

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 17 June 2021

PRESENT: Councillor(s): M Hall, D Bradford, L Caffrey, B Clelland,
P Craig, S Gallagher, K McCartney, J Mohammed, M Ord,
R Oxberry and Reay

CO-OPTED MEMBERS Tim Kynoch and Rachel Walton

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor(s): G Haley

F1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Buckley, Cllr S Craig, Cllr McMaster, Cllr Davison and co-opted member Jill Burrell.

F2 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

F3 CONSTITUTION

RESOLVED - The Committee agreed the constitution of the Committee.

F4 ROLE AND REMIT

RESOLVED - That the remit and terms of reference be noted.

F5 FOETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME UPDATE

The Committee received an update on the work to review the diagnoses of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) since the last report in April 2019.

Committee was reminded that there had been concerns regarding the diagnosis of FASD in Gateshead which led to a review being undertaken. 98 patients were identified from the pre-existing database, 9 were excluded for various reasons outlined in the report, therefore 89 patient reviews were completed.

It was reported that of those originally classified as 'definite FAS/FASD' 40% were confirmed, 40% had their diagnosis rescinded and 20% had an alternative diagnosis confirmed. Of those with an original classification of 'probable FAS/FASD', 8.5% were confirmed, 83% had their diagnosis rescinded or not confirmed and 8.5% were given an alternative diagnosis. In terms of those cases with 'possible FAS/FASD' only 4.2% had the diagnosis confirmed. It was confirmed however that for some

patients the removal of the diagnosis was solely due to there being insufficient or no confirmation of antenatal exposure to alcohol. Hence, this does not entirely exclude the possibility of the child being exposed to or affected by antenatal alcohol.

It was noted that for some the removal of the diagnosis came as a relief, however for others it came as a surprise as they had not been aware of the FASD diagnosis. It was also acknowledged that the removal of the diagnosis left some children with presenting problems but no clear diagnosis, although appropriate referrals to other services have been made for these children and young people. For some patients confirmation of the diagnosis provided reassurance.

Committee was advised that there is currently no commissioned pathway for FASD assessment in Gateshead. Therefore referrals cannot be accepted just on that basis, however patients would usually present with a range of reasons so a holistic assessment would be carried out. If there is enough evidence to consider FASD as a diagnosis the Canadian FASD guidelines are used, this is in conjunction with a pathway proposed regionally. It was confirmed that guidance on the diagnosis of FASD is being developed by NICE and the current assessment process will be reviewed once the guidance is available.

It was questioned as to what level of difficulty or challenge will be faced by children and young people with a diagnosis of FAS/FASD. It was confirmed that there is a whole spectrum of issues that could be faced, ranging from heart abnormalities to learning difficulties, memory and spatial awareness. It was also noted that some difficulties can be quite subtle and only become evident in secondary school when demand on the child increases. It was confirmed that Gateshead figures are in line with regional figures and that there is a recognition that there is difficulty in diagnosing FAS/FASD if there is no medical record of antenatal alcohol exposure. It was noted that this is not curable therefore management and treatment of such a diagnosis would be supportive and through behavioural strategies.

A question was asked around those children who did not have their diagnosis confirmed and what pathways would be open to them. It was confirmed that all the children and young people included in the review had all been in care and all continue to have statutory health assessments, therefore any issues would be flagged and supported.

It was suggested that this issue be looked at again once the NICE guidance has been published, possibly within the next 6-12 months.

RESOLVED (i) That the contents of the report be noted.

(ii) That a further report be brought back to this Committee once the NICE guidelines are published.

F6 NEW PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK UPDATE

Committee received an update report on the development and implementation of the new Performance Management and Improvement Framework (PMIF) for the

Council.

It was noted that this was approved by Council in May. Work is ongoing to further develop targets, measures and baselines and a further report will be brought back to this Committee in the Autumn on performance against the new measures.

Committee was reminded that the aims of the PMIF is to;

- Enable effective delivery of the Council's Thrive policy and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Ensure effective resource development
- Make both better informed short and long-term effective decisions
- Embedded and owned by councillors and employees
- A whole systems approach – embedded in our partnership working to deliver the Health and Wellbeing Strategy

The framework is cross cutting therefore measures per Committee have been set out. The Families OSC themes and measures are mostly around the Corporate Framework and HWB Strategy Policy Objectives for;

- Give every child the best start in life
- Enable all young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives

The draft measures for each of these areas were highlighted, including Free School Meal take up, schools gradings, number of LAC. It was noted that not all measures are new and that the new PMIF has kept those previous indicators that worked well.

It was noted that engagement has been key in the development of the framework and that it is important for employees to understand how they link to Thrive. Employee groups have been held and will continue to do so and work is ongoing to look at how to get messages to front line staff. Work has also been held with partners, through a small working group and meetings have been held with the voluntary and community sector.

It was reported that a Corporate Data Management Group has been set up to focus on PMIF and enhanced analysis of data, presentation and visualisation.

The point was made that some measures are out of our control although there are targets we can influence such as access to open space free from waste. It was confirmed that some of those points would be covered in other OSC's objectives but that potential measures around the perception of the area could be looked at further.

Concerns were raised that the use of 'targets' may lead to people focussing on easy to meet targets and therefore how can it be linked to quality of life. It was confirmed that this is something that is trying to be understood and that 'targets' will be used as indicators only. Therefore in the six month report there will be more of the 'so what' information, i.e. so what does that tell us, which will provide a broader picture. This will be measured through regular reviews and is an iterative approach.

It was questioned why there is no indicators around culture and youth provision. It was confirmed that culture may be covered in other areas but that does not mean it

could not also be reported to this Committee. It was also confirmed that the aim of the framework is to be responsive, so once an issue is identified something will be put in place to address it.

RESOLVED - That Committee was satisfied with progress made to date and the next steps and noted that further engagement and involvement would continue through the implementation stage.

F7 FREE SCHOOL MEALS UPDATE

Committee received a presentation around the current position on the number of children and young people eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and the impact of Covid on these figures.

Currently there are over 7,200 children eligible for FSM in Gateshead, however this may not be accurate as there are a number of families who do not claim but are still eligible. These children come from 4,150 households. It was reported that there has been a 4.3% increase in FSM take up since this time last year.

A map was provided which showed where the FSM eligible families live, this shows a number of locations with higher density of FSM entitlement. This map is used to plan and target activities.

Committee was advised that Pupil Premium funding is related to FSM entitlement and that, although loss of Pupil Premium is high, it cannot be accurately calculated. FSM related Pupil Premium brings £1345 per primary school child and £955 per secondary child per year. Therefore it is important that the uptake of FSM is widely encouraged.

It was reported that during the pandemic the Council supported FSM eligible families by providing 1,400 weekly packed lunches throughout October half term. It also provided 7,048 pre-loaded Mastercard's over Christmas with a credit balance of either £75 or £100. This was provided through the benefits team at a cost of £561k. In addition, shopping vouchers worth £435k were provided to FSM eligible families during the Easter and May half term holidays. It was reported that the Council has used its allocation of the Government's Winter Grant and the Covid Local Support Grant to fund several VCS partners to provide even more food support across all ward areas of Gateshead.

Committee was advised that, following the 2020 success of the DfE funded Holidays Activities and Food (HAF) Programme, the Council was successful in obtaining substantial funding to offer HAF programmes across the three main school holiday periods of Easter, Summer and Christmas. The Council delivered a programme of activities and food to 2,600 children in 8 days over Easter. In addition, a successful 'Cook n Eat' programme was delivered to 1,750 families, where a box of fresh ingredients providing five meals for four people were delivered to doorsteps.

It was reported that this summer's HAF programme will be the biggest yet with over 20,000 places available. This will be delivered by the Council, Schools and VCSE partners and is open to all in order to avoid any stigma. The programme will include

a wide range of activities, exercises and games. Using the map data to target levels with high FSM has meant that no child has to travel more than 2 miles to access free HAF provision.

In terms of the school meals service it was reported that the service is provided to 71 schools across Gateshead; 68 primaries and 3 secondary's, and also one contract in County Durham. It was reported that 67% of all primary school pupils took a school meal each day in 2019/20. The service has continues to be nationally recognised as a leading Schools Meals provider.

In relation to percentage take up of primary free meals, this has dropped to below pre-pandemic figures. It is thought that the drop in uptake is due to Covid as lunchtime is no longer a pleasurable experience as schools are making lots of compromises to get through lunchtime safely. The implications of this are that less children are taking a nutritious school meal which will impact on health and wellbeing. In addition this has led to a significant loss of revenue, with that there has been increased labour costs to cover sickness and extended lunchtimes. Local suppliers and the private sector are also struggling and this is a national issue.

Therefore, the next steps planned are to re-launch the service in September with a new menu. This will be promoted through various sources, for example parent engagement, using HAF to raise awareness and proactively work to increase uptake.

It was queried whether there has been any lobbying around automatic registration of FSM or whether there would be GDPR restraints. It was agreed that the Data Protection Officer of the Council would look at this issue again.

The Committee thanked the service for all the hard work that has been undertaken.

RESOLVED - That the comments of the Committee on the information provided be noted.

F8 NEW CORPORATE PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS

Committee received a report on the proposal to implement a Corporate Parenting Board. It was confirmed that Council approved the proposal at its meeting in May.

Currently there is no stand-alone Corporate Parenting Board in Gateshead, therefore it has been agreed that a new collaborative body is established which will reflect the wider council in terms of representation. Currently the work programme is being reviewed and arrangements are being strengthened.

The Committee felt that previously the sub-Committee did not get to the root of LAC's issues and it was questioned how these arrangements will translate. It was confirmed that the Board will be cited on any challenges, membership of the Board will be wider and will meet more frequently than the sub-Committee did previously.

It was reported that research was undertaken into the corporate parenting arrangements for other outstanding authorities which helped to shape these

proposals. It was confirmed that the Board would feed into this Committee.

Committee felt that it was essential for the voice of the LAC to be heard and it was agreed that these relationships needed to be built up again and more LAC involved.

It was also reported that a recent annual Ofsted inspection of Blaydon Children's Home resulted in a 'good' rating, with only a few minor points highlighted. In addition, section 8 visits have been carried out to Rowlands Gill Primary and Swalwell Primary. As these were section 8 visits no regrading will be given, however it is expected that there will be an improvement on the next inspection.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the contents of the Cabinet report and recommendations.

F9 COVID-19 UPDATE

Committee was provided with a verbal update on how the services are reacting to the pandemic.

It was confirmed that fortnightly meetings are continuing to be held with Headteachers and these are going well. The Headteacher's Wellbeing Group is also still being held. Planning is underway for bubbles to still be in place in September.

There continues to be a clear focus on mental health and wellbeing and the Education Psychologist is still supporting this work in schools.

Emmanuel College, Cardinal Hume and Oakfield Primary have all seen a spike in cases in recent days so there is likely to be more bubble closures. It was confirmed that the school responses are very good.

It was reported that there has been an increase in demand in Children's Social Care and Early Help, which is expected to be a lag from the country opening up after lockdown. There has been a reduction in the number of LAC but still remains higher than statistical neighbours and the national average. Child Protection figures are starting to plateau, although the overall number of children in the system is increasing. There has also been an increase in the number of care proceedings.

The service continues to be proactive in addressing these challenges, for example through the recruitment of additional Social Workers and the design of a Social Worker Academy. The Academy gives the Council an opportunity to recruit newly qualified Social Workers so that we can invest in them from the beginning of their career, forming part of the recruitment and retention campaign to address the increase in demand.

The Kinship Care Service has gone live this month, to work with connected carers to ensure the right support is around them. This will allow children to be kept in their communities within their family network.

A Peer Review was undertaken which highlighted areas where resources to support children on the edge of care could be used more effectively.

The Committee thanked all the staff and school staff for their work during the pandemic.

It was questioned whether permanent exclusion figures had increased during this time. It was confirmed that they had not increased and had remained relatively low for the last few years. In addition, elective home education in Gateshead has not increased as much as it has nationally.

It was reported that DfE funding had previously been secured for six Social Workers to be based across Gateshead's secondary schools. It is a year into this programme and it is going exceptionally well. The service is now seeing an impact in terms of families feeling supported and officers are looking to expand that if possible. The pilot has significantly reduced the referrals into care which is the aim of working with families at the earliest point.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted.

F10 WORK PROGRAMME

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

Additional suggestions were made that the Committee should look at the Music Service consultation, Permanent Exclusion data and the Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) process and data.

- RESOLVED
- (i) That the Committee noted the information contained in the annual review.
 - (ii) That the Committee endorsed the provisional work programme for 2021/22, including the suggestions made at this meeting, and refer it to Council on 22 July 2021 for agreement.
 - (iii) That Committee noted that further reports will be brought to the Committee to identify any additional issues which the Committee may be asked to consider.