

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Thursday, 1 December 2022

PRESENT: Councillor M Hall (Chair)

Councillor(s): H Kelly, D Bradford, L Caffrey, B Clelland,
P Craig, J Mohammed, L Moir, A Ord, D Robson, R Waugh
and D Weatherley

CO-OPTED MEMBERS Ayodele Akin

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor(s): G Haley

F62 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Burnett, Cllr Davison, Cllr McCartney, Cllr McMaster, Cllr M Ord and co-opted member Rachel Walton.

F63 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2022 be approved as a correct record.

F64 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK - SIX MONTH REPORT

Committee received the Performance Management and Improvement Framework (PMIF) for the first six months of 2022/23, 1 April to 30 September 2022.

Following consultation the new PMIF focuses on six policy objectives from the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the most relevant to this Committee being; Give Every Child the Best Start to Life.

A number of cross-cutting areas have emerged over the last six months, including;

- Budget pressures – an increase to £55m funding gap
- Increased demand pressures particularly in terms of Children’s Social Care
- Impact of Brexit and the conflict in Ukraine in terms of costs facing local people and delivery of council services
- Widening inequality gap – 2% increase in the number of people who are considered vulnerable
- Staffing pressures across the Council presents challenges in delivering services

A presentation was given on the deep dive work undertaken around placement

sufficiency which continues to be an area of challenge. It was acknowledged that work continues on reducing demand through supporting families to prevent children from coming into care or to enable them to return to families where it is safe to do so.

The Early Help Offer aims to keep families together through such things as respite day care, parenting support groups and courses. In addition, a good Edge of Care Service is essential, to provide a robust assessment of need and make sure intervention plans are in place.

A key part of the priorities is to look at how to help children return home, what can be put in the household to make that possible. This involves reunification planning as a partnership, not just Social Care.

A Trauma Informed Care Model is due to be implemented early in the new year, this will involve work with Children's Homes to look at how the service responds to support those young people.

The Mockingbird programme is working well to create sufficiency of places and work is ongoing to look at how to broaden the model across Foster Carers to ensure all children and young people have that extended family.

Transitional Care Planning is in place for children with complex needs, work is ongoing towards a better model so that there are more flexible routes.

It was noted that there are currently 38 children and young people placed outside of Gateshead in residential provision and this number needs to be reduced. In order to bring this young people into the Gateshead, additional provision is required in the following areas; child sexual exploitation, therapeutic support, multiple and complex needs and children with disabilities. It was acknowledged that the key challenge is ensuring the right care and accommodation is available in Gateshead, however, as is the same in other local authorities, this resource does not exist.

It was reported that there has been a huge increase in the number of Independent Foster Association's (IFA) being used. The aim is to reduce the number of children in IFA's as these cost more and the money could be better invested for in-house foster carers. It was also noted that young people would be supported to stay with those foster carers once they approach adulthood, whereas IFAs are more likely to make business decisions, which would mean young people moving to independent living earlier than may necessarily be best for them.

Work is underway to improve the supported living offer with staying close options and opportunities are being looked at to see if more can be done to address timeliness of care planning.

In terms of commissioning practice this needs to look at the best use of block contracts and spot purchases; looking at who we are already in partnership with and how to get better quality and cost and the monitoring arrangements around that. In addition, better relationships with external residential home providers is necessary so that more young people stay in Gateshead. There needs to be preparedness for

increased costs due to the general cost of living increases and there needs to be an understanding of what that will mean going forward. Another priority is to increase in-house foster carers to ensure robustness. It was acknowledged that the deep dive exercise showed that getting these factors right would start to turn the curve.

It was questioned as to how it is judged when it is safe for a child to return home, would this be evidence based or a judgement call. It was noted that this would be through constant re-assessment, looking at why the child came into care initially and if those risk factors are still in place. It would also be to do with the age of the child and re-assessment of family members and looking at the family network. It was confirmed that not all children will return home as this is not always in the child's best interests, but that wherever possible this would be the aim.

It was queried the reason why 38 children are placed outside of Gateshead. It was confirmed that for a small number of those children it was because of the risk posed to them through criminal or sexual exploitation. Some are to do with education and care needs which cannot be met in Gateshead. It was also noted that for some the reason is because there are not enough places in Gateshead, either foster carers or residential beds. The point was made that this is not disproportionate to other local authorities.

It was questioned whether there are any reciprocal arrangements for children from other local authorities finding optimum placements in Gateshead. It was advised that specialist provision will take children from all over the country, however private provision in Gateshead, although registered in Gateshead do not always prioritise Gateshead children. It was noted however that the service does work with all providers in Gateshead but does not always know who the children placed there are. It was confirmed that a piece of work is underway to establish the number of private providers within Gateshead and the children and young people placed there.

It was questioned whether there is expansion of preventative work planned. It was confirmed that the service is looking at its practice and decisions to bring children into care, looking at a whole system approach to ensure only those who need to come into care are coming in. There is a clear driver to keep children and young people with their family networks.

The question was asked as to why a Foster Carer would choose an IFA. It was confirmed that Gateshead Council has never 'lost' a Foster Carer to an IFA whereas some Foster Carers do move from IFAs to the authority. It was acknowledged that IFAs have a huge amount of money to target recruitment but the quality does not always match what the authority can provide. From Gateshead's point of view the authority is very good at retaining Foster Carers and there are good conversion rates from initial contact to Foster Carer approval.

It was questioned why there is no up to date data regarding childhood obesity and school readiness for children on free school meals as the last data was from 2020. It was confirmed that this would be reported back to Committee at the annual report stage as no data had been provided by Public Health England.

RESOLVED - (i) That the six month performance report be noted and

further information be provided regarding childhood obesity and school readiness.

- (ii) That the performance report be referred to Cabinet for consideration in January 2023.

F65 SEND LOCAL OFFER AND TRIBUNAL UPDATE AND INCLUSION IN MAINSTREAM

The Committee received reports and a presentation on the local offer, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities tribunals and the inclusion in mainstream schools.

It was reported that 16.5% of children in Gateshead have some degree of SEND, 52% of Gateshead pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are taught within special schools, this compares to regional and national figure of 35%. There has been a 70.9% increase in the number of Gateshead EHCPs over the last eight years with a 117% increase in plans being issued for the first time. It was reported that in January 2022, 15.9% of children in Gateshead had special needs and a quarter of those children had EHCPs. It was noted that Gateshead is the highest in the region for the number of school age pupils with an EHCP, this is higher than the national average.

In terms of what is going well, over the last year SENDCo Networks and Cluster Meetings have been developed. Larger cluster meetings are now held for all SENDCos and half termly SENDCo Network Meetings. Training is provided and information shared by SEND teams to their schools to create a more inclusive environment. SENDCos also have access to the digital SENDCO handbook which provides clear information on services and guidance on completing paperwork. There is a dedicated SENDCO inbox which is triaged to ensure queries are directed to the correct place.

There are eight Additionally Resourced Mainstream Schools (ARMS) units in Gateshead with the main remit to look at integration into mainstream whilst providing specialist support. It was noted that there have been some positive success stories from the ARMS units with one EHCP being removed completely and the child returning to mainstream provision. There has been the creation of an Inclusion Lead post which will oversee all teams involved with SEND, which will help to organise and streamline the systems.

In terms of the Local Offer, there has been a lot of work undertaken to make it more accessible and easier to travel through. In addition, the SENDCO handbook is not restricted so all parents and carers can access this.

In relation to SEND Tribunals it was noted that the service is working well with parents to resolve matters prior to actual appeal hearing. It was reported that of the 145 lodged, only 14 had gone to a final hearing.

The challenges remain that there are inconsistencies in approaches to inclusion in schools, with some schools feeling they do not have the knowledge, skills or

capacity to be as inclusive as they need to be. It was also noted that the places at ARMS are limited and additional provision is required which would alleviate the demand for places in special schools. A further challenge is the increase in demands for statutory assessment, this places an enormous strain on the team and the Education Psychologist team is overwhelmed by referrals.

Further challenge around the Local Offer is maintaining the accuracy of information on the site with constant work to ensure it is kept up to date. Following discussion with young people there is also the development to co-produce a Youth Hub for the Local Offer, this will deliver joint work to provide support to young people, for example in terms of employment, training and community activities.

It was reported that Gateshead's Tribunal appeal rate was 1.8% for 2020 which is slightly higher than the regional and national rate. Nationally, 95% of appeal decisions are in favour of parents therefore it is important to weigh up if it is worth going to tribunal. The main area of appeal is due to not undertaking assessment, because there is a low threshold for assessment a graduated response is required.

In terms of next steps, a working group of Headteachers and SEND teams are looking at a common assessment system for identifying need and support. This is based on an existing system and is being adapted to suit the needs in Gateshead. This will provide more consistency and thus allow more mainstream settings to acquire the skills they need to be fully inclusive for SEND children. Subsequently this will provide better information for parents in relation to needs assessments and therefore reduce the number of Tribunal appeals lodged.

Future work will also be to investigate settings that have the space and experience to provide additional ARMS, either through expansion or creating new provisions. This is in addition to development of a clear ARMS strategy to identify need and where provisions need to be based.

Next steps also include completion of the Youth Hub and ongoing refresh of the information provided in response to comments received from stakeholders. A support and advise service (SENDIASS) has also been jointly commissioned with the ICB and is based at Barnardos in Gateshead.

Committee suggested that all primary schools should have ARMS units and it was questioned as to how much is the increase in EHCP requests due to a lack of ARMS in local schools. It was noted that a lot has been done to give parents confidence in what mainstream schools can offer, however there is always unknowns for parents with a new diagnosis. It was also acknowledged that the new way of assessment is helpful because it identifies what is needed to be resourced and where the gaps in provision are.

There were concerns that some schools could no longer afford to run ARMS and the model should be looked at again. It was confirmed that work is underway looking at the ARMS model and in particular a Service Level Agreement which clearly outlines the financial responsibility. This is already in place in some ARMS and officers are working through all the provisions. There were also concern that the Education Psychologist (EP) team is overwhelmed yet there are schools with no allocated EP

time. It was confirmed that the EP works on SLAs with schools if they have bought into EP time. It was acknowledged that this is a national issue. It was queried why private EP guidance parents cannot be access for those children on the waiting list for an EHCP assessment. It was noted that there is no issue with schools securing private EP guidance but if an EHCP is then requested only the EP directly commissioned from the local authority can be used, this is contained in legislation. It was also confirmed that the work EP's do in terms of EHCP assessments are done very timely and within timescales and are performing within the top 5% of local authorities.

It was suggested that setting up separate ARMS units can create a segregation. It was noted that there are different ARMS models and this includes a whole school approach, the model would depend on the children and the school.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the information presented.

F66 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN - MASA AND BUSINESS PLAN

Committee received the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) document for 2022-24. The document sets out how the services will work together with other agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in Gateshead.

The document was implemented in 2019 following new legislation on transitioning from the Local Safeguarding Children's Board. The reviewed and updated document now includes reference to the changes from the CCG to the ICB and includes the strategic functions in place to safeguard children.

The new Gateshead Safeguarding Children Partnership's Business Plan sets out the strategic business direction, identifying specific priorities;

- GSCP leading the safeguarding agenda
- Learning lessons
- Embedding good practice and continually influenced by the views of children and young people

The document will be published online by the end of the week.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the contents of the MASA, including the statutory responsibilities and strategic functions.

F67 WORK PROGRAMME

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

It was suggested that the Committee should consider including in its work programme the lack of critical paediatric beds in the region and the step-down process / beds.

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.