



North Tyneside Council

Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee

Friday, 4 June 2021

Monday, 14 June 2021 Chamber - Quadrant, The Silverlink North, Cobalt Business Park, North Tyneside, NE27 0BY **commencing at 6.00 pm.**

Agenda Item	Page
<p>1. Apologies for Absence</p> <p>To receive apologies for absence from the meeting.</p>	
<p>2. Appointment of Substitute Members</p> <p>To receive a report on the appointment of Substitute Members.</p>	
<p>3. Declarations of Interest and Dispensations</p> <p>You are invited to declare any registerable and/or non registerable interests in matters appearing on the agenda, and the nature of that interest.</p> <p>You are also invited to disclose any dispensation in relation to any registerable and/or non-registerable interests that have been granted to you in respect of any matters appearing on the agenda.</p> <p>Please complete the Declarations of Interests card available at the meeting and return it to the Democratic Services Officer before leaving the meeting.</p>	
<p>4. Minutes</p> <p>To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 15 March 2021.</p>	5 - 8
<p>5. Covid Recovery Update</p> <p>To receive a Covid Recovery update presentation.</p>	

Members of the public are welcome to attend this meeting and receive information about it. However, in order to enable the meeting to be held in a Covid-secure manner, places for members of the public are limited. Please email democraticsupport@northtyneside.gov.uk or call 0191 643 5318 if you wish to attend or require further information.

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6. Engie sub-group Report	9 - 22
To receive the findings of the scrutiny undertaken by the Engie Sub-group into the Authority Partner.	
7. Cabinets Response to Children. Educations and Skills - Children's Readiness for School Scrutiny Sub-Group	23 - 40
To note Cabinet's response to the to the recommendations included in the Children, Education and Skills (CES) sub-group report into children's readiness for school.	

Circulation overleaf ...

Members of the Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee

Councillor Jim Allan (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Brian Burdis
Councillor Julie Cruddas
Councillor Janet Hunter (Chair)
Councillor Andy Newman
Councillor Erin Parker-Leonard
Councillor Willie Samuel
Councillor Matt Wilson

Councillor Mrs Linda Arkley
Councillor Debbie Cox
Councillor Muriel Green
Councillor Joe Kirwin
Councillor Pat Oliver
Councillor Matthew Thirlaway
Councillor Judith Wallace

Mrs Michelle Ord, Parent Governor Representative
Mr Stephen Fallon, Church Representative
Rev Michael Vine, Church Representative

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Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee

Monday, 15 March 2021

Present: Councillor S Graham (Chair)
Councillors B Burdis, K Clark, M Green, Janet Hunter,
A McMullen, A Newman, P Oliver, Rev M Vine, D Cox,
J Kirwin, W Samuel and S Fallon

In attendance:
Councillors B Pickard

Apologies: Councillors M Rankin and M Ord

OV77/21 Appointment of Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members.

OV78/21 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations

Councillor P Oliver declared a non-registerable personal interest in item 6 Efficiency Savings Programme. She has a family member in receipt of Independent supported living services.

OV79/21 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2021 be confirmed.

OV80/21 Accommodation Update March 2021

The Head of Commissioning and Asset Management gave a presentation that provided an update on changes within the Authority's operational accommodation that were aligned to the Authority's three-year Estates strategy 2018-2021.

The strategy's aim was to ensure the optimum numbers of buildings and land holdings were being used as effectively as possible, with the minimum carbon impact and running costs and supported the Our North Tyneside Plan and the Ambition for North Tyneside.

The committee was provided an overview of the accommodation changes and what had been achieved for specific properties.

It also heard of the further key projects in relation to;

- the review of depot accommodation at the Killingworth site, Norham Road and E1 depot.
- Quadrant East and West
- Wallsend Customer First centre
- The Cemetery Review

- Housing Delivery

It heard that by the end of 2021 it was hoped to achieve to provision of a Borough wide depot service on the Killingworth site, with continued ambition to reduce the overall running costs of the operational estate.

Work would continue to reduce revenue costs of the Quadrant campus through sub-letting/sharing opportunities, whilst bringing remaining vacant space into use at the Wallsend customer First Centre.

The committee was informed work was on-going to the new Estates Strategy for the period 2021-2025.

In questioning a member enquired to the level of surplus accommodation that the Authority held. In response it was stated that an on-going review was held for a range of categories, such as reducing any vacancy within the office accommodation and industrial estates to ensure efficiency. It was offered that further information would be provided to give an understanding to the number and type of property, in beneficial use and how vacant properties are marketed to potential tenants.

A member asked the length of the lease for the Quadrant campus and that consideration was being taken to the changes to how services were being delivered through home working the covid-19 pandemic with the expectation for its continuation. In responding it was acknowledged that the site was on lease with associated rental/service charge and work was continuing to consolidate Authority service into the buildings, whilst vacant space was being sub-let or shared to ensure efficiency.

A member asked to the reference of the marketing of cemetery lodges within the cemeteries through the borough. In response it was stated that those mentioned in the presentation were those being actively marketed, however there were still a number in the accommodation estate not mentioned and a full list would be circulated.

Agreed that (1) the Accommodation update be noted and (2) further information to be circulated in relation to the accommodation estate, the Quadrant campus and the marketing of cemetery lodges.

OV81/21 Efficiency Savings Programme - update report

The Committee received the quarter 3 position of the key 2020/2021 projects and business cases within the Efficiency Savings Programme.

The report provided the financial position and highlighted that;

- £0.017m had been delivered against the overall target via project activities in associated business cases
- A further £1.714m was expected to be delivered against the targets during the course of the financial year.
- £1.891m of the overall target remained to be delivered.

It was report that the £1.891m was being reported as having been impacted by covid-19 and

was forecasted to be allocated against the Local Authority Support Fund.

A member raised a concern with the services responding to Rising Complex Needs and in respect to the work delivery status and stated there was a divide with the service provided to those with physical and those with neurological conditions and how this could be addressed. The Head of Resources stated that the Multi- Disciplinary Team that delivers the service would be asked to respond to the member's concern.

A member raised a question in relation to Social Care Customer Experience – Assistive Technology and asked what technology would be used and available. In response it was stated that the indicative technology was in relation to lifting equipment and that a further update would be circulated to the committee.

A further question was asked to the need to hold a vacancy within the Youth Offending Service. In response it was stated that any post that was held vacant for a period of 6-12 months was deleted, it was stated that the service would be contacted to confirm the position.

A member raised the budget reduction in relation to legal and professional fees was expected not to be met and asked for the reason of this position. In response it was stated that there had been an increase in caseload in the current year which had been impacted to the occasion that courts were open and stated that the service would be contacted to confirm the position.

Agreed that the Efficiency Savings Programme (Quarter 3) update be noted

OV82/21 Our North Tyneside Plan Performance Report

The Policy & Performance Manager presented a report that provided an update on the progress of the Our north Tyneside plan 2020-2024.

The report detailed the performance for each of the plans themes and highlighted;

Our People

- Continued progress with supporting young people to be ready for school
- More young people being 'ready for work'
- People being cared for and supported, especially if they become homeless.

Our Places

- People being happy to live in North Tyneside
- Delivering a clean, green, health, attractive, safe and sustainable environment
- Regeneration as part of the 15 year 'Ambition for North Tyneside' Plan
- Good choice of quality housing appropriate to need
- Promotion pf parks, beaches, festivals and seasonal activities

Our Economy

- Grow by supporting new businesses and building on our strengths, including our

existing world class companies and small and growing enterprises.

It was stated that work was ongoing to understand the impact of the covid-19 pandemic and national restrictions on residents with protected characteristics and socio-economic inequalities in the borough, which would inform where further work was required as part of the stage 3 recovery plan.

A member raised their concern with the effect of inequality gap in life expectancy and asked what the Authority was able to do. In response the committee was informed that officers were looking at local data and investigating the disparities for different characteristics and the area of the borough they live.

A member asked how the 15 Year Master Plan was being developed and could experts from World Heritage or the British Museum be accessed to enhance its development, concern was also raised to the length of the plan and should it be shorter. It was stated that a response would be provided by the Arts and Heritage Team and circulated to the committee.

Agreed that the Our North Tyneside Performance Update be noted.

OV83/21 Engie Sub-group Report

The Chair informed the committee that it had been hoped that the report would be available for presentation at the meeting but due to unforeseen circumstances the report had not been finalised. The report would be presented to the Committee at the earliest opportunity.

OV84/21 Scrutiny Annual report

The Committee receive the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report that provided details of the work of scrutiny in the last year in scrutiny the Authority's response to the pandemic and the continued provision of essential services across the borough.

The Chair expressed her gratitude to all officers that ensured that scrutiny was able to continue and allowed members to keep fully engaged using technology and virtual meetings.

A member paid tribute to all for ensuring that meetings were able to continue following the rapid change to how they were delivered.

Agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Annual report be approved.

Meeting: Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee

Date: 14 June 2021

Title: Engie sub-group Report

Author: Paul Wheeler - Democratic Services Officer

Tel: 0191 643 5318

Service: Law & Governance

Wards affected: All

1. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of the Engie Sub-group who carried out an in-depth review of the Authority's partner on behalf of the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to approve the report and for it to be referred to Cabinet for its consideration.

3. Details

Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee has had a programme to undertake in-depth reviews into the out-sourced partnerships that deliver services on behalf of the Authority, with the aim to see if the Authority and its residents are receiving the service specified in the contracts. The Committee established the Engie Sub-group to undertake this work to gain a clearer understanding of the partnership and its operation.

Continuing the policy to encourage cross party/committee involvement in scrutiny, an invitation was made to all Non-Executive Members of the Council to be part of the sub-group. The sub-group met on 10 occasions, where it received information from senior lead officers of the Council and its Engie Partners for each of the contract workstreams.

The full report and recommendations of the review is attached at Appendix 1

Members of the Engie sub-group have been invited to the meeting to present and respond to any questions the committee may raise.

4. Background Information

The following documents have been used in the compilation of this report and may be inspected at the offices of the author.

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Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee

Engie Sub-group report



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Reason for the Study

Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee has a programme to undertake in-depth reviews into the out-sourced partnerships that deliver services on behalf of the Authority, with the aim to see if the Authority and its residents were receiving the service specified in the contracts.

The Committee established the Engie Sub-group to undertake this work to gain a clearer understanding of the partnership and its operation.

Continuing the policy to encourage cross party/committee involvement in scrutiny, an invitation was made to all Non-Executive Members of the Council to be part of the sub-group.

The following members volunteered to serve and took some part in the review:

Councillor Sandra Graham
Councillor Muriel Green
Councillor John O'Shea
Councillor Willie Samuel

The Sub-group met on 10 occasions.

Outsourcing Council Services

The Authority entered into a major outsourcing project that began in the summer of 2011 with a formal decision made by Cabinet in November 2011 to go to the market.

There were two distinct tenders offered (Business Services & Technical Services) for the management of the Authority's services and a competitive dialogue was undertaken at pace.

A decision was taken to manage the negotiations with interested parties with the responsibility for awarding the contract being left to a small in-house officer team, led by an interim Chief Executive who had previous outsourcing experience.

Procurement concluded in the summer of 2012 and contracts were awarded in November 2012.

Background to the Business Services Contract

The Authority completed a Business Services Partnership Agreement (the contract) with Balfour Beatty Workplace Limited late in 2012.

The contract was then sold by Balfour Beatty to Cofley, which has since changed its name to Engie.

At the inception of the contract the services that were to be outsourced were considered to be good and well performing, however the decision to outsource was taken in the knowledge that the Authority was facing significant budgetary pressure as a consequence of Central

Government austerity measures. It was considered that if no action was taken there was a possibility of significant redundancy and therefore service failure.

Initial Workstreams

The workstreams of the initial contract consisted of the following 6 workstreams;

- ICT
- Finance
- Human Resources
- Revenue and Benefits Services
- Customer Service
- Procurement

The Authority retained Client Strategic Roles that oversee the contract management.

It was noted that during the course of the contract the Procurement workstream along with Human Resource Advisory Services for the Council (2015) and Health & Safety, which included Occupational Health (2020) returned into the control of the Authority.

Objectives

The objectives of the contract were to ensure.

- Investment in the services areas in scope.
- Protect existing workforce jobs.
- Create growth in services and support additional jobs in the Borough.
- Guarantee financial efficiencies of at least £32.9million over the time of the Contract with ongoing culminative savings thereafter.
- Improve services.

Term of the contract

At the time of its procurement, it was determined that longer-term contracts resulted in greater cost savings and efficiencies due to the spread of risk and capital costs over the term of the contract.

Provisions of the Contract

Termination

The term of the contract commenced from the effective date 1 November 2012 and will continue for the Initial Term (10 years) 31 October 2022 and continue for a further period of 5 Years beyond the expiry date.

Subject to any other rights of termination that may arise to the Authority, the Authority would be entitled to issue a notice of not less than 18 months to terminate the Agreement. This provision allows the Authority to terminate the contract if a termination notice has been issued that has not been satisfactorily remedied or the benchmarking test demonstrates that

the partner is not providing value for money and is not willing to amend pricing to assure Best Value.

Benchmarking

The Authority requires the partner to complete a benchmark review of all charges, services and for service levels in years 4, 8 and 12 of the Agreement Term. If any benchmark review determines that any charges, services and service levels do not represent Best Value, the Authority would seek reduced charges or implement service improvement. If agreement cannot be reached the Authority is entitled to seek an alternative supplier or provider. At the year 4 review it was determined that the Procurement workstream would return to the Authority leaving the remaining five workstreams to be delivered by the Partner.

Performance

Each workstream has a series of associated performance measures, these are divided into;

1. Performance Indicators (PI's), which have no financial penalties associated with them and are used for monitoring purposes and;
2. Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), which if not achieved triggers a process that can result in payment deductions to the Partner, known as penalties.

Understanding the Payment & Performance Mechanism

The sub-group received a comprehensive explanation to the contracts payment mechanism where payments would be reduced for performance below expected levels. Payment reductions would be ratcheted up for continuing poor performance which could result on the issuing of a Warning Notice. If a contract Warning Notice is issued the Authority would undertake increased monitoring of the partner until such time the performance had satisfactorily improved.

Investment

Best Value Agreements are part of the contract and designed to secure added benefits from the Partner, they often include the creation of additional jobs in the locality and/or refurbishment of accommodation, creating growth, improving services and are generally provided outside of the provisions of core services.

Although these are not subject to service level regimes there is an obligation within the contract that the Partner provides these additional elements, the Authority monitors the measures to ensure they are achieved.

Contract Management & Governance

There has been robust management and governance mechanisms in place and are delivered in two configurations.

Change Control Procedure

The Authority (Client lead) and/or Partner (Service lead) may require or propose a change to any provision of the contract. These Notice of Change requests are mainly called upon to implement a change in service delivery.

Groups and Boards

- I. Monthly workstream meetings take place where service leads from the Authority and Partner meet to discuss the monitoring of KPI's, Risk, Staff, Engagement and New Business
- II. Monthly Operational Partnering Board (OPB) take place, where the Head of Resources and Partner Director meet to discuss financial performance and any issues accelerated from the workstream meeting.
- III. Quarterly Strategic Partnering Board (SPB), where reviews of service plans are discussed with the Authority Executive (Cabinet Members and the Elected Mayor) and Regional and National Partner Directors.

Engie Sub-group work

The sub-group scoped, made initial preparations and convened two meetings into the review in early 2020 but due to the Covid-19 pandemic it was decided that the review be postponed until a more appropriate time when staff resources could be deployed to the sub-group.

During November 2020, arrangements were made to resume the review and it was decided due to the time gap to conduct the scrutiny from the beginning so to understand any impact of the pandemic on the contract's operation.

Meetings took place for the 5 current workstreams ICT, Finance, Human Resources, Revenue & Benefits and Customer Service, where Service and Client lead officers were requested to attend the meetings and present information to a prescribed structure set by the sub-group.

The structure being:

- a. Service Provision
- b. Client Responsibilities
- c. Performance
- d. Added Value (Investment)
- e. Contract Amendments

Service Provision

At the outset the sub-group was provided with Schedule 2 Workstream Specifications to provide clear understanding the services that they were scrutinizing in each of the remaining 5 workstreams. In each of the service meetings the sub-group received further information with the additional metrics to the elements of provision being delivered. This provided the sub-group some insight to the levels of activity of each service.

Client Responsibility

The Authority has retained client roles, whose objective is to manage the relationship with Engie, providing the link between the Authority and the services being managed by Engie as well as monitoring the contract and performance.

There is also the responsibility to ensure the Authority's plans and vision for service delivery are implemented.

It was evident that throughout the review the role of the client managers was fundamental to ensuring the ambition of the Authority continued to be driven forward.

Performance

The sub-group received the performance level achieved/target for each KPI in the suite for 2020/2021 each service area.

It was evident that when monitoring KPI's for transactional activity, the targets were achieved in all services as expected. However, it was less obvious that the KPI's were achieved where the target was a Pass/Fail. There was an acceptance that this strategic KPI is subjective and difficult to monitor.

The sub-group also reviewed historical performance for years 2014 -2020 to understand the performance throughout the contract term to date

- ICT - 25 failures KPI's
- Finance – 10 Warning Notices that resulted to 5 Penalties being issued
- Human Resources – 6 Warning Notices that resulted to 1 Penalty being issued
- Revenue & Benefits – 22 Warning Notices that resulted to 19 Penalties beings issued (during the period Jan – Dec 2018).
- Customer Services – 19 Warning Notices that resulted to 23 Penalties being issued

The sub-group acknowledges that the majority of the failures occurred early in the contract, however issues still arise such as in 2018/19 where 16 penalties were issued in the Customer Services workstream. This gives an indication of the significant monitoring and use of Authority resources to negotiate and resolve issues of this nature and directly impacts the service to the public.

Added Value

It was not fully evident how the Authority is benefitting from the partly delivered Business Intelligence (BI) reporting QLIK system and there was concern with delays on implementation.

The QLIK system allows managers who are budget holders to access information through self-service, the sub-group heard that licenses were acquired for circa 300 budget holders, however the use of the QLIK system was less than half. An opinion was that budget holders had concerns with the integrity of the data and were reluctant to use the system, in addition there was concern to the level of training for its use.

The sub-group were made aware that the current version of Oracle E Business Suite (BMS) would be no longer supported from December 2021 and the Authority was leading a project to look at a replacement for this system.

The group was unsure to the delay on the Implementation of alternative to Enterprise Resource Planning system to replace BMS but it understood that planning for a project of this nature takes a period of 18-24months. The sub-group viewed that the delay could have a

detrimental effect to the ability of the Authority to perform at its optimum and questions the delay which has resulted in the need to procure a 3rd party to support the current system until a new system can be procured.

In relation to the Human Resource workstream the sub-group were informed that a review using Lean Methodology had been completed. The Lean Methodology is defined as a way to optimise the people, resources, effort, and energy of and organization toward creating value for the customer, however it was viewed that no demonstrable outcomes had been realised from the review. The sub-group questions tasks undertaken that do not provide a demonstrable value.

Contract Amendments

A common theme throughout the review were the process of charging for services not specified in the contract.

It is acknowledged that the services were outsourced to make savings, secure services and jobs and the partner has assisted to do this. There is also the realistic view that the partner operates to make a profit. There is concern that the need to do both could affect the ability to deliver the services that our customers expect.

To provide an example the sub-group heard that at the time when the Authority in-sourced its housing property and construction services, it was accepted that there was a need to ensure the necessary work could be completed and a Notice of Change was negotiated with the partner to undertake the increased workload.

A further example was given to the operation of ICT support to staff and members working out of normal hours, such as in early evening when Committee meetings take place or at weekends. The sub-group was informed that this requirement was not part of the contract, however, the sub-group considered that changes to operational activity such as these should be viewed as business as usual activity and no Notice of Change should be required.

In the need to adapt to the changing ways of working, the sub-group viewed the need to negotiate and implement through the process of a Notice of Change was too restrictive and questioned would the costs and delays in service delivery exist in the same way if the service was delivered in-house. It was further felt that the significant time this took in negotiating such changes could be better spent simply providing the service at cost to our residents.

Findings

It was considered that from the outset that the decision to out-source services and the pace to its completion, insufficient time had been provided to allow full consideration of the contract.

In the scrutiny of the partnership with Engie it is clear that performance of the transactional day to day activity is rated good. This is contrasting to the areas of the contract where the Authority seeks strategic support and guidance.

There is a lack of evidence of strategic planning in Financial advisory support to the Authority, where it is believed should be fully embedded as part of the finance service.

It is the belief by the sub-group that this is driven by Authority officers rather than Engie.

There is little evidence of succession planning in relation to high level strategic staff and evidence how Engie could help deliver the Investment Plan has been an ongoing challenge. The client team appeared to be paramount in the strategic role of adding value and budget setting had been very delayed and lacking. It is the sub-groups view that the skills gap produced more financial challenges.

The Authority and its partners need to be strategically proactive however the view of the sub-group is that the partner works reactively and responds only when prompted by client managers to do so.

This was evident during the presentation in the Finance service and monthly budget monitoring. There is concern that the strategic advisory support to the Authority is insufficient and it was not demonstrable how the partner was providing this contract requirement fully. It was also clear there is not a consistent strategic approach in supporting all budget holders, which could affect the efficacy of budget monitoring and forecasting.

There is further concern to the issues where penalties have been issued and the effect of not having sufficient robust financial reporting. When occurrences such as these transpire, there is an increased risk in the decision making of the Authority.

When questioned to the challenges for the future, the response was to continue with Business Partnering. Business partnering is defined as the development of successful, long term, strategic relationships between customers and suppliers, based on achieving best practice and sustainable competitive advantage. It is understood that Business Partnering only commenced in 2019 and it is unclear why this did not commence at the outset of the contract.

The sub-group has concern that the number of qualified and experienced staff supporting services is not at the appropriate level. The Authority must be confident that it is being supported fully by qualified and experienced resource to fulfil all the contract requirements. Also there is a need to provide real opportunities within the partnership for succession planning as it is unclear that this is happening to ensure smooth running of the contract when people leave or move on.

The Authority should demand real deliverable outcomes to any reviews, implementation of new systems or devices. The sub-group heard of reviews with no real beneficial outcome, partially implemented systems that were not fully useable and devices that were regarded inadequate for use.

There were instances throughout the scrutiny where it was demonstrable that services, its officers and the Local Authority were committed and working together to the same values and ethos promoted by North Tyneside Council, this was evident in the Revenue & Benefit, Customer Services and in part Human Resources workstreams.

The sub-group acknowledge that Engie has cooperated and shown a more flexible approach in supporting the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Remote working in particular was a challenge that was overcome to ensure employees could continue service delivery from their homes. It also acknowledges the distribution of payment transactions in business grants through Revenues and Benefits Service.

There were many instances before and during the current Covid-19 crisis that the Authority and its partners have shown flexibility in its operation. However, the sub-group also heard instances of where rigidity came to the fore and required extended negotiation and Notices of Change before the much-needed progress was made. Occasions of this nature should be reduced as much as possible to ensure we display the Authority values of We listen, We Care, We are Ambitious and We are good value for money.

Following issues with the resourcing of Customer Services in 2017/18, through the action of reducing staffing numbers which led to 16 penalties being issued the sub-group were assured that lessons had been learnt and once the correct staffing level were returned to normal customer satisfaction was re-established. The sub-group viewed this action as a cost saving enterprise by the partner, which ultimately affected service delivery and customer confidence.

The sub-group considered that throughout the length of the contract ICT delivery has been an issue from the reliability of the network, systems implemented, telephony, devices and training have all caused concerns. The security of delivering Teams meetings has also been an issue for Members and staff.

It acknowledged the Authority has made high value investment to the improvement of its systems, however its view is that ICT have over promised and under delivered and it was pleased to see the Authority had appointed a new client lead to drive service improvement. The sub-group felt that some parts of each of these workstreams dovetailed into each other – Finance, ICT, HR and Customer Service and an overall look at these workstreams together may be useful to aid efficiencies.

It was apparent that there was greater flexibility and issue resolution was quicker where client officers and partnership staff were displaying public service motivation and their focus on the residents/customers need. This is an endeavour that all services should work toward.

It is hoped that the findings and comments made throughout this report aids the thinking of Cabinet and appropriate officers towards areas of the partnership that the sub-group believes are not being fulfilled as expected.

Benchmarking and measuring performance of transactional activity is working well, however where performance is deficient is in the areas where a more strategic level of support is expected. The review could not determine if this was due to not having the right level of professional support in place or a business decision.

There is a need for a continued drive for efficiencies and having to devote Authority officer time prompting known responsibilities and negotiating changes, uses significant resources which could be better used for the benefits of residents.

It is recognised that the Authority has recent experience of gaining greater benefit and outcomes by managing its partnerships well. It is acknowledged that our partners are private organisations that work to make a profit. It is the view of the sub-group that managed appropriately the profit could be used to improve services to residents.

The sub-group would therefore recommend that Cabinet:

- 1. In its benchmarking activity pay particular attention to the strategic aspects of service delivery of the partnership.**
- 2. Following benchmarking testing, it believes if the Partner is not providing value for money it should consider amending the contract to assure best value and/or investigate all options to in-source parts/all services.**
- 3. The group feels that as and when legally possible and at the best and earliest opportunity that these services should be returned and insourced to the local authority.**

Acknowledgements

Janice Gillespie – Head of Resources
Suzanne Duncan - Senior Manager (HR)
Claire Emmerson - Senior Manager Financial Planning and Strategy
Haley Hudson - Customer Service and Digital Strategy Manager
Tracy Hunter - Client Manager Revenues Benefits and Customer Services
Jacqueline Laughton - Head of Corporate Strategy
Daniel Simms - Chief Information Officer
Andrew Scott - Senior Client Manager Revenues Benefits and Customer Services
Mick Ripley - Partnership Director
Angela Close - Service Development and Support Manager
Sue Graham - Principal Accountant
Jackie Mulvey - Revenues & Benefits Lead
Mick Nicholson - Senior Operations Manager
Christine Ponting - Senior Manager - Schools Human Resources
Mike Truran - Business Change Director

Background Papers

Presentations relating to each workstream:

- ICT
- Finance
- Human Resources
- Revenue and Benefits Services
- Customer Service

Recommendations

- R1: In its benchmarking activity pay particular attention to the strategic aspects of service delivery of the partnership.**
- R2: Following benchmarking testing, it believes if the Partner is not providing value for money it should consider amending the contract to assure best value and/or investigate all options to in-source parts/all services.**
- R3: The group feels that as and when legally possible and at the best and earliest opportunity that these services should be returned and insourced to the local authority.**

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North Tyneside Council Report to Cabinet Date: 6 April 2021

Title: Cabinet Response to Children, Education and Skills sub-group report on Children's Readiness for School

Portfolio(s): Children, Young People and Learning	Cabinet Member: Councillor Peter Earley
Report from Service Area:	Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding
Responsible Officer:	Jacqui Old, Head of Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding
Wards affected:	All

PART 1

1.1 Executive Summary:

- 1.1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet approval to the proposed response to the recommendations included in the Children, Education and Skills (CES) sub-group report into children's readiness for school.
- 1.1.2 In accordance with Section 21B of the Local Government Act 2000, Cabinet is required to provide a response to the recommendations contained in the report of the CES Committee sub-group of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee within two months of the receipt of the recommendations by Cabinet. In providing its response Cabinet is required to indicate what action, if any, it proposes to take in relation to each of the recommendations made by the CES Committee sub-group.
- 1.1.3 The CES Committee's sub-group made six recommendations, of which all are proposed to be accepted by Cabinet.
- 1.1.4 The six recommendations from the sub-group are that:
 - 1. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services considers improving communication between the Authority, schools, and private nurseries in relation to early help and being ready for school.
 - 2. Cabinet requests the Director of Children's and Adult Services to consider simplifying the early help assessment process, so it is less time consuming and bureaucratic for schools and private nurseries or provides adequate help to schools and private nurseries in completing the early help assessment process.

3. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help to schools and private nurseries for toilet training, including for children without special needs.
4. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help and encouragement for parents and carers in accessing early help information and services, including help for toilet training, language development, and accessing online educational material for children.
5. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services consults with parents, schools, and private nurseries about early help and being ready for school, including a focus on the size and distribution of any problems in North Tyneside. The findings of this consultation are to be shared with Cabinet and all Elected Members
6. Cabinet requests that the Elected Mayor writes to the Secretary of State for Education asking for more funding and resources for local government for early help to ensure all children are ready for school.

1.2 Recommendation(s):

- 1.2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet agree all of the recommendations. The proposed responses are set out in Appendix 1.

1.3 Forward Plan:

- 1.3.1 This report first appeared on the Forward Plan that was published on 2 February 2021

1.4 Council Plan and Policy Framework:

- 1.4.1 The 2020-2024 Our North Tyneside Plan states that 'Our people will':
 - Be ready for school – giving our children and their families the best start in life.

1.5 Information:

- 1.5.1 In September 2019, the Children, Education and Skills Committee agreed to establish a sub-group to review the 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 enable outcomes to be improved for children and families.
- 1.5.2 The sub-group felt that it was important to consult directly with schools, so a questionnaire was circulated to all first and primary schools in North Tyneside. The group met with officers in the early help service, and the health visiting and school nursing service to gather information on the role that the Authority has in relation to children's readiness for school. The sub-group also met with staff in private nurseries in North Tyneside. Further consultation was deferred due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- 1.5.3 Cabinet has a statutory duty to respond to the recommendations of the report within two months of receipt of the recommendation by Cabinet indicating what action, if any, it proposes to take.

1.6 Decision options:

- 1.6.1 The following decision options are available for consideration by Cabinet:

Option 1

Cabinet accepts the recommendations set out in paragraph 1.2.

Option 2

Cabinet does not accept the recommendations set out in paragraph 1.2 and provides an alternative response to the report at the meeting.

1.7 Reasons for recommended option:

- 1.7.1 Option 1 is recommended in order to improve and further develop the Early Help offer to support Children's Readiness for school by the Authority.

1.8 Appendices:

Appendix 1: Cabinet response to Children, Education and Skills Committee Sub-Group recommendations and action plan

Appendix 2: Report on *Children's Readiness for school* (November 2020)

1.9 Contact officers:

Jacqui Old, Head of Health, Education, Care and Safeguarding Tel. 0191 643 7317
Julie Firth, Assistant Director, Safeguarding and Children's Services Tel. 0191 643 5943
Nik Flavell, Senior Manager for Quality Assurance Tel. 0191 643 7219
David G Dunford, Acting Senior Business Partner Tel 0191 643 7027

1.10 Background Information

No additional background papers/information have been used in the compilation of this report.

PART 2 – COMPLIANCE WITH PRINCIPLES OF DECISION MAKING

2.1 Finance and other resources

It is anticipated that recommendations within the completed action plan can be implemented within existing financial resources.

2.2 Legal

In accordance with Section 21B of the Local Government Act 2000, Cabinet is required to provide a response to the recommendations of the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Report within two months of receipt of the recommendations indicating what action, if any, Cabinet proposes to take in relation to the recommendations.

2.3 Consultation/community engagement

The sub-group consulted with Officers of the Authority and also met with representatives of partner agencies as well as staff from both the 0-19 Service and Early Help teams.

2.4 Human rights

Part 2 Article 2 of the First Protocol of the Human Rights Act 1998 provides that every person has a right to education.

2.5 Equalities and diversity

As the 'ready for school' and early help offer provided by the Authority and its partners is universal, services are available to all children and families, including those with various protected characteristics (as defined by the Equality Act 2010). Whilst the offer is universal, tailored approaches and services are provided to a range of different groups, including families from deprived communities, children with SEND, and BAME communities. The recommendations made by the sub-group will support the further development of the offer, including ensuring support is sufficiently tailored, with due regard for children and families with protected characteristics.

2.6 Risk management

There are no specific risk management implications arising from this report.

2.7 Crime and disorder

There are no specific crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

2.8 Environment and sustainability

There are no specific environment and sustainability implications arising from this report.

PART 3 - SIGN OFF

- Chief Executive ☐
- Head(s) of Service ☐
- Mayor/Cabinet Member(s) ☐
- Chief Finance Officer ☐
- Monitoring Officer ☐
- Head of Corporate Strategy and Customer Service ☐

Cabinet Response to Children's Readiness for School Scrutiny Recommendations Completed Action Plan

Cabinet response to Children, Education and Skills Committee report on *Children's Readiness for School*

In accordance with Section 122 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, Cabinet are required to provide a response to the recommendations of the Committee within 2 months. In providing this response Cabinet are asked to state whether or not it accepts each recommendation and the reasons for this decision. Cabinet must also indicate what action, if any, it proposes to take.

Recommendation	Officer Commentary	Cabinet Decision (Accept or reject)	Action to be taken (if any) and timescale for completion
1. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services considers improving communication between the Council, schools, and private nurseries in relation to early help and being ready for school.	<p>A number of recent developments across the Authority's services will assist with responding to this recommendation.</p> <p>A recently recruited Ready for School Improvement Officer post works across a range of partners to support children to be 'school ready', with communication and engagement across key partners, including the Authority, schools and private nurseries a key part of the role.</p> <p>In addition, the School Improvement Service has recently appointed to the Early Years SENCO post, with part of this role being to support early years settings with regard to children with SEND.</p> <p>We have also increased the capacity of</p>	Accept	<p>Develop and deliver a comprehensive communication plan to launch the new Prevention & Early help Strategy. This will increase awareness of the services and support offer across the partnership.</p> <p>This will be carried out in May and June 2021.</p>

	<p>the Early Years Manager in the early help service to further develop this work.</p> <p>We have recently reviewed and updated our Prevention & Early help Strategy (2021 -2024). We plan to launch the strategy between May and June and as part of the launch we will develop a comprehensive communications plan.</p>		
2. Cabinet requests the Director of Children's and Adult Services to consider simplifying the early help assessment process, so it is less time consuming and bureaucratic for schools and private nurseries or provides adequate help to schools and private nurseries in completing the early help assessment process.	<p>The Early Help Assessment (EHA) is a short, 3-page document, which was developed with partners, and has been reviewed with partners to ensure it meets everyone's needs.</p> <p>A significant proportion of the role of Early Help Coordinators is to assist partners with the Early Help Assessment process.</p> <p>In addition to early help, there are specific processes and requirements in order to access early years-specific funding and resources. This is unrelated to the EHA process.</p>	Accept	<p>It is proposed that further communication is undertaken with early years providers and settings to ensure the respective Early Help Assessment and early years funding and resources processes and requirements are understood.</p> <p>This will be carried out in April 2021.</p>
3. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and	The key focus is on ensuring parents that would benefit from support in these areas	Accept	All partners, including schools and private nurseries, will receive information and

Adult Services provides more help to schools and private nurseries for toilet training, including for children without special needs.	are aware of, and have access to, this support. New approaches have been developed over the past year to enhance the support model, including online/virtual information and support, which is available to all parents. In addition, bespoke support is available for our most vulnerable parents, where needed.		materials regarding available support so that parents are aware of what is available. This will be carried out in April 2021.
4. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help and encouragement for parents and carers in accessing early help information and services, including help for toilet training, language development, and accessing online educational material for children.	The online information /sessions have been developed by the Early Years Manager in Early Help, in partnership with 0-19 Public Health team. They are currently being piloted with the parents registered with the Ready for School Centre in online sessions. Topics specifically cover "Helping your child talk" and "Toilet Training" amongst other child development/parenting issues. Parents have reported them to be easy to understand and the strategies useful. The 0-19 team have also developed a direct text service, so parents can text any questions or ask advice; parents are responded to directly by the Health Visitors.	Accept	Pilot sessions to be mainstreamed on both the RFS and Childrens Centre Facebook pages, with the option to join virtual group sessions or face to face options, dependant on Covid restrictions. This will be fully in place by August 2021 Parenting sessions to be offered to all new parents attending the Ready for School Centre on a rolling basis. Action from April 2021.
5. Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and	We have recently entered into a partnership with York St John University	Accept	External evaluation of the Ready for School offer to be commenced, including

<p>Adult Services consults with parents, schools, and private nurseries about early help and being ready for school, including a focus on the size and distribution of any problems in North Tyneside. The findings of this consultation are to be shared with Cabinet and all Elected Members</p>	<p>to evaluate the Ready for School Offer. As part of this evaluation a needs assessment will be undertaken, and consultation completed with families and key stakeholders.</p>		<p>an assessment of need across the Authority and consultation with families and key stakeholders, in order to inform future service development.</p> <p>This will be completed by March 2022.</p>
<p>6. Cabinet requests that the Elected Mayor writes to the Secretary of State for Education asking for more funding and resources for local government for early help to ensure all children are ready for school.</p>		Accept	

Overview and Scrutiny Report

Children's Readiness for School

November 2020



2. Reason for the study

- 2.1 At its meeting in September 2019, the Children, Education and Skills Sub-committee agreed 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.

- 2.2 The topic linked to the Be Ready for School Priority of the North Tyneside Plan – “Giving our children and their families the best start in life”.

3. Remit and method

- 3.1 At a Scoping meeting the Sub-group agreed to consult with First and Primary Schools and ask the following questions:

- What is your understanding of “being ready for school”?
- What is involved in developing children’s school readiness including for example self care, literacy, language and socialisation?
- What are the reasons for children not being ready for school?
- What is your approach to children being ready for school?
- How do you engage with parents/carers?
- Have you seen an improvement in children being ready for school?
- Who is involved in improving children’s school readiness and do you work together to achieve this aim?
- Would you be interested in providing information/speaking to the Sub Group?

- 3.2 The following Members volunteered to serve on the group:

- Councillor Matthew Thirlaway (Chair)
- Councillor Pat Oliver (Vice-Chair)
- Rev Michael Vine

- 3.3 The Sub-group felt that it was important to consult directly with schools and a questionnaire was circulated to all First and Primary Schools in North Tyneside. The Group met with officers in the Early Help Services Team and the Health Visiting and School Nurse Service to gather information on the role that the Council has in relation to Children’s Readiness for School. The Sub-group also met with staff in Private Nurseries in North Tyneside. Further consultation was deferred due to Covid restrictions.

4. Findings and evidence

4.1 Consultation with Schools

- 4.1.1 A number of Primary Schools reported that they were seeing an increasing number of children who were not ready for school with children not being toilet trained, the over use of dummies and nappies and children being transported in buggies, poor speech acquisition and inability to interact with others, child protection issues, poor social skills, poor language and communication skills,

children allowed unlimited access to electronic devices and children with low literacy skills and no knowledge of stories and rhymes.

- 4.1.2 A number of reasons cited were parents with a lack of skills, knowledge and vocabulary/academic ability, parents with social issues not parenting appropriately, working parents being too busy, helicopter parenting with parents doing everything for their child, lowering their child's self help skills and sense of independence
- 4.1.3 A school in Benton noted that toilet issues took staff away from teaching and they reported that they were completing more referrals for speech and language therapy which added to staff workload.
- 4.1.4 Schools had different approaches to improving children's readiness for school. One school in Howdon offered pre start toileting sessions and shared expectations and support in the school's induction pack.
- 4.1.5 Another school in Longbenton had opened up two year old provision to allow children an even earlier chance to receive care and instruction from qualified staff. They completed Early Help Assessments with families entering two year old provision as a means of identifying and offering support as quickly as possible. They employed a school nurse one day per week to support parents and offered workshops, drop ins and appointments across the whole school. However the Workshops had not been well attended despite being timetabled to coincide with school drop off and pick up times.

The children who had attended the two year old provision were much more settled on entry to nursery and children attending the nursery transition into reception class had increased communication and social skills compared to those who had not.

- 4.1.6 A school in Shiremoor with a two year old and a rising three nursery prior to nursery immersed children in vocabulary, stories, songs, experiences and development in all areas and ensured that they learned boundaries. They kept parents well-informed and engaged with parents/carers by organising lessons with the children, singing events, wellie walks, performances, visits out of school to a farm and the beach. They also tweeted books of the week and daily learning. They held book bonanza or pyjama story days and sessions to learn about how to share stories and they gave out packs with ideas for learning

The School noted that 88% of the children lived in the four most deprived areas and engagement with parents was an on-going challenge.

- 4.1.7 Another School in North Shields encouraged children to develop key attributes and attitudes and develop a sense of self as 'a positive learner' with an 'I can do' approach and involved parents to increase their own confidence. They stated that they did not have a problem with children being ready for school who had been through the 2 and 3 year old Nursery. However, there was a difference with those children who had attended other childcare providers.

4.2 Meeting with **Early Help Services**

- 4.2.1 At the service based at Riverside, the staff worked with parents to assist them to prepare children for school as schools in the Riverside area had raised that this was a problem. Family Partners in the Early Help Service undertook one to one work, early help assessments and whole family partnership work.
- 4.2.2 Health Visitors and School nurses would go out to families if health was an issue and issues would be picked up by Health Visitors at clinics to support parents.
- 4.2.3 Schools who had raised readiness for school as an issue could log with the early help pathway and start early help assessments.
- 4.2.4 Early Help had an approach to engage with families with ready for school workshops and they undertook door knocking to encourage parents to take up the 2 year old offer. The Service also organised stay and play drop ins. The approach was to encourage parents to participate and not be judgemental. At these sessions, the team discussed the importance of morning and bed time routines and story time and song time and reinforcing positive messages.
Some parents used ipads instead of traditional toys and intensive work was undertaken to involve families in learning and fun days and the importance of talking to children.
A Parenting course had been held at a School in North Shields which had been well attended and the intention was to run another course.

The Early Help Service worked with the Children, Adolescent and Mental Health Services Team and families were referred to Early Help to see what level of support they needed and to upskill and the Team supported the parents in the family home.

- 4.2.5 Members asked how many early years children there were in the Borough who were not ready for school and where there were development issues and neglect was raised as an issue
The Team said that the neglect referrals they received were not solely down to children not being ready for school, as the neglect category covered a much broader remit/range of issues.
- 4.2.6 In terms of hotspot areas where there were higher numbers of children who were not ready for school these were mainly in areas of multiple deprivation.
- 4.2.7 The tables below show the percentage number of parents who accessed the 2 year old offer and 3 and 4 year old offer in 2019:

Take up of 2 Year Old entitlement – Early Years Census

	2019
North Tyneside	84%
North East	82%

National	68%
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There was a very high take up, and those who did not take up the offer at 2 years, did by 3 years

Take up of 3 and 4 Year old entitlement – Early Years Census

	2019
North Tyneside	101%
North East	99%
National	94%

The take up was 101% as children from other Local Authorities accessed the provision also

The Sub-Group recognised the work that was being done in North Tyneside to achieve the high take up of the Early Years offer.

4.3 Health Visiting and School Nurses Service

4.3.1 The Service provided support to parents. Readiness for school started very early and the Service supported mums during the ante natal period and all women were offered an ante natal contact and a very early health needs assessment. Dads were encouraged to be present so the Team could build up a relationship with the family. The mums who did not engage were either still at work or had to cancel their appointment which was re arranged or mums were contacted by telephone to go through ante natal information and information was sent out in the post.

4.3.2 All families had universal contact including ante natal contact, new baby visit, assessment at 6-8 weeks, one year old assessment and 24-28 month assessment. There was 98% compliance within North Tyneside for the new birth visit by Health Visitors to families and non compliance was usually due to baby being in special care.

Under the Healthy Child Programme children had a development review at two years however the Service offered advice up until the age of five years. The National Child Measurement Programme was for children in reception class.

4.3.3 The Service had seen a rise in children who had not been toilet trained as using nappies was convenient and it was not always a priority for parents. The Service had offered a drop in session to help with toilet training at a Primary school in North Shields in April 2019 in order for children to be trained before the beginning of the school term in September, however the take up for the session had been low. Engagement with parents was sometimes difficult, and the Service had recruited community nursery nurses and it was hoped they could assist in readiness for school support.

4.3.4 There were higher levels of children not meeting assessment thresholds in the Riverside and Howdon areas and the vulnerable parent pathway pilot would

target resources to parents in these areas and then be introduced to other areas where there were pockets of deprivation.
Social media would be used more regularly to promote health messages to parents and young people.

- 4.3.5 Baby clinics were held in libraries and leisure centres and Bounce and Rhythm and Stay and Play sessions were promoted together with peer support sessions for breast feeding.
Parents in the coastal area had set up a social media group to offer support and continued to meet to support each other.
- 4.3.6 In families where there was a drug or alcohol problem and a chaotic lifestyle there was an impact on the development of a child and any safeguarding concerns would be escalated and parental support offered.
- 4.3.7 The School nurse team was small and undertook a whole system approach. A pilot was being undertaken by school nurses to give out a toothbrush and toothpaste kit to parents to roll out the cleaning teeth public health message. A chat health online forum had been introduced for young people to email questions to a school nurse and young people were signposted or referred for support.
- A safety equipment pilot had been introduced in the North Shields locality to reduce childhood accidents and the impact would be shared with other wards in the Borough.
- 4.3.8 The move from the NHS to the Council's Public Health Team had enabled the Team to improve links with the Special Educational Needs Team and to provide advice to parents whose children had special educational needs and a market place event at the Parks had enabled the Team to build links and partnerships with the community and voluntary sector.
- 4.3.9 During discussions with the Health Visiting Service the Sub-Group asked if schools flagged the issue of children not being toilet trained with the Service and it was noted that few cases had been reported to the Service.
The Sub-Group noted that in schools, there was an impact on the child and other children in the class.
The Sub-Group recognised the need to strengthen communication between Schools and the Health Visiting Service and acknowledged that it was the responsibility of many services for children's readiness for school.

4.4 Private Nurseries

- 4.4.1 The Sub-Group met with representatives from private nursery providers in Tynemouth, Wallsend and North Shields
- 4.4.2 The representative from the Nursery in Tynemouth discussed how the Nursery had a Pre School Room and how they supported the childrens' social and emotional development and prepared children for transition to school and learning.
- 4.4.3 The representative from Wallsend stated that some children were not emotionally or socially ready for school and an example was highlighted

where some children at the Wallsend Nursery could not sit still at the table at meal times. The Nursery had children with toileting and behaviour problems and had applied for Leaps funding.

- 4.4.4 The representative from North Shields advised that the Nursery worked with children from deprived areas whose parents were out of work and also with children whose parents had busy working lifestyles who did not invest time with their children.

In Wallsend the deprivation issues were related to parenting and some unemployed parents did not appreciate the value of early education and it was about cultural change.

- 4.4.5 Links with reception classes

The representative from Tynemouth Nursery confirmed that the links with the reception classes and Nursery schools were very positive in North Tyneside.

- 4.4.6 Readiness for school Initiatives

It was acknowledged that preventative measures undertaken by Sure Start were a big miss such as free childcare courses undertaken by the Adult Learning Alliance which built a relationship with the community and were not seen as a threat.

Families had engaged with projects which included cooking and reading with children and clothes exchanges and the children flourished.

The Nurseries stated that they offered elements from Sure Start such as “Stay and Play” for parents but funding was tight.

- 4.4.7 The representative from North Shields stated that they used the Solihull Parenting Programme “Cool for Schools” where parents were trained to be buddies and which included useful activities.

- 4.4.8 The North Shields representative stated that the Nursery had invested in an online learning journal to send out tips and relevant literature and this was a useful way to engage parents.

- 4.4.9 The Tynemouth representative noted that the online learning book was a useful way to engage with parents and presentations to parents at a parents evening were beneficial.

- 4.4.10 The Nursery in Tynemouth undertook some home visits.

- 4.4.11 The Wallsend representative noted that the Nursery had previously given out written newsletters but they now used Facebook to engage with parents and post information and this was a useful platform to use for the community.

- 4.4.12 The Nursery representatives discussed the support offered from the Council.

The representatives noted that additional support for an individual child via Early Years Inclusive Funding or Leaps funding involved a huge amount of paperwork which was time consuming and difficult to navigate.

- 4.4.13 The North Shields Representative noted that the Council's ready for school offer was very useful and a mock Ofsted and checking of Policies and Procedures was undertaken but sometimes disheartening when the recommendations were not always affordable. The Nursery had a service level agreement with the Council for training. It was noted that this training was optional for Nurseries to buy into and that unless the Nursery had a child with special needs there would be very little communication with the Early Years team. They stated that the early help assessment was a lengthy process in order to coordinate speech and language, physiotherapy and childcare specialisms.
- 4.4.14 It was acknowledged that the training sessions undertaken by the Council's Commissioning Team were very worthwhile.
- 4.4.15 During discussions with Private Nurseries it was highlighted that the early help assessment process was very lengthy and bureaucratic and applying for additional support for an individual child via Early Years Inclusion or Leaps funding involved a huge amount of paperwork which was time consuming and difficult to navigate.
The Sub-Group felt that the Local Authority should consider simplifying the early help assessment process.
Nursery Representatives commented that further support from Health Visitors on toilet training would be beneficial.

4.5 Consideration by Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

The Report was considered by the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee on 2 February 2021 and the Committee agreed to refer the Report to Cabinet

The Committee were concerned about the lack of engagement from schools and nurseries, which obstructed the ability to scrutinise fully.

They acknowledged the full engagement from council officers and proposed an alternative approach to schools to gain greater engagement through Head Teacher briefings which might gain greater engagement.

5 Conclusion

When we came to the end of our evidence gathering for this piece of investigatory work, the coronavirus outbreak was only just in its infancy. Words like "lockdown" and "social distancing" were not yet a part of our vocabulary. Ironically, this piece of work focuses on an issue that can only have been worsened by the pandemic. Ensuring young children are ready for school is vital to their development and has an impact throughout their life.

During this piece of work, we were adamant in our belief that parents and carers are, first and foremost, responsible for ensuring their child is ready for school. We acknowledged, however, that most parents will want or need additional support. North Tyneside Council, and other agencies, therefore,

have an important role in supporting parents and carers so that all children in the borough have a good start in life. The Council also has a distinct duty towards our looked after children.

Concerns were raised at several meetings of the Children, Education, and Skills Sub-Committee about reports in the national media about children not being ready for school because of issues such as poor language development and the lack of toilet training. The Sub-Committee established an investigation into the size of the problem in North Tyneside.

The Sub-Group began by sending a questionnaire to all First and Primary Schools in North Tyneside about their experiences, however, we received a very small return. While the feedback was consistent the Sub-Group felt the amount of evidence prevented us from drawing any conclusions about the size of the problem in North Tyneside. We, therefore, believe it is crucial that the Council consults with parents, schools, and private nurseries about children being ready for school with a focus on the size and distribution of the problem in North Tyneside.

The Sub-Group also met with staff from private nursery providers, council officers, and health workers. It became clear during these meetings that there was a problem with some children not being ready for school. While we were impressed with the support available to parents and carers, the Sub-Group agreed on a number of important recommendations.

We would like to thank all those people who assisted us during this piece of work as well as those Council staff who help, support, and protect children in North Tyneside on a daily basis throughout the year.

6 Recommendations

The Sub-Group makes the following recommendations:

6.1 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services considers improving communication between the Council, schools, and private nurseries in relation to early help and being ready for school.

6.2 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests the Director of Children's and Adult Services to consider simplifying the early help assessment process, so it is less time consuming and bureaucratic for schools and private nurseries or provides adequate help to schools and private nurseries in completing the early help assessment process.

6.3 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help to schools and private nurseries for toilet training, including for children without special needs.

6.4 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help and encouragement for parents and carers in accessing early help information and services, including help for toilet training, language development, and accessing online educational material for children.

6.5 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services consults with parents, schools, and private nurseries about early help and being ready for school, including a focus on the size and distribution of any problems in North Tyneside. The findings of this consultation are to be shared with Cabinet and all Elected Members.

6.6 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Elected Mayor writes to the Secretary of State for Education asking for more funding and resources for local government for early help to ensure all children are ready for school.

7.0 Acknowledgements

The Sub Group would like to place on record its thanks and appreciation to those officers and representatives of external organisations for their assistance in providing the evidence on which this report is based. A full list of all those individuals who helped the Sub Group with its work is set out in Appendix 1.

8.0 Background Information

Our North Tyneside Plan