

## **Children, Education and Skills Sub-Committee**

**8 July 2021**

Present: Councillor M Thirlaway (Chair)  
Councillor J Cassidy, HP Johnson, C Johnston, M Madden,  
P McIntyre, J Montague, A Newman, P Oliver, E Parker-  
Leonard, S Phillips and M Wilson.

Rev M Vine - Church Representative

Apologies: Mrs M Ord

The Chair thanked Councillor Pat Oliver for all her work as Deputy Chair of the Sub-Committee and wished her well in her new role.

### **CES1/21 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute members

### **CES2/21 Declarations of Interest**

Councillor E Parker-Leonard declared a registerable personal interest in Item 6 Safeguarding Children and Young people in the Covid Pandemic, as she was a foster carer with another local authority.

### **CES3/21 Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 March 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

### **CES4/21 Safeguarding Children and Young People in the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Children's Services reported that since September 2020 services had largely returned to normal but underpinned by risk assessments to keep children, families and staff safe and prevent transmission of Covid. The staff group had worked with incredible commitment and dedication and had maintained on the whole, high standards of practice and performance.

Children's Homes had continued to offer warmth, care and support to children in care. They had to contend with using PPE and additional restrictions whilst at the same time supporting children and young people experiencing the pandemic. The teams have been able to cover the gaps where staff members were unable to continue in their role due to shielding or specific vulnerabilities, with other staff from across the service identified to assist.

Due to the additional health complexities the residential short break service was reduced to keep

children safe. Instead of offering short breaks to 5 children a night, the service was offered to 2 children a night and then on a risk assessed basis around need and complexity. However, by April 2021, the offer of overnight short breaks was to all children accessing the services. The service has been valued highly by families especially as some of the children were not in school.

The additional vulnerabilities of Care Leavers was recognised, particularly around isolation and so support was increased over the last year. This was not only in terms of visits and contact but also practical support such as food, toiletries, and activities. Care Leavers have been disproportionately impacted in terms of employment. Many Care leavers found employment in the retail and services sectors, often this work was casual in nature and as such their employment ended without protection. There was a lot of work to do to try and address the number of young people not in education, employment and training (NEET) in the care experienced population and the Service was working with colleagues in adult learning to finalise plans.

The New Belongings survey was completed during lockdown and the results outlined 10 'Bright Spots' of practice (good practice) and a number of areas to focus on: -

- Having a good friend
- Having a trusted person
- Coping financially
- Experience anxiety
- Happy with appearance

Young people have been involved in the development of an action plan and delivery of the action plan has been adopted as one of the priorities for the Corporate Parenting Forum.

The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Children's Services reported that it had been a challenging time for the Fostering community, but they had been amazing in their support to children in their care. As reported in September 2020, it remained the case that no Foster Carers had decided to end their care of children as a result of the pandemic. They have continued to offer placements to children even when at times of crisis, there may have been worries about infection risks and this was evidence of the absolute commitment of Foster Carers to children in care. Two valued Foster Carers have been lost to Covid and this has caused great sadness across the community.

Fostering Fortnight has just been celebrated and all Foster Carers have been thanked for their incredible work with a card and handmade candle.

The Fostering Team have provided high levels of support to both mainstream carers and connected carers and received positive feedback in a recent Fostering Survey.

In reply to a question regarding feedback in the recent Survey from Foster Carers who were not so satisfied, it was confirmed that virtual training did not suit some Foster Carers and others missed the face to face peer support from coffee mornings and soft play training events.

In April 2021 the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) returned to the office on a rota basis. The MASH is critical to decision making for children and young people within the Borough and while the service has worked well remotely, it was recognised that the quality of the discussion, information sharing and decision making across the partners was enhanced by face to face working.

At the end of March 2021, there has been an increase in referrals compared to 2019/2020. The rate of referrals per 10,000 at the end of 2020/2021 was 404.3, higher than the March 2020 figure of 378.7. The England rate for 19/20 was 534, and Statistical Neighbours, 603.

Given the nature of the work, direct face-to-face work with children, young people, parents and carers is core to Social Work and Early Help practice in North Tyneside. As reported in September 2020, the pandemic has, by necessity, required new ways of working. Practitioners responded quickly to the changing environment and have been incredibly creative and innovative when restrictions have been in place. While the Service in the main is face to face, a blended approach with virtual contact and virtual meetings supports face to face work.

The performance data for 2020/2021 compared to the previous year, has shown the following: -

- A 24.2% increase in early help plans.
- An increase of almost 200 children being supported by the statutory social work teams.
- An increase of 24.7% in children on child protection plans.
- Stability in children in care numbers.
- At the end of March 2021, 98.2% of children who were subject to a child protection plan had been visited within timescales. (167 out of 170 children).
- 90% of Children in Care reviews held within timescales.

Members considered if the increase in children on child protection plans was a result of the pandemic and it was noted that plans had been stable over the last 4-5 years but since November 2020 there had been an increase in children with complex circumstances due to the pandemic.

The Ready for School nursery at the Riverside Centre has been operational throughout the pandemic providing childcare for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. In June 2021 there was an outbreak of Covid and the Nursery was closed and staff immediately moved to a virtual outreach support offer so that families were all receiving support.

The safe and appropriate delivery of family time has been a particular challenge. Children in Care have a legal right, save in exceptional circumstances, to family time with their parents and siblings. Family time inevitably means bringing together multiple households and a face-to-face family time offer, has been maintained subject to robust risk assessments, where possible.

The Youth Justice Service has continued to deliver services to young people and families throughout the pandemic both face to face and virtual and in April 2021 had an HMIP inspection of the Youth Offending service under Covid restrictions. The report is due for publication in the week commencing 26 July 2021.

North Tyneside Children's Services are a Partner in Practice with the Department for Education. Through this arrangement, the Service were approached to do some further study and analysis around lessons learnt from working during the pandemic, that could be shared and used across the sector. In partnership with Professor Eileen Munro, Professor Andrew Turnell and Marie Devine, the Service have worked with three other local authorities to explore: -

**What helps and hinders practitioners build safety through naturally connected networks during a pandemic when professional contact is limited?**

Under the conditions of COVID-19, direct professional involvement with families and children in statutory social care services has been significantly reduced. This led to local authorities having to think about how they can work with, and support, children, young people and their families in different ways.

The study was small in size and consequently the findings are tentative but do support the hypothesis that the use of networks makes a worthwhile contribution to improving children's safety and wellbeing. Alongside the study, an Executive summary from a local authority perspective around the learning has been published and there are a series of events and tools that the Service will produce to share across the sector to disseminate the learning.

The pandemic has brought with it an increase in demand for Children's services and an increase in the complexity of issues. This is putting pressure on the service and in particular on the staff teams. The Service are increasing resources to try and meet this demand, but the recruitment market is challenging at this time.

To support staff, weekly communication and regular sessions with the Assistant Director and a range of workshops on trauma, resilience and self-care have been introduced. These have all been welcomed and appreciated by the teams and across the Service they continue to feedback that they have good access to support and supervision and that managers are visible and accessible.

On 28 June 2021, the Safe and Supported social work teams returned to the office as it was recognised that learning, especially for newly qualified staff has been impacted by not being alongside their more experienced colleagues, and this has been a key driver for returning to some office working. Other teams will follow dependant on available office space and social distancing.

The Children's Centres will also open in time for the summer holidays so that a range of activities to support children and families can be delivered during the summer break.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that where the Service had the staff, families with children with special needs were supported in their homes.

A Member asked if the Service was at full strength and it was confirmed that with the exception of Family time, the Service had largely returned to the full-service offer and statutory visits were all face to face.

Members commended staff for all the work undertaken during the pandemic in maintaining safe services.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director Safeguarding and Children's Services for the informative report and for attendance at the meeting.

**CES5/21 The Health of Young People under 18 in the Borough**

The Sub-Committee considered a presentation by the Director of Public Health on understanding health inequalities and the health of young people in the Borough.

It was noted that:

- The Marmot Review had evidenced that mortality and morbidity for children and young people was preventable
- Inequalities in health had a significant and negative impact on the health and well being of children – a low birth weight baby was five times more likely to die as an infant than those of normal birth weight
- Overweight, obese children were at a greater risk of poorer attainment
- Poverty was a key issue and associated with negative outcomes and child poverty in the Riverside ward was 34.3% compared to 5.3% in St Mary's ward
- Covid 19 had exposed and amplified the existing inequalities facing children and the wider effects of Covid had disproportionately and negatively affected vulnerable children
- In terms of education and the impact of Covid, school attendance was very important for children and young people and critical to reduce health inequalities
- The Child Health Profile for North Tyneside in March 2021 (copies of which had been circulated at the meeting) provided a good snapshot of child health in the area and overall comparing local indicators with England averages, the health and well being of children in North Tyneside was mixed.
- The infant mortality rate was similar to England with an average of 8 infants dying before age 1 each year. Recently there have been 4 child deaths (1-17 year olds) each year on average
- By 6-8 weeks after birth, 42.2% of mothers were still breastfeeding and this was one of the biggest protectors against poverty and promoted by the Health Visiting Service Programme
- The levels of child obesity compared with the English average were worse, with 25.8% of children in Reception class and 36.2% of children in Year 6 who have excess weight and was a concern in some localities.
- Covid 19 had impacted on nutrition and physical activity as the less affluent were less likely to eat well and exercise more
- In relation to young people's mental health, nationally the rate of young people being admitted to hospital as a result of self harm was increasing and this was also the case for North Tyneside. Lockdowns have had an impact with the withdrawal of structure and support and there has been an increase in the demand for Counselling services and referrals to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).
- Dental health was an issue with 12.7% of 5 year olds with experience of dental decay

- In North Tyneside there were significant improvements in teenage pregnancy rates and fewer young people taking up smoking
- However there were clear inequalities in health outcomes and to address health inequalities the wider determinants of health needed to be addressed by optimising the conditions

The Sub-Committee discussed the issues raised in the presentation and in the course of discussion raised the following points:

- Schools had been asked to remain open during the lockdowns for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils and some pupils had benefitted from smaller class sizes which was a positive aspect.
- The strategy for children and young people's mental health was being refreshed due to Covid and the Mental Health First Aid Project would examine the gaps and offer more time for teaching about mental and physical health and well being and more support for parents and more staff would also be involved in mental health advice, guidance and signposting
- Local Authority officers began the first phase of a pilot project to achieve an ambition to train staff and pupils from North Tyneside schools in mental health awareness, with two staff trained as mental health first aiders from each school. The intention behind this universal offer, was to ensure there was a shared language and understanding of the impact of poor mental ill-health. Thus, enabling all staff to provide appropriate responses to all pupils at the point of need
- Reference was made to the trend of young people taking up vaping and it was noted that currently there were no figures on a local level and no evidence to suggest that young people would go on to use other drugs.
- With regard to the statistics on children living in poverty it was confirmed that these included in work poverty and average incomes and in terms of poverty intervention, the creation of secure jobs with decent salaries would be important.
- Concerns were expressed that mental health support was chronically underfunded and that a child with mental health needs would be likely to carry on with the problem into adulthood.

The Chair thanked the Director of Public Health for the informative presentation and for attendance at the meeting.

### **CES6/21      Serious Case Review**

The Sub-Committee considered a Report on the learning from Serious Case Review (SCR) Jasmine published in April 2021

The SCR had been commissioned in July 2019 by North Tyneside Safeguarding Board (NTSCB) in line with statutory guidance at that time. An Independent Reviewer was commissioned to facilitate the review process and complete the report. The Review was

completed in September 2020 but could not be published until criminal proceedings had concluded.

The purpose of a SCR was to undertake a rigorous analysis of the contact Jasmine and her family had with services to try and understand what happened and why. The organisations responsible for services could then identify any lessons to be learnt which could be used to improve services and reduce any future risk of harm to children and young people.

The Safeguarding Partners were resolved to act on the learning and a detailed action plan was in place which identified achievable and measurable actions to act on the learning identified in the Review.

Members discussed the issues raised in the Report and in the course of the discussion raised the following points:

- A Member expressed concern that the perpetrator had been allowed to go back to the family home, that the child had been let down by Services and that the sexual abuse would impact on the child and family and affect the child's mental health.

The Review found that Jasmine's allegation against P was taken seriously, discussed with agency partners and actions taken in line with child protection procedures. However, Jasmine's retraction of her allegation and the response to it was not discussed with agency partners and was not subject to the same degree of scrutiny. Her refusal to cooperate and the letter she sent stating she had made up the abuse did not spark healthy skepticism and was not sufficiently explored with her. The important role of trusted relationships with vulnerable children and young people to enable them to talk about their experiences was highlighted .

It was noted that to support practitioners in this complex area of work the Safeguarding Partnership had developed training which considered child sexual abuse from the child's perspective and included why children may retract statements of sexual abuse and how they can be best supported when they do so. Feedback in relation to the value and relevance of the training had been positive.

- Members referred to the child's retraction of her allegation and the response to it not being discussed with agency partners and asked what action Children's Social care would be taking in the future to make sure this does not happen again. It was reported that going forward as part of the training there would be multi agency involvement and the procedures emphasised and shared with agencies and other local authorities on retractions.
- A Member expressed concern that the views of the articulate professional parent had been listened to at the expense of the child's view in this case.

The learning identified in the Review highlighted the need to be aware of the possibility of elements of disguised compliance in the responses of some parents/carers.

- Reference was made to the support that Social Workers received when dealing with a case of sexual abuse and it was confirmed that a number of actions from the Case review for Children's Social Care included:

- Supervision training which had taken place with all team managers in relation to the principles of quality, effective and reflective supervision.
  - A Workshop for managers in relation to group supervision using the Signs of safety methodology had taken place
  - Supervision audit had been carried out, and a task and finish group had implemented the recommendations, including changes to the supervision policy.
- In reply to a question regarding social work support and supervision, it was noted that staff met with managers every four weeks to reflect and virtual support was available for practitioners.
- It was acknowledged that the Safeguarding partners were resolved to act on the learning and would have a better understanding of this area of work and share in multi agency training.

The Chair thanked the North Tyneside Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager for the Report and for attendance at the meeting.

### **CES7/21 School Clothing**

The Sub-Committee considered a report by the Assistant Director for Education on School Clothing.

The number of children on income related free school meals had increased from 6225 (Jan 2020 census) to 7025 (Student Support data May 2021).

The Council had started to address this by supplying every child on income related free school meals with vouchers worth £45.

The vouchers were split into £20 for the school uniform supplier to spend on the logoed item and a £25 supermarket voucher to buy the generic items.

The vouchers had been split as using supermarkets was cheaper for the generic items than the uniform suppliers.

Through the engagement work in preparation for the Poverty Intervention Fund it was clear that the cost of the school day was seen as an issue for school age children.

The second phase of the project was to support schools with some funding to help out other families who were struggling with school clothing but were not on free school meals.

There was also a stock of new school clothing to give to families who had not received the vouchers. Most of it was primary aged clothing but there was also stock suitable for secondary aged children. The stock included shoes, winter coats and PE kits as the project had been about school appropriate clothing not just uniform. The stock was housed at the Council for Voluntary Service with access through the Participation Advocacy and Engagement Team and schools could refer families in for support.

In order to address inequalities, over the coming academic year, a Poverty Proofing the School Day project would give every school in the borough the opportunity to work with Children North East to look at their school day. This was a longer term project but would look at all aspects of the school day and the costs associated with this. The schools

themselves would have an individual action plan and the Service would be able to pull together the picture across the authority to assess what support families needed.

It was noted that Greenfields Community Primary School were changing their uniform so that families could buy generic items from supermarkets and then purchase a logo from the school to attach the badge which only cost £1.

A School's Governing Body decided on a school's uniform policy and most schools signposted to local supermarkets.

Many schools had their own uniform clothing schemes or had a collection bin from the Community School Clothing Scheme.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director of Education for the Report and for attendance at the meeting.

### **CES8/21 Work Programme**

The Sub-committee received a report which asked Members to consider and agree a work programme for the municipal year 2021/2022.

A proposed outline work programme was attached at Appendix 1. Members of the Sub-committee were invited to raise any other topics relevant to the remit of the Sub-committee that they thought should be included in the work programme and the following were suggested:

- Impact of Poverty Intervention Fund
- Poverty Proofing Audit Findings (January/March)
- Early Language Development
- Education – Covid catchup – current cohort in school, make sure not underperforming and long term disadvantage
- Mental health refresh – impact on first tranche

It was agreed that these topics together with any additional topics raised by Members would be scheduled accordingly in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chair