

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 9 March 2023

PRESENT: Councillor(s): D Burnett, H Kelly, L Caffrey, B Clelland,
P Craig, E McMaster, J Mohammed, A Ord, M Ord,
D Robson, R Waugh and D Weatherley

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor(s): G Haley

F75 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Hall, Cllr McCartney, Cllr Moir, Cllr Davison, Cllr Bradford and co-opted members Rachel Walton and Ayo Akin.

F76 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2023 be approved as a correct record.

F77 IMPACT OF COVID ON NEW PARENTS - UPDATE

The Committee received an update report on the impact of Covid on new parents and their babies.

National research has been carried out which gives a good indication of the issues faced by new parents and babies during the pandemic. Findings by Ofsted showed that children's communication and language development continued to be affected, with increased numbers being referred for additional support. There are also many children still lacking confidence in social settings, with some taking longer to settle into nursery than would have been expected prior to the pandemic. In addition, some children are lacking in the development of gross motor skills due to lack of physical activity, including access to large-scale play equipment during the pandemic. There are also issues highlighted by the Ofsted report around recruitment and retainment of qualified staff since the start of the pandemic. It was noted however, that these points cannot be assumed to represent the whole sector but rather to highlight challenges that some providers and children experienced.

A further report was published at the end of 2022 for the First 1001 Days Movement and the Institute of Health Visiting. The findings were highlighted and included; more young children exposed to stresses and adversities at home, the pandemic is having an ongoing impact on children's health and development and many services are struggling to meet children's needs.

It was acknowledged that it will be years until the impact of the pandemic on early development can be truly measured. There have been disparities in terms of

outcomes for young people based on deprivation levels. It was also noted that some children thrived during lockdown due to the extra time at home with family.

Committee was reminded that Gateshead Council is eligible for funding to develop a network of Family Hubs. The main theme areas for these Hubs will be; parent-infant relationships and perinatal mental health support, infant feeding, parenting support and home learning environment to aid early years educational recovery. The funding for these areas is mainly in relation to the start for life offer (100 critical days – conception to age 2). However, the home learning environment funding is targeted at 3-4 year olds whose development has been negatively impacted upon by the pandemic. This will be evidence-based intervention through a number of programmes to support language, literacy, social and emotional development and self-regulation.

Through the Health Visiting Ages and Stages Questionnaire, this will help Health Visitors decide if a referral to the 0-4 Panel is required. The data collected through the questionnaire has shown a drop in communication skills since 2020, however Gateshead still remains above the national average. Currently 84.5% of children in Gateshead aged 2 - 2.5 years are at or above the expected level in communication skills.

The 0 to 4 Referral Meeting is unique to Gateshead and is aimed at those children identified as having additional needs. Developmental checks are carried out by the Health Visitor or key worker at nursery and this allows early identification of any developmental needs and referrals can be made to the 0 to 4 meeting. A number of services will be represented at those meetings and they work in a multi-agency way. The 0 to 4 referral meeting continued to support children throughout the pandemic. During the pandemic resource packs were developed by services to support children in terms of social communication and interaction skills. It was reported that the number of referrals has increased since 2019/20, this may be because of the impact of Covid, however without doing further work into each individual case this can not be confirmed. It was acknowledged that this shows that services are getting better at the early identification of developmental needs.

It was questioned as to when funding will be received for Family Hubs and when programmes will start. It was confirmed that the first tranche of funding was received in January and the second part of the year one funding is expected imminently. The Delivery Plan was submitted in December and Gateshead is the only North East local authority who got approved first time. There are challenges however because the plan was not approved until the end of January so it has been hard to allocate spend as it is quite prescriptive. It was acknowledged that the first requirement of the funding bid was to get delivery of one hub by the end of April, Gateshead will have four by that time.

It was reported that the Baby Box scheme was launched this week, this is a development box for some first time parents which will encourage reading, play and bonding. Work is underway to look at expanding this as part of the Family Hub offer. The Baby Box scheme is initially targeted towards the most deprived families.

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

F78 REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY ANNUAL REPORT 2021/2022

The Committee received a report giving an overview on practice and delivery of adoption services in 2021/22.

Committee was reminded that it is the local authority's responsibility for securing permanence plans for children and young people in its care. Adoption is the transfer of parental responsibility to the adopters. Adopt North East is the Regional Adoption Agency responsible for supporting the authority in matching children to adopters.

The Safeguarding and Care Planning Service is responsible for working with families to progress plans for permanency. Within the service there is a dedicated Support Assistant who undertakes Life Story work with the child and adoptive parents, this will allow the child to understand when and why decisions were made.

It was noted that all adoption decisions are ratified by the Assistant Strategic Director for Children and Families. Decisions for adoption means that there is no other alternative and that all connected persons have been ruled out.

There are three stages to finalise a plan of adoption, the first stage is that a plan is agreed internally as the best way forward. A Placement Order will then be sought and agreed through the Courts, for 2021/22 a Placement Order was agreed for 25 children. Stage three is to seek a match with adopters, there were 21 children in 2021/22 matched with adopters.

It was acknowledged that it is very rare that a decision is reversed once a plan is made. However, there was one case of this happening in 2021, this was due to a family member coming forward with a changed position who wished to care for the child.

It was reported that arrangements with children moving to early permanence arrangements have been very positive at Gateshead. particularly in relation to placing children at birth with expected adopters. Adopt North East have asked the service to provide training for other local authorities on this approach. The benefits of early permanence mean a child is placed at the earliest opportunity, it avoids delay and disruption and allows early bonding. It was noted that there has been a significant shift in early permanence plans, with 13 children placed in Foster to Adopt placements in 2012/22, compared to 4 children in 2019/20.

It was noted that Adopt North East continues to support the service to identify prospective adopters and match children. It also offers training and support post-adoption in terms of links to birth families.

It was acknowledged that the service works closely with all areas of the Council, for example Housing, to ensure prospective adopters are best placed looking at all environmental factors.

It was questioned as to what degree of adoption plans fail. It was confirmed that there is a robust process in place, the authority and adoption agency carry out extensive work to assess adopters and the child. In addition things such as

geography to birth family based on risks will be looked at.

RESOLVD - That the Committee noted the information provided in the report.

F79 NATIONAL TRANSFER SCHEME AND UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN

The Board received a report on the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) national scheme and Gateshead's progress to date.

It was reported that at the end of 2021 local authorities were served with notice to comply with the National Transfer Scheme. Gateshead was initially given a quota of 0.07%, this has now risen to 0.1%, this equates to 39 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This is a rolling total so once the young person reaches 18 they will drop off the total.

From April 2022 to December 2022, 33 young people were allocated to Gateshead. 20 of this cohort now have a new home in Gateshead, 9 young people were withdrawn by the Home Office before they arrived. Work is ongoing to find a foster family or supported accommodation for 4 young people.

It was noted that all the young people allocated to Gateshead were aged between 15 and 18 years old. The majority of the 33 young people were male and identified their country of origin as Iran or Afghanistan. It was reported that all 33 young people are in some form of education and all have an allocated Social Worker. The young people that come to Gateshead have suffered trauma and trafficking.

Gateshead has been identified for a further 4 young people in the next cycle. It is not yet known as to when the next cycle will happen as this will depend on when they arrive into the country. It was noted that there tends to be an increase in numbers across the UK during the warmer weather so that would be when the cycles move quicker.

Once young people are allocated to Gateshead, the authority has five days in which to provide accommodation. It was acknowledged that this is a real challenge. If the authority does not comply with the timescales there is a challenge process from the Home Office. Gateshead has only been challenged once so far.

It was recognised that this is a real challenge for all local authorities in terms of the provision of care. This impacts on the number of children and young people allocated to Social Workers. An additional 39 children in care equates to an extra two Social Workers, based on 20 cases per Social Worker. It was noted that there are financial incentives attached to the scheme, however the challenge remains in terms of a lack of resources.

Foster carer recruitment remains a challenge across the region and Gateshead is part of regional fostering campaign for the UASC programme.

It was questioned how the language barrier is dealt with. It was confirmed that an

interpreting service has been commissioned and often the young people speak English quite well.

It was queried what happens to these young people when they turn 18. It was confirmed that they would transfer to the care experienced service.

It was questioned how the Legal Migration Bill will impact on this. It was noted that services will continue to be planned for young people and nothing will change in that respect. There is a clear view from the Home Office that this is not expected to change anytime soon, therefore the authority's responsibility will not change for the foreseeable future.

It was questioned as to what a flat with support amounts to and what relationship they have with a Social Worker. It was confirmed that a determination will be made under section 20 as to the level of need of each individual young person and what their needs are, based on age and skills. For some of the older young people arriving in Gateshead it has been determined that they can be best supported through supported accommodation. This will be a property with 24/7 support. In addition, the service has commissioned out support around life skills for these young people. The level of need depends on the assessment of need. There is a dedicated Social Worker for these young people, who has developed skills in working with trauma experienced young people and language barriers. Work is underway to look at developing this role further in order to ensure resilience. Social Workers within the team are advocates and there is a therapeutic life story worker to look at the trauma these young people have experienced. The Trauma Informed Service, which is due to be implemented in May, will train staff to develop skills in working with children and young people around trauma.

It was queried how long the assessment of these young people takes and where they are placed in the meantime. It was confirmed that the assessment begins as soon as they arrive in the UK (in Kent), they then pass the assessment to the allocated local authority. Social Workers undertake assessment of need quickly while they are placed in hotels in the South. This is an ongoing assessment and needs continue to be assessed through Child Protection Reviews.

The point was made that the North East Refugee Service (NERS) has rejected the approach of placing these young people in anywhere but families. It is felt that there would not be enough support and potential isolation. It was suggested that the young people would be able to learn and understand more about the country by living with families. It was questioned if they are being placed in supported accommodation is this due to a lack of foster placements. It was agreed that a meeting with NERS would be arranged with the Strategic Director to ensure work is joined up as there is a lot of regional coordination work ongoing to share best practice. It was acknowledged that there is a range of young people coming into the area with a wide range of need and some are very independent and living in a family base would be the opposite of what they want. The aim is to have a wide range of options and choice open for these young people, some would not want to be placed with families. It was noted that placement sufficiency is the biggest strategic priority locally and therefore there is always pressure in that respect.

It was suggested that Ward Councillors would benefit from knowing how they can appropriately and constructively support these young people. It was agreed that more thought needs to be given to mentoring opportunities going forward and potentially invite some of these young people to this Committee if they were willing.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the information provided in the report and would receive an update report at a future meeting.

F80 WORK PROGRAMME

Committee received the work programme report which included items requested and deferred for the next municipal year.

- 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.