

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 21 January 2016

PRESENT: Councillor M Brain

Councillors: B Oliphant, J Adams, B Clelland, J Graham,
K McCartney, D Robson, S Ronchetti, C Simcox, J Turnbull
and John Wilkinson

F28 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hawkins, S Craig, Caffrey, Geddes, Thompson, McNally and Co-opted members Malcolm Brown and Sasha Ban.

F29 MINUTES

RESOLVED - The minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2015 be agreed as a correct record.

F30 LIAISON WITH GATESHEAD YOUTH ASSEMBLY

The Committee received a presentation from the Gateshead Youth Assembly (GYA) Chair, Ewan Taws, and Secretary, Jake Guthrie. It was noted that a weekend in November was used to plan priorities for the new year, which are;

- Emotional wellbeing
- Child Sexual Exploitation
- Child poverty
- Religious and racial harmony
- Staying safe

In terms of emotional wellbeing, work is ongoing to reprint posters and develop myth buster factsheets. Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) continues to be big news and will be included on the myth buster factsheets, police cadets will also be invited to deliver their CSE presentation to the GYA to inform members on the issue. The GYA have been working with the North East Child Poverty Commission for three years and working with Gateshead Foodbank to provide Christmas presents and selection boxes to children and young people living in poverty. Part of the GYA's work this year will be to develop a poster around 'what poverty looks like', not just focused on financial poverty but also poverty of experience and opportunity, as poverty is often hidden it is important to raise awareness. In addition, work will be held with schools to map what action they take to alleviate the effects of poverty on their students.

Speakers will be invited to address the GYA around religious and racial harmony,

schools and youth clubs will be lobbied to follow suit. In terms of the staying safe priority, a campaign will be developed around risks, personal safety and how young people can make others feel by their behaviour.

It was noted that the GYA only have limited time and money and therefore only five main priorities were identified, however a position statement was provided which shows what the GYA stands for and what it wants to achieve going forward. It was confirmed that the group has become smaller as a lot of members have left, however the GYA continues to work on issues important to Gateshead and its young people.

It was queried why the group has lost members. It was confirmed that Valerie Ender, Youth Support Worker, now only works one day per week and the group has reduced to 24 from 62. It was suggested that this may be due to Val being less able to engage fully with schools, therefore not as many new members are being recruited.

It was questioned what funding avenues have been explored. It was noted that numerous bids have been submitted and work continues to look for funding opportunities, however as this is a Gateshead charity opportunities are limited and aimed at national based organisations.

It was also questioned how young people outside of education are engaged with. It was noted that a lot of awareness raising work is done through social media.

In terms of the position statement, clarification was sought on the rationale around requesting the voting age to be lowered. It was acknowledged that there will be a campaign for the voting age to be lowered to 16 as in some respects 16 year olds are treated as adults, for example are no longer eligible for a child's bus fare. The GYA feel that there is nothing that happens between the ages of 16 and 18 which makes 18 year olds better able to vote.

The point was made that excellent work has been carried out by Bede Primary School, as discussed at the last OSC meeting, around emotional health and wellbeing and it was suggested that this information be shared so work between the schools and GYA can be better aligned.

It was questioned whether the GYA has been involved in the consultation around the re-provision of the children and young people's mental health service. It was noted that the GYA have not been involved in the consultation, the Committee suggested that the group look at feeding into that consultation.

It was noted that the GYA's budget has been cut by two thirds, previously there were three workers, two full time and one part time, however now there is only one part time worker. This reduction in staffing has impacted on the work of the youth assembly and ambitions have had to be lowered. It was stated that if a worker could be employed for one additional day this would enable more bids for funding to be secured.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the information presented.

REVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTION IN GATESHEAD - EVIDENCE GATHERING

The Committee took part in an evidence gathering session on the review of child protection in Gateshead. The session was led by Yvonne Bartlett, Team Manager Referral and Assessment, and focused on one particular family, following the child and family's journey through the system, from initial contact and referral to a (strategy discussion) and eventual section 47 Child Protection Enquiry.

If concerns about the welfare of a child are raised during a Child in Need Assessment (CiN) it would be decided whether a strategy meeting is required. A strategy meeting will then be held within three working days, unless the case is complex. The strategy meeting will be held between the social care, police, health and any other appropriate agencies. The discussion will identify the level of risk and is an opportunity for agencies to share information they hold on the family. Following this meeting, if concerns are substantiated the case will progress to a section 47 enquiry, if unsubstantiated the case will either be closed or will continue under CiN.

Sgt Andrea Hall gave a police perspective on the process. A police officer from the Child Protection Unit will attend a strategy discussion, this will occasionally be done over the phone in emergency situations. The role of the police officer during these discussions is to provide information on the family, including convictions, address history and will look at the information shared by other agencies present at the meeting. The police will take the lead on an investigation if it is needed. In some cases an urgent joint response is required. During the strategy discussion it will be decided what not to share with the family, for example if certain information may jeopardise an investigation.

John Clark, local authority Solicitor, provided a legal overview of the process. A solicitor would be called to join a strategy meeting, normally they would not have any information about the family, their role is to help assess risk and advise on the criteria for section 47 and how the case would fair if it went to court. The strategy meeting would need to decide if the child had suffered significant harm or was likely to suffer significant harm due to the level of care provided to the child.

The Committee received information on a family where one child had suffered unexplained injuries, a decision was made that the children should be removed. There are three routes to remove a child; through agreement with the parent (section 20), to house the child with another family member. In this case the social worker must take care to ensure the parents are aware of what the agreement involves. In Gateshead parents receive a proforma which spells out the issues around section 20 agreements, a mini booklet has also been developed which sets out the parent's rights. Alternatively, a child can also be removed through police protection under section 46 or an application can be made to court for an emergency protection order (section 44).

During the strategy discussion it must be confirmed by a medic that any injuries sustained are non-accidental. If it is decided that a child requires police protection there must be reasonable cause to believe that a child would otherwise suffer

significant harm. An initiating officer will take steps to inform the parents or anyone who has parental responsibility, the officer will take the child and hand them to social services to provide suitable accommodation. When police protection is required there will be a named Designated Officer who will be responsible for holding paperwork and receiving updates on the case. Police protection lasts for no longer than 72 hours, until safe accommodation can be provided for the child, this is an emergency power, it does not give police officers parental rights for the child.

Most investigations are undertaken jointly, however police do some work alone. The police have facilities to interview children, under 10's are interviewed with intermediaries present. There is the facility to medically photograph a child and if there are allegations of sexual assault an on call paediatrician will be available to examine the child. Offender interviews are not done jointly, these are undertaken by the police and need to be done under caution.

When a child is removed from its family, the Social Worker must look for a place of safety for the child, this can be with family members following a regulation 24 assessment of that family member(s).

Following a strategy meeting if it is decided to initiate section 47 enquiries this will assess whether the risk of harm is still there. In Gateshead, during section 47 enquiries, on average the Social Worker will speak to 21 agencies in relation to a family. The outcomes of a section 47 assessment can be that the concerns are not substantiated or the child is not likely to suffer significant harm. If concerns are substantiated and the child is likely to suffer harm, an Initial Child Protection Conference will be held. All section 47's are signed off by a manager and at day 10 it will be decided whether care proceedings are to be progressed.

It was noted that throughout the process the views of the child are important, support workers are assigned to undertake direct work with children, who are of an age where they can speak, to get their views. This is an integral part of the process and examples of some children's views were provided to the Committee.

The difference between police protection and emergency protection orders was queried. It was confirmed that this depends on the level of risk, for an emergency protection order the court would be contacted to establish how quick it could hear an application, this could be within hours. It was noted that the circumstances of the particular case would need to be looked at as an emergency protection order lasts for seven days and police protection for 72 hours.

It was questioned whether section 47 enquiries are only initiated when there is a threat or if this also includes neglect. It was confirmed that section 47 will be initiated if there is a risk of significant harm regardless if this is due to neglect or physical, sexual abuse etc.

It was also queried what level of proof of non-accidental injury is required in order to initiate an investigation. It was noted that a doctor would need to confirm that it is more probably than not that an adult is responsible for the injury and it must be beyond reasonable doubt in order for police protection to be initiated.

It was questioned as to how easy the section 20 proforma and booklet is for parents to understand. It was confirmed that previously the format was less understood and was reliant on the social worker to verbally advise parents. However, this has been developed further and the proforma provides very clear explanations. It was noted that social workers will always speak to parents and ensure they seek legal advice, a social worker will review throughout the process and reiterate understanding with parents. It was acknowledged that parents do have the right to withdraw from a section 20 agreement at any time.

It was queried how investigation progresses to establish who caused an injury to a child, when it is apparent that it is not accidental. It was noted that if it is an unexplained injury it will be reviewed with the doctor once more information is known. The timeline of who has had previous care of the child will be looked at and the probable start time of the injuries.

It was suggested that Sunderland Council's recent Ofsted inspection report should be looked at by the Committee. It was agreed that other regional Ofsted report would be referenced when Gateshead's report is finalised and brought to Committee.

It was questioned as to what checks are in place through the process. It was confirmed that management oversight is fundamental throughout the process, the service is judged on this by Ofsted and Legal Gateway meetings are held.

The point was raised that there are different priorities and roles of each agency which could lead to conflict at times, it was questioned how this is resolved. It was confirmed that there is an agreement that information be anonymised if necessary and any conflicts are resolved without any major difficulty.

RESOLVED - That the comments of the Committee on the evidence heard be noted.

F32

REVIEW OF REVISED MEMBERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING OSC

A report was presented confirming the previously agreed appointment of non-voting members to the Corporate Parenting OSC. The Committee previously agreed to appoint representatives from various sectors; parent governor, foster carers association, third sector, The Gateshead Housing Company, a care leaver; and review the position 12 months after appointments. It was noted that to date a care leaver has not been appointed, therefore work is ongoing to find another care leaver representative. The Committee was asked to formally approve the current appointments for three years.

RESOLVED - (i) That the Committee agreed the next steps outlined in the report.

(ii) That the Committee agreed to a further review of these arrangements in 12 months' time.

F33

ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL INSPECTIONS - AUTUMN TERM 2015

The Committee received a report outlining the inspections that were carried out in the autumn 2015 term. It was noted that a new Ofsted framework has been implemented since September 2015,

During the autumn term three schools were inspected. Ryton Junior School has now been judged as 'good', this school was previous rated as 'inadequate' and was in special measures, however the school has been supported in its improvement. Ryton Infant School has been judges as 'requires improvement', this was due to the school going into the inspection with poor pupil performance data. Sacred Heart RC Academy was previously judged as 'requires improvement' and has now been rated as 'outstanding'.

It was reported that Ryton Infant and Ryton Junior Schools are currently developing a soft federation and appointing a single Headteacher from September 2016. It was confirmed that a soft federation is the coming together of two schools who agree to work closely together under a memorandum of understanding. This only stands for a couple of years before the schools must agree to separate or go to a hard federation, which means they will be locked together legally, this was previously known as an amalgamation.

It was noted that there are currently no inadequate schools, however two secondary schools; Thomas Hepburn Academy and Charles Thorp Academy, which have not been inspected since converting to Academy status. Therefore, technically there are two schools without grading.

RESOLVED - That the Committee note the position of schools in relation to Ofsted inspections.

F34

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair confirmed that this would be the last meeting for co-opted members Malcolm Brown and Ray Tolley, as their term of office has ended. The Chair, on behalf of the Committee, thanked them for their work on the Committee and wished them well for the future.