as to the staffing levels throughout Covid. It was confirmed that there was a lot of preparation undertaken in case of reduced staffing levels, however at the early stage the service was not impacted and it is only in more recent weeks that staff levels are being affected. An advert for Social Worker posts has gone out which has received a good response, shortlisting will be carried out next week and it is anticipated that those appointments will resolve any immediate problems.

RESOLVED - That Committee noted the contents of the report.

## **F5 EARLY HELP SERVICE RESPONSE TO COVID**

Committee received a report on the response of the Early Help Service to the pandemic and the performance of Targeted Family Support.

In terms of performance of the Troubled Families Programme, it was noted that 100% of the required outcomes were achieved for 1,930 families over the five years of delivery. This generated £1.54m in Payment by Results revenue for the Council.

In terms of practical support, it was reported that 450 sports activity packs were delivered to vulnerable families. Parental conflict programmes transferred to virtual platforms, with a good take up from 626 referrals.

It was noted that a number of programmes moved to digital platforms and it is likely that they will continue in that format.

The service has moved to a seven day working week to support those most in need, very positive feedback has been received regarding how this change has worked.

It was requested that further information be provided as to how many people are involved in the programme at a ward level. It was acknowledged that the higher numbers reflect those wards with a high level of deprivation. It was agreed that breakdown of ward level data would be circulated to the Committee outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED - That Committee noted the end of year performance of the Early Help Service (Targeted Family Support) and the pandemic response.

## **F6 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The end of year performance update was reported to Committee which provided 2019/20 data up until the end of March. It was noted that due to Covid this report was delayed and therefore does not reflect the full impact of the pandemic.

It was noted that the current strategic indicators are in the process of being reviewed and a new performance framework adopted for the Council.

Overall there are 28 indicators, 15 of which have improved which are mainly in People and Families and Working Together. Tackling inequality still remains a challenge, although that area does have the biggest number of indicators.

In terms of the People and Families theme, performance has improved in both indicators. The percentage of eligible two-year olds accessing their free early learning place has increased and the Gateshead Families initiative target has been achieved with successful outcomes for 1930 families between 2016 and 2020. It was noted that the take-up of two-year old places is at 91% of those eligible, compared to 68% nationally, as last reported. It was also reported that Grove House achieved an Outstanding Ofsted rating.

In relation to the Tackling Inequality outcome, the indicators are linked to education attainment where there have been mixed improvements in relation to KS2 and KS4. In terms of achievements in this area, a successful Christmas hamper campaign was launched which ensured all vulnerable families had everything they needed to provide a Christmas dinner, in addition, a Christmas gift campaign was also launched. A collaborative initiative with Gateshead Leisure Service and Adult Learning and Skills was delivered to incentivise and engage young people not in education, employment or training into healthy activity and accessing the world of training and employment.

It was questioned whether the decline in excess weight in 4-11 year olds is looking like it will continue and what strategies are in place to readdress this. It was confirmed that currently there is nothing which will show the direction that this indicator is going as some schools took measurements before Covid, therefore there will not be a full Gateshead picture. It was agreed that officers would speak to colleagues in Public Health to get a better understanding of the direction of travel in relation to excess weight data.

It was recognised that it is expected there will be more demand for initiatives such as Christmas hampers this year and therefore what plans are in place to address this demand. It was noted that last year hubs did a lot of the deliveries, officers will look at what plans may be in this year and feedback to the Committee.

It was questioned whether the indicators would change once the new reporting format is in place. It was noted that the corporate performance framework is currently being reviewed and that the indicators will not be the same in the future. The current indicators reflected the Vision 2020 plan which were right at the time but going forward there will be a different set of indicators linked the Council priorities. It is expected that the new indicators will be more meaningful and provide more up to

date data. Committee felt that some of the current data should be kept under review, in particular the tackling inequality data. It was confirmed that all the data would continue to be tracked but would not necessarily be reported on, although it may be necessary to do some bespoke education indicator reports in the future. It was also noted that the new framework will better reflect priorities and how these have changed as a result of Covid. It was confirmed that Councillors will be engaged in the development of the framework.

Committee raised concerns that the indicator in relation to the percentage of children in low income families has been removed. It was confirmed that this was originally based on government data (tax credits) which government said was not fit for purpose and were reviewing it, however there is no replacement as of yet. Committee agreed this was key and should be included in future reports and questioned whether something locally could be looked at instead of waiting for a government indicator to be developed. It was noted that this has been looked at locally but that there is not a straightforward way of calculating this, generally there is not a lot of data that can be pulled together locally which would produce a meaningful indicator. The data relating to children in poverty is derived from national data sets, which is not held locally, therefore it would not be possible to replicate this indicator. It was agreed that this should be looked at as part of the performance framework review to see what could be produced locally, albeit a breakdown to show part of the picture rather than an amalgamation of data sets.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That Committee was satisfied the activities undertaken during October to March 2020 supported delivery of the Thrive agenda.
  - (ii) That the areas identified by Committee during its discussion be included in future performance reporting.
  - (iii) That the Cabinet will consider a composite performance report at their meeting on 20 October 2020.