

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee was held on Wednesday 15 November 2023.

Present: Cllr Carol Clark (Chair), Cllr Barbara Inman (Vice-Chair), Cllr Ray Godwin, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Stephen Richardson, Cllr Emily Tate, Cllr Sally Ann Watson and Cllr Katie Weston.

Officers: Haleem Ghafoor (A,H&W), Eddie Huntington, Mandie Rowlands (ChS) and Gary Woods (CS).

Also in attendance: Janet Bradley (Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees)

Apologies: Cllr Nathan Gale.

CYP/7/23 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

CYP/8/23 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

CYP/9/23 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Children and Young People Select Committee meeting which was held on 19 July 2023 for approval and signature.

AGREED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 19 July 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

CYP/10/23 Progress Update - Scrutiny Review of Care Leavers EET

Consideration was given to the assessments of progress on the implementation of the recommendations from the Committee's previously completed review of Care Leavers EET. This was the third progress update following the Committee's agreement of the Action Plan in September 2021, with developments in relation to the three outstanding agreed actions noted as follows:

- Recommendation 2 (Redefines its approach and commitment to getting a young person in care or leaving care into education, employment or training by retraining and refocusing the workforce): Action considered fully achieved. Progression Advisers work with Personal Advisers to seek opportunities regarding EET, with the latter continuing to take on the lead professional role for care leavers. Those young people who need most support could now be identified.

Referencing the previous update on progress, Members queried whether the percentages quoted in February 2023 for young people moving towards EET had changed, and how many individuals this involved. Officers reported that the figures remained broadly similar to date, with around 33 individuals aged 17-18 years (67%),

and around 68 individuals aged 19 years (66%). It was also noted that, by the end of November 2023, confirmation of the status of all care leavers should be known in terms of whether they are in education, employment, or training (or none of these).

- Recommendation 6 (Has a corporate commitment to creating a sustainable model to increase access to work experience and apprenticeship opportunities within SBC for young people leaving care): Action considered fully achieved. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) would continue to review and evaluate its approach around care leavers obtaining employment within the Council itself, and examples of young people successfully gaining apprenticeships, qualifications and, in the case of one individual, a full-time role were testament to the progress made on increasing access to opportunities. Encouragingly, young people were reporting that the opportunity provided had allowed them to create some stability, focus and drive towards improving their aspirations.

The Committee asked if, as potential advocates for the aim to increase access to opportunities for care leavers, those young people who had completed a work placement / apprenticeship with the Council were asked to get involved in the recruitment process for others. Officers stated that whilst not formally part of subsequent recruitment, care leavers who had experienced opportunities within SBC were consulted in relation to the support they had received in the past, and any learning (e.g. how any issues were managed during a placement) was incorporated into plans for the next cohort. Some had also come forward to assist with the interviews for the SBC Director of Children Services replacement and had provided positive contributions towards other Council initiatives.

Despite the small number of care leavers who had benefitted (two within Children's Services and one within Community Services, Environment and Culture (Care For Your Area)) / were due to benefit (two within Children's Services) thus far, Members were encouraged by progress around this recommendation, particularly given the fact that there were often complex circumstances involved. Building self-esteem / self-value was a crucial by-product of providing such opportunities.

- Recommendation 7 (Has a Borough-wide commitment to creating a sustainable model to increase access to work experience and job opportunities with local employers and partner agencies for young people leaving care through the creation of a dedicated brokerage resource which will focus on pro-actively finding, placing and maintaining young people in education, employment and training): Progress was ongoing but further work was required at a corporate level to ensure there was commitment across all directorates to provide opportunities. Children's Services had the evidence of how this had been successful, and this needed to be used as the blueprint across the Council.

Reflecting on the overall update, the Committee enquired as to how the current situation regarding care leavers within EET compared to historical figures. Officers responded that, for school years 12-14 (16-19-year-olds), around 5% of care experienced young people were not in EET (NEET). Care leavers were given an increased level of input from Council services until the end of year 14 (more information on this could be provided if desired), though officers were careful to ensure that such young people were not being pushed into anything they were not ready for.

AGREED that the Care Leavers EET progress update be noted.

CYP/11/23 Progress Update - Scrutiny Review of Child Poverty

Consideration was given to the assessments of progress on the implementation of the recommendations from the Committee's previously completed review of Child Poverty. This was the second progress update following the Committee's agreement of the Action Plan in July 2022, with developments in relation to the four outstanding agreed actions noted as follows:

- Recommendation 1 (That a family poverty profile is compiled and updated annually from available data and input from those with lived experience and is used to identify a key priority for targeted action each year; an initial focus being take up of Free School Meals for those eligible and in need): Action considered fully achieved. Multiple strands of progress evident including an increase in places on the Holidays Activities Fund (HAF) Programme, the continuation of the Supporting Families Programme, increased take-up of Free School Meals, and the establishment of the Free School Meal Auto-Enrolment Project Group and the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group.

Referencing the mapping of schools across the region which offer breakfast clubs, Members stressed the importance of children having adequate food prior to the start of the school day.

- Recommendation 2 (That support offered to families in poverty is enhanced through: a) a more integrated and visible offer for families experiencing poverty focusing on information, advice, financial and other support; b) roll-out of Poverty Proofing the School Day across all Stockton Schools; c) establishing a mutual aid / giving scheme, in partnership with Catalyst, to facilitate community giving; d) ensuring an enhanced support offer is available for communities and areas targeted through the Fairer Stockton-on-Tees Framework): Action considered fully achieved. Again, several areas demonstrated progress on this action, including the implementation of 'The Bread and Butter Thing' (providing families with cost-effective, healthy food options), the continuation of the Community Spaces (previously Warm Spaces) initiative, and the development of outreach Here to Help events to provide communities with a range of support, referrals and advice. Developments around this recommendation would continue to be picked-up as part of the wider Scrutiny Review of Cost-of-Living Response that was currently being undertaken by the People Select Committee, a piece of work which was also considering progress on the costs of school uniform.

Focusing on the ongoing concerns in relation to school uniform costs, Members expressed disappointment that there was still a need to look at this issue again given the Committee undertook an in-depth review on this very topic in the previous Council term – officers were therefore urged to ensure the findings and recommendations from the Committee's previous work were not overlooked. Assurance was subsequently given that momentum around the school uniform agenda was still being maintained off the back of the Committee's past review.

- Recommendation 4 (That, subject to funding, a direct payments scheme is developed for those identified as in need, building on the examples of vouchers during the pandemic): Action considered fully achieved. Currently exploring auto-enrolment options for Free School Meals with the support of members from the North East Child Poverty Commission.

- Recommendation 5 (That all subsidy policies are reviewed and revised as appropriate to provide streamlined and enhanced support for families): Action considered fully achieved. Working in-line with SBC 'Powering Our Future' and 'ABCD' initiatives to support communities and gather information through those with lived experience, findings will be fed through the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group and be shared with the Child Poverty Project Group which meets every six weeks.

The Committee noted the multiple elements which had either been achieved or were ongoing around the issue of child poverty (even in the face of limited resources) which, in cumulation, contributed to providing significant and much-needed help to a number of the Borough's residents and their families.

AGREED that the Child Poverty progress update be noted and the originally agreed Action Plan be signed-off as complete (no further updates required).

CYP/12/23 Scrutiny Review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment

Consideration was given to the brief and scope for the Scrutiny Review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment. Following the 'appreciative inquiry' methodology, the overall aim of the project would be to work collaboratively with schools and partners to explore what good practice already exists and what could still be done to support families, establish innovative ways of working, and make better use of resources through a renewed approach.

Focusing on the specific factors of a) attendance, and b) community outreach and connected Children's Services, the review would seek to:

- Improve identification of disadvantaged, CIOC and SEN pupils.
- Better understand the issues around disadvantaged, CIOC and SEN pupils' educational outcomes.
- Identify what more can be done locally to tackle these issues.
- Assess how well current policies, services and interventions address the issues and identify potential gaps.
- Identify the changes needed to policies, services and interventions based on best practice, national recommendations, evidence base and data.
- Establish what more should be done to provide support in early years, in particular to new mothers / families.
- Review the effectiveness of the strategic and local approaches in place to tackle lower disadvantaged, CIOC and SEND outcomes.
- Identify how the Council can, together with its partners, collectively respond to tackle the issues identified.

For both these specific factors, potential stakeholders and proposed ways in which to engage with the identified organisations / groups / individuals were outlined – this involved a mix of workshops and visits to established entities such as family hubs, foodbanks / baby banks, and youth clubs.

To provide additional context, an 'Early Help Transformation & Improvement Programme: Project Initiation Document (Brief & scope of the work)' paper was tabled for Members' information. One of the aims within this piece of work was to narrow the gap of educational attainment, improve school attendance and reduce school-based exclusion.

Officers acknowledged that the appreciative inquiry approach was not wildly different to how reviews had been conducted in the past and that, whilst some of the findings would perhaps be uncomfortable, the Committee needed to hear and understand the existing situation. Schools had a good working knowledge of their pupils, but they could not be expected to do everything around the factors influencing attainment – as such, there was a desire to work in partnership with schools and help them wherever possible. Indeed, support from the community was a vastly underused resource, part of which was already reaching out to help.

Linked to the child poverty update received earlier in this meeting, Members again raised the issue of breakfast clubs within schools. Officers stated that, in the future, every school would be obliged to provide wraparound care (or signpost to somewhere providing before and / or after-school support), though current provision within the Borough was very positive.

Members queried if exclusion / isolation rates were being monitored and heard that the SBC Early Help Team worked with schools to prevent / minimise such issues (though it could not dictate to them). In related matters, officers noted that special education needs and disability (SEND) considerations would also be involved as part of the review, though off-rolling (the practice of removing disadvantaged and struggling pupils from the school roll before they took their final exams so their poor results were not included in the school statistics) was not within scope, even though this did need to be challenged.

With reference to the suggested stakeholder list, the Committee proposed the addition of Thirteen Housing Group since they were likely involved with a proportion of people who may be associated with this scrutiny topic. In having responsibilities as a social landlord, Thirteen had a resilience team and were also currently tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) in Thornaby which had been well-received.

The Committee was informed that dates for subsequent evidence-gathering sessions would be organised and circulated in due course. In the meantime, a forthcoming session in Manchester on 5 December 2023 regarding disadvantage was highlighted, something which Members had the opportunity to access if interested.

AGREED that the scope for the Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment review be approved.