

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 3 February 2022

PRESENT: Councillor M Hall (Chair)

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

CO-OPTED MEMBERS Ayodele Akin and Rachel Walton

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor G Haley

F22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Davison, Councillor S Craig, Councillor Mohammed and Councillor Reay.

F23 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2021 were approved as a correct record subject to the following inclusion;

F19 – Corporate Parenting Training

Paragraph 2 - The following wording to be included;

“Councillors who may wish to take this on should have their contact details provided to care leavers to provide a source of advice and support.”

It was noted that now the Young Ambassadors are in post this will provide a key link to Councillors within the Civic Centre and provides an opportunity for interaction. It was confirmed that conversations will be held with the Young Ambassadors and Chris Hulme as to how this can practically be taken forward. A report will be brought back to Committee on this.

F24 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO DENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN GATESHEAD - UPDATE

The Committee received a presentation on NHS dental services for children and young people in Gateshead.

It was reported that all practices operate in a highly regulated environment, however these regulations do not allow for patient registration. This means that any resident can access dental care from any NHS dentist. NHS dentistry contracts are demand led and contracts are measured in units of dental activity (UDAs). Each practice is

therefore contracted for a certain level of access across the year.

It was noted that there are 24 NHS dental practices across Gateshead, contracted to provide general dental service, commissioned for 364,347 UDAs. Pre-Covid approximately 98.3% of the commissioned capacity in Gateshead was utilised. Covid has had an impact on access to dental care and work is ongoing to increase access for patients locally.

Challenges in the dental service is also around recruitment and retention of dentists and dental nurses, although the position in Gateshead is better than in other parts of the region. The service was put under pressure with the emergence of Covid-19, because this was an airborne virus it was important to keep staff safe. A small number of urgent care centres were set up, however there were issues in terms of accessing PPE for staff and further training, which meant that these did not open until June 2020. Due to the majority of dentist accommodation being previously residential, this led to an impact on the number of patients these practices could safely see. In view of the reduced capacity dentists were required to prioritise patients based on clinical need, children were within these priority groups.

There remains a large backlog and dental practices are still being advised to keep priority groups and increase gradually. National guidance has been set to increase capacity to 85% from January to December 2022.

In order to improve access incentives for all NHS dental practices are in place to prioritise those patients who have not been seen within 12 months for children, and 24 months for adults. There has been further investment into clinical triage through the 111 service to ensure those with the greatest need are being prioritised.

It was reported that expressions of interest are being sought from practices who have capacity to deliver additional in-hours access until the end of March 2022, with a focus on the priority groups. All practices have also been requested to maintain short notice cancellation lists in order to reduce clinical downtime as missed appointments remain an issue as it was pre-Covid.

It was questioned whether there are any records kept of those children not accessing any dental care. It was acknowledged that because there is no registration requirements it is difficult to know, however there is data to show who has accessed. It was noted that smaller geographies could be analysed to identify where there is a low uptake of children accessing appointments. It was also noted that there is links with the authority around looked after children and ensuring they are accessing dental appointments. It was confirmed that once a child becomes looked after, Children's Services ensure the child or young person has regular routine dental checks, however this was a challenge throughout the pandemic.

It was questioned whether there is any help for those young people who are getting to the threshold of having to pay for treatment. It was confirmed that there is no flexibility around payment as this is set by NHS England, however there is constant dialogue between practitioners and NHS England around the cost of care being an inhibiting factor.

It was questioned what has happened to dental practices as a result of them not achieving UDAs during Covid. It was confirmed that practices had to meet minimum expectations and these expectations on patient numbers were lowered during Covid to a level that was safe. The practices remained open the same hours and although usual UDAs were not met they were still fulfilling NHS expectations.

The point was made that more needs to be done to look at children and young people accessing dental provision as there are a lot of adults who do not use dental services and therefore their children do not access it either. It was noted that the full extent of the problem is not known and therefore it was suggested that further work should be taken up with Public Health around this and how we work together to ensure people are using the services. It was proposed that this be included in the work programme for next year.

It was also suggested that there remains gaps to be filled to provide a more joined up system between GPs and Dentists, for example to encourage pregnant women to access check ups and therefore stop potential future problems for them and their children.

The point was made that dental appointments are unaffordable for a lot of families at the moment and that this will have a long-term effect on dental health as choices are prioritised elsewhere. It was noted that this is a topic for lobbying for a different system because this does not work for a proportion of the population.

It was questioned what service is in place for specialist dental care. It was confirmed that this service is not monitored on UDAs as they have longer appointments and are referred through GPs, dentists as well as self-referrals. There is a limited criteria around who can access this service as it works with specific groups, will visit Special Schools and has strong links with the rest of the care system.

RESOLVED - That the information be noted.

F25 CORPORATE PARENTING UPDATE

Committee received a report on the Corporate Parenting Board. Two meetings have been held so far, chaired by the Portfolio Lead. It was noted that attendance has been strong at these meetings, although the Police were not represented at the last meeting. There has been challenges around recruiting a voluntary sector representative and work is ongoing to fill the vacancy. It was noted that the Young Ambassadors are now in post so they will be identified to be part of the Board going forward.

Partners are also involved in the partnership group which is a sub-group of the Board.

In terms of the Young Ambassadors it was noted that these are young people who have been in the authority's care and have moved to support accommodation or independent living. The recruitment process for these posts was rigorous and it is hoped this will help forge links between services and offer opportunities to shape

policies, help with recruitment of other posts and participation in hearing the voice of the child.

The point was made that there will be certain areas that require more help. It was confirmed that details can be provided of where the highest number of looked after children are. It was noted that a Social Worker post was developed in Beacon Lough because this was a particular area in need of Child Protection Services. Committee requested a further report on this be brought back.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the contents of the report.

F26 COVID-19 UPDATE

Committee received a report giving an update on the Covid response and in particular the impact of Omicron over the festive period. As a result of Omicron there were staffing pressures due to staff isolating, however the service continued to see a high level of commitment of staff who, if well enough, continued to work remotely.

Risk assessments were produced for all Children's Homes and short break care provision remained open for respite care.

Fostering Panels are now being held face to face in order to be regulatory compliant. RAG rated performance data trackers have been re-established to ensure those children at highest risk are being seen and supported. Recruitment and progression trackers ensure that staff absences are being covered. In addition, senior officer rotas are in place to ensure management presence in the Civic Centre at all times.

There have been additional service pressures due to the implementation of a new IT system, Mosaic. The system went live on 24 January 2022 and this has been labour intense for practitioners. There has also been the highest number of children in care, 463, during the Christmas period, this therefore impacted on placement sufficiency and was a real challenge for the service.

It was questioned whether there has been young people not returning to school after Covid, as has been seen nationally. It was confirmed that attendance is not where it was pre-Covid but this relates to a small number of pupils who have been identified and the service is currently working with. In terms of the largest secondary school in Gateshead, they have confirmed that attendance is just about back to normal. Committee was reassured that schools and practitioners continue to monitor the most vulnerable children.

It was questioned as to the workload for Social Workers. It was confirmed that the service is continuing to adhere to its caseload policy and this is monitored on a weekly basis through meetings with practice leads. It was noted that this was highlighted during the focused visit as something the service works hard on. Additional Social Worker posts have been advertised due to the increased demand, also development of the Social Worker Academy has allowed investment into newly qualified Social Workers.

Budget pressures in relation to placements was raised as an area of concern. It was

noted that all children's Homes are looked at to ensure all beds are utilised and that there is no bed locking in any of the homes. Investment through capital funding has been agreed for an additional two Children's Homes, however there has been issues in terms of finding the appropriate properties to meet the criteria.

It was confirmed that the main factors for children coming into care during Covid was; neglect, domestic violence and mental health.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the contents of the report.

F27 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK - SIX MONTH PERFORMANCE REPORT 2021/22

Committee received the six month Performance Management and Improvement Framework (PMIF). The Committee was reminded of the background and development of the PMIF.

It was noted that the PMIF links performance to the budget approach, resource allocation is now included to link performance to priorities. It was clarified that the document is live and tries to identify areas of challenge and analysis rather than looking at specific data.

Areas of continuing challenge were identified as; increasing numbers of families requiring support, increased numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals and pressure in terms of recruitment and retention as the lifespan of a Social Worker is only 8 years. There is also pressure in the medium term financial strategy, the increase in demand mean higher costs for external placement as providers are driving the market, this presents a real challenge when trying to make savings.

Areas of excellence were highlighted as the recent successful Focused Visit which highlighted the commitment of the staff within Children's Services. There has also been a reduction in the time of children being in care as well as an increase in the number of early help cases being closed as more families are being offered and accepting family group conferencing.

Actions going forward were identified as; a focus on early intervention, development of an additional two residential homes for children with autism and learning disabilities and a therapeutic home, there is also a focus on developing strategies and the implementation of the AYSE Academy for progression opportunities.

It was acknowledged that there are concerns around employee morale with Occupational Health under increased pressure, work is therefore underway to develop a framework to support employees morale and wellbeing. It was noted that there are recruitment and retention risks across the Council and therefore succession planning is being looked at.

The next steps are to align the PMIF to the new budget approach, further develop the priorities and actions and report the six month performance to Cabinet.

It was questioned what the Youth Justice Divert from Charge referral process is. It

was explained that this is a national programme for those young people on the fringes of offending, they are supported to move away from crime before they have criminal charges. This does not apply to all young people, there is certain criteria and access onto the programme must be agreed by the Police and the Youth Justice Services, this tends to relate to low level behaviour.

The point was made that employees are crucial in delivering services and therefore low staff morale is an inherent weakness. It was questioned whether there is or if there should be a strategy to increase wages at a time when people are struggling and the Council is not paying them enough. It was acknowledged that the recruitment and retention challenges for Social Workers is not to do with pay as Gateshead is very competitive and benchmarks salaries against neighbouring local authorities. It was noted that good Ofsted's are what attracts Social Workers to an organisation opposed to salaries. The point was made that it would be counter productive for one local authority to pay more than other authorities and instead need to act regionally to uplift salaries together. It was also suggested that aside from wages, the support in place for employees needs to be considered.

The point was made that the document is difficult to read electronically and as it was quite dense was not very user friendly. It was noted that this is being looked at for the year end report.

Further information on the PAUSE Programme was requested. It was explained the programme is commissioned for women who have had at least two children removed from their care. Practitioners work with them to break the cycle, through for example employment, learning skills, budgeting and improving their mental health and wellbeing. 27 women have engaged since the start of the programme and there are currently 18 women on the programme. It was reported that none of the women who have completed the programme have gone on to have any further children removed from their care. It was acknowledged that this is a significant cost saving for every child the service does not remove. It was confirmed that only two women dropped out of the programme so far.

The point was made that there is nothing to show the gaps in SEND / EHCPs performance data. It was agreed that this could be looked at further for next time.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the comments of the Committee be noted for areas of further scrutiny.
 - (ii) That the performance be reported to Cabinet for consideration in March 2022.

F28 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.....