

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 3 December 2020

PRESENT:

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

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

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor(s): G Haley

F7 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies received.

F8 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

Matters Arising:

F4 - Children Social Care Services Response to Covid

It was questioned what is happening following the national changes which were due to end on 25 September 2020. It was confirmed that these changes offered more flexibility in legislation, for example being able to carry out Foster Carer assessments without medical certificates. This flexibility has now been removed and it is back to business as usual. It was noted that the service managed not to utilise much of these changes and therefore its removal has not had much impact on the service.

F9 EDUCATION SERVICE RESPONSE TO COVID - UPDATE

Committee received a presentation giving an update on the Education Service response to the pandemic.

In terms of what went well, it was noted that all schools stayed open during the initial lockdown, with places provided for vulnerable and key worker children and good contact was maintained with families not attending school. In addition schools worked with the School Meals team to ensure no child went hungry.

Robust risk assessments were put in place and good risk assessments were led by the Council's Health and Safety Team. Committee was advised that since

September the vast majority of children have thrived since returning to school.

Schools have advised that communication has been great throughout with daily briefings being sent out initially and weekly virtual meetings with Headteachers continues. Schools have appreciated that services have adapted so quickly.

In terms of what has not worked so well, these are mainly issues beyond the control of the schools and Council with a lot of mixed messages coming out of Government, and therefore that has been a lot of reliance on schools and Headteachers. For example around free school meal vouchers, track and trace and changing messages regarding GCSE's. there is also still concern about statutory assessments and accountability. It was noted that this has added to the growing pressure and anxiety in schools that is being felt by leaders and staff.

It was acknowledged that a number of lessons have been learnt, for example utilising technology and if this were to happen again contact with vulnerable families would need to be made even quicker. In addition, the redeployment of staff to roles where they can make a difference would be done quicker.

In terms of ongoing challenges, these were outlined as;

- Significant disruption of education due to 'bubbles' popping
- Staffing level becoming challenging in some schools
- Potential supply costs could have a very negative impact on budgets
- Tension / anxiety within many schools remains high – for example there has been an increase in the number of grievances, with more pressure on teachers who feel that they have never been off duty.

The point was made that there have been real issues with digital access for some pupils, this has been down to lack of equipment or affordability of access to data. This has led to difficulties for some children in completing their work as some schools have been reluctant to give paperwork to pupils. This issue was acknowledged as a concern and schools have been encouraged to do more 'blended learning'. A group was set up early on in the pandemic to look at what tools were available to them. An example was given of Carr Hill Primary School which went back to paper resources as it was felt that this was right for that community.

It was noted that early on in the pandemic, through a government scheme, vulnerable children were identified to receive laptops. Each school was then given a notional number of laptops they should receive, however this number was then lowered which resulted in some schools not receiving the quantity they should have.

Concerns were raised that if teachers have to isolate because their own child has been sent home to isolate they do not receive full pay. It was confirmed that this was a decision taken within HR and is not just in relation to schools but is across all services. Committee requested further information on the rationale of this decision.

It was asked whether there was any feedback on how year 6 children have transitioned into secondary school. It was noted that a number of secondary schools were creative with their transition arrangements, for example offering virtual tours, and there have been no reported problems outside of the ordinary for this year.

It was queried what the intake into nursery has been like this year, in particular in terms of speech and language skills. It was noted that the Early Years Team will be working on these figures and be making comparisons to previous years.

It was questioned as to what support is being provided to Teachers through the pandemic. It was confirmed that counselling services have been increased, and whereas previously Governors would challenge schools a different ethos is being created. In terms of SATS for example schools are being told to do what is right for the school and their children. The Service was keen to ensure staff were being listened to and therefore reassurance and counselling is continuing to be offered.

It was queried whether data is being collected around staff absence and the number of children working from home. It was confirmed that there has been close work with Public Health and they receive daily numbers of pupils and staff who are isolating on a school by school basis.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted.

F10 CHILDREN SOCIAL CARE SERVICES RESPONSE TO COVID - UPDATE

An update was provided on the response to Covid by Children's Social Care.

In terms of what has worked well, it was noted that all service within Social Care and Early Help continued to be delivered throughout the initial lockdown phase. All vulnerable children were supported by their care team and family time continued to be offered to all through both face to face and virtually, which depended on a full risk assessment. It was also noted that all staff successfully moved to remote working and staffing level remained viable throughout. Great support was offered from ICT services to ensure staff and families could continue to work and make contact.

The service continues to RAG rate children on how they will work from home. Through a DfE grant, 500-600 laptops were provided to vulnerable families. It was acknowledged however that this was not an easy feat.

It was noted that there has been an increase in the overall demand in Children's Social Care, with 11.8% more Looked After Children (LAC) compared to last year. The highest number of LAC that Gateshead has ever had was in the summer when there were 454 children, there was also a 9.6% increase in Children in Need. This created pressures as staffing levels have not increased and it also reflects the challenges faced by families. There has also been an increase in Early Help services with a 17% increase from last year.

Due to the increased demand on the service, more children have been placed with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), 24 more places than previous year. This has impacted on response time and has proven quite challenging.

During the most recent phase of the lockdown there has been more of an impact on the workforce with more Covid positive staff and therefore more isolation. The majority of staff have still been able to work but this has required the service to think

differently regarding how direct work was undertaken.

In terms of lessons learnt, the merits of re-deployment have been seen with the successful movement of staff into children's Homes. There has been successful recruitment of additional Social Workers at a time when other local authorities were putting their recruitment on hold. This has led to the appointment of some very experienced Social Workers. There has also been a number of benefits to using IT platforms, through teams, video meetings and virtual family time.

It was reported that, despite increased demand, services have been maintained and new initiatives taken up, such as the DfE Social Worker in schools programme which was launched in November. Through this programme there have been six Social Workers placed in schools across Gateshead, the initiative has been well received by schools.

In terms of ongoing challenges it was noted that maintaining good staff emotional wellbeing and morale is essential. Also, being responsive to staffing pressures and absences as an impact of Covid will continue to be challenging, although it was acknowledged that this has slowed down over the last week. A further challenge will be the ability to meet ongoing increase in demand, especially if the pattern of increasing number continues, this will be in relation to foster placements, residential provision and staffing levels.

It was queried whether the delays with partner agencies has led to increased cost burdens on the authority and whether there is any indication of what overspend there has been this year. It was confirmed that this is currently being worked on but that placing a child in a local authority placement is very different compared to IFAs and ideally our children and young people should be kept in local foster placements. Work is ongoing to increase the number of Foster Carers in Gateshead and it is hoped that due to the current situation, i.e. increased redundancies etc, more people will see this as an opportunity for a career change. Virtual open evenings are being held and so far 10 new families have come forward and assessments have started. It was acknowledged however that with a greater number of Foster Carers comes a need for more Social Workers, therefore it is expected there will be a large overspend on the budget this year, although Covid funding has also been received to offset some of that overspend.

It was questioned whether there has been an increase in the number of grievances within the Social Care Teams. It was confirmed that there has been no increase, the service has very robust managers who are very linked in with their staff. Although the service has had to adapt staff are receiving the support they need.

Committee requested that absence figures be shared to show yearly comparisons and also those absences relating to Covid.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted.

F11 APPROACH TO A NEW PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Committee received a report setting out the proposed approach towards developing a new performance management and improvement framework for the Council. The current framework ended in September and the new framework is being developed to better reflect the Council's priorities.

It was reported that it is important to have a tool to identify how the Council is delivering against the Thrive agenda, and therefore making a difference for local people. The new framework will be looking at if resources are in the right place which will be part of a broader framework. The framework should help get the Council from where it is to where we want it to be with clear analysis to understand where improvements and interventions need to be targeted to have the greatest impact.

The guiding principles were set out as;

- Shaped by Councillors to enable them to scrutinise performance
- Owned by all services and led by senior officers
- Based on delivery of Thrive
- Layered approach
- Integral to the budget approach
- Simple and responsive
- Engages employees through its development
- Quantitative and qualitative approach
- Locality based approached as well as population level
- Takes account of partnership working
- Intelligence led, including benchmarking, to review and improves
- Data hub approach – more accessible data behind a streamlined, corporate framework
- Measures the health of the organisation

A number of performance frameworks from other local authorities was provided to the Committee.

Committee was advised that performance management should help an organisation get from where it is to where it wants to be and is an important tool in identifying strengths and areas for improvement through interventions.

The point was made that the Thrive agenda and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy are based on a qualitative approach and therefore not about quantitative as many performance frameworks usually are. It was noted that the basic principles of both strategies are to reduce inequality, place based positive redistribution (equity between communities). It was acknowledged that these principles need to be reflected in any performance management framework and to make Thrive a reality these principles need to be unlocked. It was acknowledged as things change quickly it may be that the framework will need to start small and continue to be reviewed going forward.

It was agreed that the information contained in the framework needed to be

accessible and more condensed. It was also suggested that any under performance should be highlighted with the reasons why and how it would be addressed. RAG rating was also felt useful to continue into the new framework.

RESOLVED - That the views of the Committee be noted and any further views be provided to officers.

F12 DEVELOPMENT OF OSC WORK PROGRAMMES

A report was presented on the current position relating to the OSC work programmes for 2020-21 and 2021-22.

As a result of Covid it was previously agreed that this year's programme would not go ahead and for next year the work programme would continue to have a degree of flexibility.

Discussions will be held with OSC Chair's in the new year and emerging themes will then be identified at the next meeting of this Committee in March.

One area of concern was raised relating to children's oral health as dentists have been badly impacted and Committee previously undertook a review on this issue.

RESOLVED -

- (i) That Committee noted the position in relation to the OSC's work programme for 2020-21.
- (ii) That Committee was satisfied with the indicative approach to developing the OSC work programmes for 2021-22.