

Children, Education and Skills Sub Committee

Thursday, 14 January 2021

Present: Councillor M Thirlaway (Chair)
Councillors T Brady, S Brockbank, J Cassidy, S Fallon,
N Huscroft, K Lee, A Newman, P Oliver, M Ord, E Parker-
Leonard.
S Phillips, Rev M Vine and M Wilson

Apologies: Councillors M Madden

CES29 Appointment of substitutes

There were no substitute members appointed.

CES30 To receive any declarations of interest

Councillor Erin Parker Leonard declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest because she is employed by Newcastle City Council as a Foster Carer.

Councillor Sean Brockbank declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest because he is employed as a Cafcass Guardian.

CES31 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 23 January 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

CES32 Corporate Parenting Activity During the Covid 19 Pandemic

The sub-committee received a report on how the Authority had exercised its corporate parenting responsibilities during the Covid 19 pandemic. The statutory activity of children's services had continued throughout the pandemic. Social workers and social care staff had continued to come to work and to work remotely to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in North Tyneside.

There were currently 299 children and young people in care. The majority (224) lived in fostering households. All aspects of the fostering service had continued. Officers and members both paid tribute to the foster care community who had responded to the pandemic with stoic resilience. In some instances carers had placed themselves and their families at risk to respond to the needs of children in care. The Authority had 157 approved foster carers and work to recruit others had continued.

The Authority continued to provide support to 162 care leavers. Personal Advisors had been working from home maintaining contact with young people using telephones, face time and social media. The resilience shown by the care leaving population had been humbling. They had come together to support each other practically and emotionally and have developed networks to problem solve.

The Authority's 5 children's homes had continued to operate during the pandemic with staff and carers working throughout. There had been challenges with young people struggling to cope with the implications of lock down and some not being able to adhere to the social distancing rules. Where young people had needed to self-isolate due to be symptomatic, they had been cared for within the homes. Where young people had tested positive for Covid 19, staff had volunteered to work in these homes with young people in a 'care bubble'.

Staff and carers had received welfare and psychologist support and PPE had been made available and had been used. All staff at work with identified underlying health complaints had been supported with individual risk assessments and when required to do so those who are extremely clinically vulnerable are at home with work provided. Arrangements were in place for staff from other homes to provide cover if required and several staff from other areas of the council have been inducted to support this work.

It had been apparent during the pandemic that some of the areas of focus from the Corporate Parenting Forum had shifted. For example, concern for the number of children missing from care had declined dramatically. Other areas such as the need to promote the health needs of our children, and to ensure that children are placed as close to or within North Tyneside as possible remained areas of priority.

The sub-committee examined in more detail the reasons why children and young people in care in some instances had to be placed outside of the borough, they discussed the benefits of children being placed closer to home and how the number of out of borough placements might be minimised.

Members considered the impact of lockdowns on the mental health of children in care which was unlikely to be fully understood for sometime yet. In the short term the closure of schools and the delivery of on-line learning had presented some challenges in terms of encouraging vulnerable young people to continue to engage with their education.

Officers described the difficult balance between allowing family time for children in care but doing so safely and minimising the risks associated with social contact across different households. Discussions were ongoing about prioritising care workers for testing and vaccinations.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and on behalf of the sub-committee he expressed gratitude and appreciation for the extraordinary efforts of social workers and carers in maintaining services throughout this challenging period.

CES33 Report of the Children's Readiness for School Sub-Group

In September 2019, the sub-committee had established a sub group to review the early intervention support available for parents in North Tyneside to enable children to be ready for school and identify if any improvements could be made to the support available to ensure the outcomes were improved for their children and families.

The sub group had completed its work and the sub-committee were presented with a report setting out its findings and a series of recommendations to Cabinet.

Resolved that the report of the Children's Readiness for School Sub-Group be approved for submission to the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee for consideration at its meeting on 2 February 2021.

CES34 Child Sexual Exploitation Update

The sub-committee was presented with a report setting out details of work undertaken during 2020 to develop the Council's response to the exploitation of children, including those Missing, Slavery, Exploitation (both criminal and sexual) and Trafficked (MSET).

There had been a significant amount of work undertaken to further strengthen how the Authority safeguarded and reported on those children who were at risk of or were being exploited within North Tyneside. Throughout 2020 a working group had met to review and develop policies, process, responses and data sets in relation to MSET, building on the well established multi-agency MSET arrangements operating across the Northumbria Police area. This work had focussed on areas such as updating processes and documents, risk assessment tools, referral pathways and case management systems and raising awareness of exploitation across partnerships and in the community.

The new MSET processes had been agreed with the Police and partners and would be launched in February 2021 together with awareness raising sessions for the community, partnerships and within the Council so everyone understood and could respond to MSET within North Tyneside.

Often children and young people who were at risk of, or were being, exploited were those that were reported missing by their carers on a regular basis. Between October and December 2020 there had been 84 reported instances of a young person being missing. This related to 21 young people. Of those 21 young people 17 were all returned within less than 24 hours with a high proportion only being missing for a few hours. Officers described the processes for recording and responding to incidents of young people reported as missing. Since the commencement of the global pandemic in March 2020 there had been a decrease in the number of our young people who go missing.

The sub-committee considered the use and effectiveness of harbouring notices as one of a number ways of disrupting those interactions which may lead to the exploitation of children. Members expressed concern that in some cases the placement of children in different settings may create new and unknown opportunities for exploitation. It was noted that the MSET framework provided the Authority and the Police with the mechanisms to manage risks but this had to be balanced against the need for young people to be allowed freedom to live their lives and to make their own informed choices.

The Chair thanked officers for the report.