

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 4 March 2021

PRESENT:

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

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Tim Kynoch

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor(s): G Haley

F13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Caffrey, Cllr M Ord and co-opted member Rachel Walton.

F14 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 December 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

F15 EDUCATION RESPONSE TO COVID - UPDATE

Committee received a presentation around the response in education within Gateshead to the third lockdown.

It was reported that the reintroduction of the two metre social distancing requirement resulted in the number of pupils being capped at the same time as the key worker list becoming more extensive than previously. For some schools the restricted numbers became an issue and there were some cases where key worker children had to attend neighbouring schools which had places for a short time.

It was noted that all schools were better prepared for remote learning with live and recorded lessons taking place. Teaching methods became more sophisticated and there was more focus on getting IT equipment to those parents who needed it and also an acknowledgment that some children required more in terms of printed resources.

All Special School children were able to access a school place throughout the lockdown.

Work is continuing with Headteachers and school leaders on the development of a recovery curriculum that focuses on emotional health and wellbeing, physical activity

and academic development. Schools have recognised that the longer pupils are away from school the bigger the challenge becomes so there is a long-term approach to getting pupils back to where they should be.

In terms of the wellbeing of school staff, a Headteacher wellbeing group has been established, chaired by Steve Horne and the Education Psychologist, to look at ways to support them.

Meetings are being held regularly with Headteachers and Unions to discuss the issues regarding full opening from 8 March.

It was questioned whether there were plans to prioritise vaccinations for teachers. It was confirmed that all staff in Special Schools and those schools with ARMS units have had access to a vaccination. In addition, those teams based at Dryden, who support children in schools, have had the opportunity to have the vaccine.

Concern was raised that some schools have not received any Covid money from Government. It was noted that officers would take this up with finance colleagues outside of the meeting.

The point was made that there seemed to be some confusion around free school meals at the beginning of the pandemic and there was a lack of advice from the authority to schools, i.e. in terms of how they were to be delivered. It was noted that there was no requirement for schools to deliver meals door to door and therefore there was no guidance provided by the authority, although examples of good practice were shared. It was also noted that a lot of schools used community help during this time.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted.

F16 CHILDREN SOCIAL CARE SERVICES RESPONSE TO COVID - UPDATE

A presentation was given to Committee on the response to Covid by the Children's Social Care service.

It was reported that all services are continuing to be offered and that no service was stood down throughout any of the lockdowns. Family time and visits have continued and during the latest lockdown virtual visits were only held by exception, for example if there were safety concerns.

There has continued to be low numbers of sickness absence and the service is now starting to see the benefits of more flexible working.

There has continued to be an increase in overall demand with numbers reaching a peak in July 2020 of 450 children and young people in the system. There are currently 443 children in the LAC system, this is still higher than would usually be expected and the pandemic is a factor in that. It was reported that at its peak there were 287 children subject to a Child Protection Plan, this figure currently stands at 231. There are still over 100 more children and young people in statutory services and there are 1700 caseloads.

It was noted that staff have been resilient throughout the pandemic, there has been low numbers of sickness absence and a low number of agency workers in comparison to neighbouring authorities. Vaccinations have been rolled out to all frontline staff.

It was reported that there has been an increase in Ofsted activity in Gateshead, which has put a lot of demand on the service. It was noted that there is awareness of staff pressures and the impact of increased LAC numbers and the service has been creative in terms of placements, trying to ensure placements are kept within the borough where appropriate.

It was questioned as to how many cases there are per Social Worker. It was noted that on average there are 19 children per Social Worker, however there is no national guidance with regards to this and in Gateshead it is aimed to keep case loads between 16 and 20. There are lower case loads for those working with complex edge of care cases and the SWIS team. Staff are on a rota to attend the Civic Centre and any staff requiring closer communication will be facilitated.

It was questioned whether there has been an increase in the number of domestic violence cases during the pandemic. It was acknowledged that there is a correlation between domestic violence and the increase in LAC numbers.

It was reported that there has been a local advert on TV as part of a Foster Carer recruitment drive, 10 assessments are ongoing as a result of this. It was noted that some Foster Carers go on to become permanent Foster Carers or 'staying put' Foster Carers which means less availability for additional placements.

More newborns and unborn babies are coming through referrals so work is ongoing to look at intervention packages. There has also been more children needing mental health interventions.

It was noted that all services for Care Leavers have continued with Personal Advisors face to face visits and financial packages remaining the same. Recent surveys showed that Care Leavers felt supported and Chris Hulme continues to work closely with them on a number of activities.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted.

F17 NEW PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

A presentation was given to Committee on the new Performance Management and Improvement framework. The new framework has a strong focus on people and on what the Council is doing to address challenges and achieve its Thrive priorities and deliver the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

There is a move away from performance indicators to management action and change. The guiding principles are that this will be shaped and owned by Councillors, to scrutinise performance, see impact of decision making and deploy resources. There will be a strong employee focus so that staff can see how they are

contributing to the Council's priorities.

There will be a focus on the most vulnerable residents through the Health and Wellbeing Strategy mechanism. Emerging strategies are around Economic, Housing and Investment with interventions required to fulfil Climate Emergency response and Community Wealth Building. These will be the building blocks for Council priorities.

It was noted that Councillors have been engaged from the beginning and there has been strong support for an approach framed around the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Analysis has been held at a corporate level to see what policies need to change. This is an iterative approach and will be developed and improved over the year.

An Employee Network was established and there was a lot of enthusiasm which is essential as this will be driven by employees.

Corporate Performance framework has been structured around the six policy objectives of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy;

- Give every child the best start in life
- Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and control over their lives
- Create fair employment and good work for all
- Ensure a healthy standard of living for all in accordance with international law on economic and social rights
- Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
- Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention

For each of these six objectives key features have been identified.

It is anticipated that the framework will provide; transparency and clarity on delivering priorities, links between performance and resources, ability to scrutinise effectively and enable informed policy decisions to be taken.

The framework will go to Cabinet for approval in April and will be implemented thereafter, it was noted that this will be continually developed.

It was questioned whether there would be more in depth data available for Councillors to look at. It was confirmed that the intention is to have a data hub which will address transparency issues. It was noted that the starting point is broad outcomes then there is a basket of measures so it will not be a case of looking at individual indicators as previously performance measuring started with the indicators. Therefore, the new framework will be better at providing qualitative measures.

It was suggested that the Cabinet report format be changed to better reflect impacts on Thrive.

RESOLVED - That the information presented, and the comments made by Committee, be noted.

F18 SEND OFSTED ASSURANCE VISIT

Committee was advised that a SEND Assurance visit is due to be carried out next week over two days. This will be run by three inspectors and will be a virtual visit. 40 cases, 20 SEND and 20 SEN, have been provided to the inspectors. An Ofsted survey has been issued to families, a good response has been received (267 parents and 67 children).

The key questions the inspectors will explore are;

- How have children and young people with SEND experienced the pandemic
- What had worked well in supporting them
- What have the challenges been and what did not work so well
- What are the plans for supporting these children and young people in the future

Committee was advised that Ofsted will not grade the authority but their findings will form part of a database and national report.

RESOLVED - That the information presented be noted.

F19 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21 AND DEVELOPMENT OF WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2021/22

A report was received on the development of the work programme for the municipal year 2021/22 and the suggestions of potential areas of work for the Committee.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) Committee noted the work programme for 2020-21
 - (ii) Committee noted the emerging issues for the 2021-22 work programme.