

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 10 March 2022

PRESENT: Councillor M Hall (Chair)

Councillor(s): H Kelly, L Caffrey, B Clelland, P Craig, S Craig, C Davison, S Gallagher, K McCartney, E McMaster, J Mohammed, M Ord, R Oxberry and D Robson

CO-OPTED MEMBERS Rachel Walton

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor(s): G Haley

F29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bradford, Councillor Buckley, Councillor Reay, Councillor Burnett and Ayodele Akin (co-opted member).

F30 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2022 were approved as a correct record.

F31 OFSTED IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Committee received a report and presentation on the Ofsted Improvement Plan which came from the focussed visit in September 2021 and the short inspection in April 2019.

It was reported that the findings were very positive, however there were a small number of areas for improvement. Using the learning from both inspections an action plan was developed which identifies six areas of improvement;

- Improve the quality and focus of written plans to ensure they are specific and targeted to meet the needs of individual children
- Secure access to services for those children in care who live out of the borough
- Improve the quality and impact of supervision and contingency planning for children in need
- Ensure routine inclusion of children and their families' views in audits
- Development of contextual safeguarding arrangements
- Further development of domestic abuse provision

In terms of improving the focus of written plans it was reported that there has been the introduction of co-production of plan so social workers are able to support young

people to lead and be inclusive in their own plans. Training for social workers has been developed on this issue and will be delivered from March to July 2022 and it is anticipated that all plans will be written to the child by August – October 2022.

The action around the development of contextual safeguarding arrangements came from informal feedback. This has led to a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) worker post which will be incorporated into the contextual safeguarding team. There is also a Dedicated Return Home Support Worker (RHSW) in place to undertake return home interviews with all young people reported missing. There has also been a specialist Young People's Domestic Abuse Worker (YPVA) role developed to support young people experiencing abuse in their own relationships. These roles will work closely with the Contextual Safeguarding Team.

It was reported that return home interviews have to be offered to every young person who is missing, however the young person may not necessarily take up the offer. Previously, there was a 30% uptake, however the Return Home Support Worker has been in post since September 2021 and engagement rates have increased to 65%, as at January 2022.

It was questioned as to what the co-production of plans involve. It was confirmed that this involves working with partners, parents and young people to look at the language used and help write the plans to the child or young person in language they understand.

It was also questioned as to the obligations on the authority in relation to children placed out of the borough. It was confirmed that if a Gateshead child is placed outside of the borough the service continues to ensure the placement is regulated, the social worker will visit the child to maintain contact and family time. Care proceedings and legal work around that child is still the responsibility of the authority. In terms of children placed out of borough and attending schools outside of the area it was noted that Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are regularly reviewed and the child or young person will only be placed in a school which is at least 'good' or better. The point was made that the authority would always strive to keep its looked after children in Gateshead, however this is getting more difficult.

It was queried what are the indicators used to define if a child is 'missing' and how persistent absences are being dealt with. It was confirmed that any child that is missing is reported to the police. The Return Home Support Worker will respond to any missing child no matter how long they were missing or how often they go missing. There is no differentiation around risk levels, the worker will speak to all those young people who have a missing episode.

It was questioned whether there was any comment from Ofsted in relation to the number of out of borough placements. It was noted that Gateshead is no higher than other local authorities in this respect and Ofsted did not flag this as an area for improvement.

Committee was advised that the Mockingbird Programme is working with local authorities to focus on foster carer recruitment and retention, looking at a 'hub carer' who becomes a support network contact point for carers. This is commissioned through DfE funding and a consultant social worker will run the programme. This is a

national programme and it is hoped this will increase recruitment. Committee requested that a further report be brought back to a future meeting on the Mockingbird Programme.

Committee requested the rationale behind out of borough placements. It was confirmed that these can be placements across the UK and these are based on needs of the child, for example specialist providers which are not available in Gateshead. It is also around resources and what is available in terms of placement sufficiency. It was noted that a child could be placed out of borough but still live very local as only 10% of placements are over 10 miles away, also some Gateshead Foster Carers live outside of Gateshead. Committee asked for further information to be circulated around out of borough numbers.

It was questioned as to the meaning of 'radical candour principles'. It was confirmed that this is about practitioners not assuming the obvious; nothing is beyond impossible.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the Committee noted the information presented.
 - (ii) That further information be brought back on the Mockingbird Programme and out of borough placement numbers.
 - (iii) That a progress update be received in six months.

F32 OVERVIEW OF PERFORMANCE AND ACTIVITY OF THE ADOPT NORTH EAST REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY 2020/21

Committee received a presentation on the work of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

In 2015 it came into statute that local authorities had to become part of a RAA and in 2016 Gateshead collaborated with Northumberland County, Newcastle City, North Tyneside and South Tyneside Councils to form a RAA; Adopt North East. This went live in 2019.

A hosted model was opted for and this sits with North Tyneside Council as the lead for Adopt North East. The delegated functions include; recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, family finding for children and support for adopters, those adopted and those affected by adoption for all five local authorities.

In terms of governance for the RAA, lead members meet on an annual basis and also attend quarterly Executive Board meeting. The Senior Leadership Group meeting quarterly and an Operational Leadership Group meet monthly.

Adopt North East is made up of 46 staff; one senior manager, five team managers, one team co-ordinator, 31 social workers and 8 business support officers.

In terms of performance for 2020/21, 21 children have been placed with adopters

and 23 have been adopted (some of these are from 2019/20). Gateshead is good at placing children in fostering to adopt placements and has twice as many as other local authorities in the RAA. This arrangement places children with potential adopters before plans are endorsed by the courts, therefore social workers must be confident that the court will approve the placements. It was reported that so far, all fostering to adopt placements have had their legal adoptions order granted. Gateshead has also had no disruptions of adoptive placements, whereas this has not been the case for other authorities.

It was noted that there has been an increase in the initial contacts of potential adopters, however there is a fall off after initial contact. Therefore work is ongoing around this as there has been an increase in the number of placements required to be outsourced due to lack of placement sufficiency.

A number of adoption support mechanisms are in place and there has been positive feedback around fostering panels, however it was acknowledged that there have been issues around medical advisors availability which will be picked up at the next leadership meeting.

It was reported that there is no inspection framework for RAA's as this is picked up through individual local authority's inspection. So far there has been positive feedback in relation to Adopt North East. However, there are issues around sufficiency of places which is placing additional financial burden on authorities who have to pay for external placements on top of the fee to Adopt North East.

RESOLVED - That the content of the report be noted and an annual Regional Adoption Agency report be brought back to Committee.

F33 HOW GATESHEAD IS MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES (SEND)

The Committee received a presentation on the needs of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

It was reported that there has been a substantial increase in the number of assessment requests and Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs). The number of new requests for 2022 is 277, this figure was 196 for 2020 so this has meant a massive increase in demand. In terms of neighbouring local authorities Gateshead is slightly higher, with 3.9% EHCPs, regionally the average is 3.8% and national average is 3.7%. However, Gateshead is lower than the regional and national averages in terms of SEND Support.

It was noted that since 2017 there has been an increase in the number of primary SEN for Social and Emotional Health, Speech Language and Communication Needs and Autistic Spectrum Condition. There has been a decrease in the number of primary SEN for specific learning difficulty, moderate learning difficulty and severe learning difficulty. Figures have remained static in relation to hearing and visual impairments, physical disability and profound and multiple learning difficulties.

It was reported that in Gateshead there are higher numbers of EHCPs than regional and neighbouring authorities and therefore it is becoming harder to place these children in Special Schools. It was noted that work is underway to review the ARMS provision and it is anticipated that three new provisions will be opened from September 2022. Kells Lane Primary School is also providing an additional 10 places to meet demand, in partnership with Gibside School. There are also discussions with a further three primary schools to offer new provision from September which will create a further 24 places.

Schools are being encouraged to think about Preparing for Adulthood earlier, so from year 9 onwards, the four Preparing for Adulthood headings will be included in EHCPs;

- Higher education or employment
- Independent living
- Friends, relationships and community
- Being healthy

It was reported that the SEND Service has invested in a further 4.4 FTE posts to cope with increased demand. The Gateshead SENCO Network is being re-launched, including local peer groups and open door policy for support. Work is underway on participation and co-production, looking at how far the young people and carers influence strategic planning. The Parent / Carer Forum has been re-launched and meets regularly with senior leaders to discuss areas of concern. The SEND Youth Forum has also been relaunched following the appointment of a new Engagement Officer. An SEND newsletter is circulated to a wide range of stakeholders every half term, which provides updates across education, health and care.

In terms of next steps it was reported that the new Green Paper on SEND is expected soon, as well as a new SEND Inspection framework. There will be a review of Secondary ARMS provision and a step up of the monitoring role to reduce further increase in requests for top-ups. In addition parents and carers will be supported to engage in strategic SEND developments.

The point was made that there is a 20 week assessment for EHCPs but that it can take a long time to get to the start of the process for assessment. It was confirmed that the Code of Practice expects a graduated response as not all applicants will need EHCPs and many can get SEN support at mainstream school. It was confirmed that the start of the 20 week period is when a school or parent submits a written request for an EHCP assessment. The service then decides if an assessment is appropriate and then an action planning meeting is held. From the initial letter to outcome is a 20 week performance measure.

It was also queried that there has been a 46% increase in EHCPs but 26% were refused. It was acknowledged that there is no criteria or threshold for EHCPs, the service looks at what the schools have been doing for that child and will get a notional budget which needs to be fully used on that child before an EHCP would be granted. Committee felt it needed a better understanding of the whole process and asked that further updates be brought back to Committee on this issue.

Committee requested that, due to the increased numbers of children with social, emotional and mental health needs, a further report be added to the work programme to look at adverse childhood experiences.

It was suggested that more information should be provided to parents to prevent inappropriate self-referrals to the service which impacts on the demand put upon the service.

It was queried why Haskel School is not included in the report. It was confirmed that this is because it is an independent school and there is no jurisdiction over it, although the authority does commission places there. It was noted that there has been a lot of work with Haskel School in terms of Service Level Agreements and the school buying into the service. It was acknowledged that although this is not a maintained school and it is not public money that runs the school, there is still funding attached to those Gateshead children and young people attending that school. It was confirmed that children with EHCPs attending Haskel school are included in the overall figures presented in the report.

It was reported that 30% of children with EHCPs are going into mainstream secondary schools and that this is not sustainable. This year there has been more demand for year 7 Special School places than the authority can place.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the Committee noted the update report.
 - (ii) That a further update be brought back to Committee in 6-12 months to include information on Haskel Special School.
 - (iii) That a training / members development session be held around specific SEN processes.

F34 PERMANENT EXCLUSION DATA

Committee received an update report on permanent exclusion data. It was reported that, although this is a fluctuating picture, over the last four years there has been an overall downward trend in permanent exclusions.

Generally exclusions are at their highest rate over the autumn term and are most commonly due to persistent disruptive behaviour. In 2020/21, male students were more likely to be excluded. There were no exclusions in primary settings in the last year.

It was reported that 103 places are currently commissioned at River Tyne Academy. Work is ongoing to look at how young people are supported in our schools and help them before they become permanently excluded. Schools are being offered to work with the team on managed moves, 4-5 weeks prior to Fair Access Panel. It is hoped the early help work will prevent issues further upstream.

Work is ongoing to explore what the service has and needs with secondary leaders and what the main drivers are to prevent and reduce permanent exclusions.

It was noted that permanent exclusions for one-off major incidents will usually return to mainstream school as soon as possible through the Fair Access Panel. There is a strengthening reintegration of previously permanently excluded young people and River Tyne Academy support to reintegrate young people back into mainstream schools.

The point was made that some Headteachers speak to other schools and agree managed moves outside of the Fair Access Panel. It was noted that there is a consultation on permanent exclusions and it is expected that there will be additional guidance around offsite agreements which may change that going forward. All Headteachers are asked to inform the Fair Access Panel on any managed moves agreed outside of Panel.

Concerns were raised that permanent exclusion meetings can be daunting and therefore some parents may not engage with the process. It was noted that in terms of Pupil Disciplinary Committees parents are provided with information and evidence packs prior to the meeting. It was recognised that some parents may not be confident to attend and it was acknowledged that this may need to be strengthened in terms of a potential advocate for parents or helping parents to become more confident to advocate for themselves.

It was requested that data around free school meals in relation to permanent exclusions be included in the report to Committee next time.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the information be noted.
 - (ii) That an update report be brought back to Committee in 12 months time.

F35 WORK PROGRAMME

Committee received a report on the work programme for the remainder of the 2021/22 municipal year.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the Committee noted the provisional programme.
 - (ii) That the Committee noted that further reports on the work programme will be brought to the Committee to identify any additional policy issues, which the Committee may be asked to consider.

Chair.....