

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 20 October 2022

PRESENT: Councillor M Hall (Chair)

Councillor(s): D Burnett, H Kelly, B Clelland, P Craig,
K McCartney, E McMaster, J Mohammed, L Moir, A Ord,
M Ord, D Robson and D Weatherley

CO-OPTED MEMBERS Rachel Walton

F55 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bradford, Cllr Caffrey and Cllr Davison.

F56 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2022 be approved as a correct record subject to apologies being noted for Cllr D Weatherley.

F57 YOUTH JUSTICE - SPEECH LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS

The Committee received a report on the impact of Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) for young people involved with Gateshead Youth Justice Service.

It was noted that all young people involved with Gateshead Youth Justice Service undergo a robust assessment of need. This assessment considers the young person's individual needs, including SLCN. However, it was noted that some young people are adept at hiding the true nature of their difficulties, for example by deflecting and not admitting they do not understand and sometimes disguised compliance.

It was reported that in 2015 the Communication Trust reported on SLCN in the Youth Justice System and found that over 60% of young people accessing youth justice services present with SLCN which are largely unrecognised. The research showed that people with SLCN were overrepresented in the justice system. In some cases these needs are not always assessed early enough in they are not engaged in education or health.

An organisation based in Durham, Clear Cut Communications, specialises in SLCN for young people in the Criminal Justice System and have produced an AssetPlus Screening Support Pack. The service in Gateshead has been working with this

screening tool for some years and has recommissioned the training for new staff and as a refresher for other staff. The screening tool allows interventions to be put in place and referrals to be made if necessary.

Further research undertaken by the Royal College of Speech and Language screened all young people subject to the most intensive community sentence. This research found that 65% of the young people required speech and language therapy intervention, 20% scored at the 'severely delayed' level on standardised assessment and 6% as 'very severely delayed'.

A study of Secure Training Centres, which are involved with the most serious and persistent offenders, found that 72% required additional support for SLCN.

In terms of Gateshead, 42% of the current cohort have been identified as having Speech, Language or Communication difficulty. In the cohort of young people who received a court order, 57% had an identified SLCN need. It was acknowledged that this is on par with national research figures. It was also noted that it is concerning that these young people do not have the same cognition as other young people.

An offer of an appropriate adult is always made to help them understand and Gateshead Youth Service provides a Court Officer to all Magistrate and Crown Court hearings regardless if the young person has SLCN. This allows requirements of intervention to be fully explained to the young person to ensure they do not breach bail conditions and that they understand their conditions.

It was questioned whether there is engagement with education in order to share knowledge. It was confirmed that the service sits on all education panels and Boards and discussions are underway with secondary school senior leaders around permanent exclusions.

It was questioned whether offences are linked to needs and therefore would early assessment improve this. It was confirmed that there is a myriad of factors which could send a child on the trajectory to offend. It was agreed that further information around Family Hubs would be useful to add to the work programme in the future which can look at such factors.

It was also questioned whether there is an opportunity for feedback from service users. It was confirmed that feedback is always looked at and young people experienced in the service help shape and develop the service. Work is ongoing with Digital Me around the voice of the child. Exit interviews are also offered for each child and parent as well as consultation with the Youth Assembly on all documents that are developed.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the contents of the report and requested further information on Family Hubs.

F58 DEMAND PRESSURES, CHILDREN IN CARE AND CHILD PROTECTION

The Committee received a report on demand pressures in Children's Social Care for the first quarter of 2022/23, (April – June).

It was reported that the service is seeing an increase in demand for support and this is in line with the national trend. The North East has the second highest rate of child poverty (38%) and 16% of Gateshead residents live in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the country.

In terms of contacts with the service there has been a 7% increase since 2018/19, there was a dip in demand in 2019/20 which was due to Covid. The number of contacts progressing to referral increased from 23% in 2018/19 to 31% in 2021/22. In quarter one of this year the number of contacts moving to referral increased to 33%.

The number of assessments completed in 2021/22 increased by 13% compared to 2018/19. Quarter one for this year has seen the highest number of assessments completed.

It was reported that there is an increase in the number of open cases across the service. There has been a 39% increase in children in need since April 2018, with a sharp increase from April 2020. The number of looked after children has increased by 28% since 2018, currently there are 516 at the end of June 2022.

The number of Child Protection Plans has decreased and the number of care leavers remains static.

It was noted that there has been a year on year increase in the number of section 47 Enquiries, however the conversion rates of Initial Child Protection Conference to Child Protection Plans has decreased slightly.

In terms of the looked after children this figure steadily increased to March 2021 then there was a sharp increase until March 2022. It was noted that the current number of looked after children is 516, this is the highest level recorded.

It was questioned what stress this increased demand is putting on staff. It was confirmed that work is ongoing with HR to increase the workforce in order to better balance caseloads. It was acknowledged that the challenge is the complexities the service is working with. It was confirmed that caseloads are reviewed weekly to ensure they are appropriate and other areas of the system are used to help, for example practitioners are helping with visits and court papers for example.

It was questioned whether increased demand is due to a bigger issue or if it is to do with better identification of issues. It was confirmed that the increased demand was a direct correlation with the pandemic. It was acknowledged that more understanding is needed of why Gateshead is the third highest in the region for looked after children and what can be done to maintain children in their family network for better outcomes.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the content of the report and agreed to receive a progress update in approximately six months.

F59 MOCKINGBIRD PROGRAMME - PROGRESS UPDATE

The Committee received a presentation on the Mockingbird Programme. It was noted that the model is an American Model introduced by the Fostering Network which oversees the brand. South Tyneside Council bid on behalf of the region and was successful in receiving DfE funding to buy the model.

The model is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model, which provides sleepovers, peer support, regular joint planning and training and social activities. It was noted that the programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers children and young people, fostering services and birth families. It is aimed at strengthening relationships and stabilising foster carers.

It was noted that this model has been tried and tested in the USA and currently Leeds City Council is implementing its tenth model and they have seen good results.

In Gateshead a Hub Group is set up, with a number of foster households and a hub carer at the centre, this is an experienced foster carer who applied to do this role. There will be no young people placed with the hub carer as they will be the support and host the social events, provide advice and guidance and 'sleepovers' (no longer using respite terminology). The first model will start in November 2022.

Officers from the service have spent the day with the hub carers and met other hub home carers from other local authorities.

Evaluation of the programme will be undertaken through the DfE and progress will be reported on in due course.

It was questioned whether the hubs are set up based on geography. It was noted that because the model started in Arizona, America the hubs covered a massive area and because of the size of Gateshead in comparison this is not a big issue. It was also noted that sometimes it is helpful not to be too close and that distance has not proven to be a problem in other local authority areas that already have hubs in place.

It was questioned whether there are plans in place to have more than one 'constellation'. It was confirmed that there are plans and this will be after this years evaluation. It was noted that Leeds currently has 10 constellations but this only covers 14% of their LAC population. It was suggested that the hub carers should be invited to a future meeting of the OSC.

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

F60 AFFORDABILITY OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS

A verbal update was provided to the Committee on affordability of school uniforms. It was noted that in November 2021 the DfE issued statutory guidance for schools to implement by September 2022. This was to ensure parents did not have to factor in school uniform affordability when choosing a school. Branded items were to be kept

to a minimum and there should be availability of second hand uniforms on the schools website.

In Gateshead additional funding was received for Ukrainian refugees and Home Office Schemes. In the West of the Borough a 'pre-loved scheme' has been established and this will become more accessible.

It was noted however that this is a much bigger issue than uniforms, it is about poverty proofing schools. The Poverty Portfolio Group is looking at facilities which can help families clean uniforms through Warm Spaces.

The Committee felt that as primary school governors they could help influence schools, however in terms of secondary academies this would be more problematic. It was noted that officers from education do attend secondary Headteacher meetings and are in a position to challenge schools if they are not implementing clear statutory guidance.

It was noted that a report would be brought to Committee in the next municipal year looking at the wider picture of poverty proofing in schools.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted and Committee receive further information in due course.

F61 WORK PROGRAMME

Committee received the work programme and the two additions to next year's work programme were highlighted for information.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the provisional work programme for 2022/23 be noted.
 - (ii) 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.