

## **People Select Committee**

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday 6th October 2025.

**Present:** Cllr Marilyn Surtees (Chair), Cllr Paul Weston (Vice-Chair), Cllr John Coulson (sub Cllr Niall Innes), Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr John Gardner, Cllr David Reynard and Cllr Barry Woodhouse

**Officers:** Jane Smith, Hazel Clark (Children's Services), Aishah Waite, Michelle Gun (Corporate Services), Lucy Owen, and Marc Besford (Catalyst)

**Also in attendance:**

**Apologies:** Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Eileen Johnson and Cllr Hugo Stratton

### **PEO/27/25 Evacuation Procedure**

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

### **PEO/28/25 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **PEO/29/25 Minutes**

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **PEO/30/25 Scrutiny Review of Partnership Working in Early Help**

The Committee received a presentation from Catalyst, a strategic infrastructure organisation for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Stockton-on-Tees. The presentation included an outline of their work, partnership working in Stockton-on-Tees, and how the Council could support the VCSE sector moving forward. The key issues highlighted and discussed were:

- Catalyst felt that partnership working was strong in Stockton-on-Tees, and while different partners did not always agree on issues, this was seen as positive as partners were bringing different viewpoints.
- While officers from Catalyst would represent the VCSE sector at executive level meetings and groups, they would encourage other VCSE organisations and individuals who were delivering services on the ground to join different meetings and working groups to ensure their voices were heard. There was discussion around relaunching Catalyst's previously held Senior Leaders' Forum to create clear pathways to report back from the different groups and boards and Members questioned how it could be ensured that a forum would engage a broad representation of the sector. It was felt that it was important to consult with the sector in the first instance to confirm it was something that it wanted and then shape it as a space for the sector with speakers from partners invited to attend.

- Initiatives such as the Wellbeing Hub and Warm Welcome were highlighted as examples of partners working together with the VCSE sector to provide advice and services for people.
- The Youth United Stockton Alliance (YUSA) was discussed, which was a collective of key partners who delivered youth provision. The purpose was to support the sustainability of high-quality open access youth provision as well as ensuring that there were targeted and focused interventions to support children and young people within youth settings. It was believed that this would reduce pressure on partners such as the Local Authority, NHS, and Police. YUSA worked closely with the Council to highlight their work and had a 'seat at the table' in planning of services for young people. YUSA had been able to provide fully funded training to the sector to create the next generation of youth workers and had engaged with over 2000 young people.
- It was noted that the VCSE sector had experience and expertise to deliver a wide range of services that could be commissioned and should not be seen as a reduced service. The real cost of delivery should also be considered when commissioning or funding the VCSE sector, including administrative costs and costs of utilities.
- It was noted that VCSE organisations often did not have paid staff, and were reliant on volunteers giving their time, therefore when requesting information from them partners should give realistic timescales.
- The Stockton Information Directory was highlighted as an area for improvement to ensure it was accessible and the information on the directory relevant.
- Funding of VCSE organisations was discussed. Groups and organisations were encouraged to work together to submit partnership funding bids, rather than submitting these separately but the challenges around this, when organisations were understandably looking to gain funding to keep themselves going, must be acknowledged. Also, when working with the private sector who wished to fulfil their social contracts the VCSE sector were being encouraged to make clear what support they needed, whether this was volunteering time or goods. It was sometimes appropriate to make financial requests, but this was unlikely to be substantial enough to keep operating a service long term. VCSE organisation usually applied for funding directly with Catalyst able to offer support to identify funding opportunities and also look over funding bids, while not able to write them on other organisations' behalf. It was stressed that it was each funder that decided who their funding was open to and sometimes they specify it was for an infrastructure such as Catalyst if they wanted a strategic organisation to distribute to the sector as a whole.

The Committee received a report regarding learning from visits to Lincolnshire and Sunderland Local Authorities. The report noted:

- Lincolnshire instigated a cultural shift over a decade to reduce reliance on local authority services, making early help "everyone's business", resulting in 80% of Early Help delivery being delivered by external partners.
- The LA carried out extensive consultations with partners and children and young people to ensure there were involved in the transition, as well as providing training to build confidence for partners to lead on early help.
- Sunderland prioritised early identification and partnership-led support and had piloted a duty system within its locality teams, with dedicated teams operating reduced caseloads.
- The visits revealed several common themes across both local authorities including that Early Help could be a shared responsibility with external partners,

- shifting the burden away from the local authority alone, and embedding expectations across partners.
- The local authorities also invested in training, tools, and clear frameworks to equip partners to confidently lead on cases.
  - They had strong gateways and thresholds, so families were supported through universal community-based services first. Officers noted that this linked to the improvements needed to the Stockton Information Directory highlighted by Catalyst.

Members questioned whether moving towards a partnership model where partners provided the majority of early help services would affect the Council's statutory responsibilities. It was explained that the responsibility for statutory interventions and protections would remain with and be provided by the Council and would not be outsourced to partners and/or the VCSE sector.

It was recognised that partners were carrying out a wide range of services and working with families, building up relationships with them, e.g. health visitors, schools, youth workers etc. However, they were referring families into social care services when, given the right support and resources, they would be best placed to support the family. Increased partnership working would be an improved offer for families as they would be receiving the right support earlier and would not have to wait for social care assessments to be carried out, which could be intrusive and/or lead to no further action taking place. This would also take some pressure off social care, so they were more able to concentrate on providing targeted and complex support.

The Committee also received a presentation regarding the Family First Partnership (FFP) Programme reforms which included the journey to date, how partners had been engaged, and an overview of the guidance and changes for family help. The issues highlighted and discussed included:

- The Family First Partnership Programme Guide was published in March 2025, and funding confirmed in April 2025. The reforms were the biggest change to social care since the Children Acts in 1989 and 2004 and aimed to ensure that the right decisions were made at the right time for families, so they received the support that they needed. Partners would be empowered to be part of this process.
- The funding mostly comprised of bringing together existing funding pots, however there was some new funding to assist with ensuring partners were prepared, and the Council had also been granted delivery support from the Department for Education (DfE).
- Engagement had been taking place with partners, such as Health and Police, to ensure they were aware of the social care reforms, and this had been taking place at a time when partners were also experiencing structural changes in their sectors. However, they had shown a commitment and had been involved in the planning and co-design of FFP in Stockton-on-Tees. There was robust governance in place for the reforms.
- Family Help would bring together support workers and social workers into a single service to respond more flexibly to a range of needs families may have. Over the next year the Council would be working with partners to develop Multi-disciplinary Family Help teams.
- A rapid need assessment had taken place to understand the needs of children, young people and families in the borough and had identified that the greatest need for family help and support was during pregnancy and the first year of a child's life and at age 10 – 15 years.

- Family Group Decision Making was similar to the Family Group Conferences that had been operating in the Borough, whereby professionals facilitated conversations with families to assist them in identifying their needs and who within their support network could commit to providing support e.g. an auntie helping with school pick-up. These types of conversations were frequently used in child protection but less so in early help and it was time to embed it across the system.
- An integrated front door to children service was the main way for organisations and individuals to flag concerns about a child and this was carried out by the Children's Hub (CHUB) shared with Hartlepool Borough Council. The Council had made the decision to bring the CHUB back to Stockton-on-Tees by April 2026 and were in the process of redesigning it.
- Conversations were needed at the front door to understand issues, and this could lead to the appropriate advice and information given to a family, potentially meaning a referral for a more detailed assessment may not be needed and that families were able to access services and support more rapidly.
- Partners were often able to help families without referring to the front door therefore would be encouraged to do so. Councils were one of many organisations that delivered Early Help and it was believed that many referrals to the CHUB could be better dealt with through Early Help if there was a really good partnership system in place. Partners had also expressed that they would like to receive updates, feedback and outcomes from referrals. By sharing this information, it could prevent partners re-referring families to the front door when their needs were better supported elsewhere.
- The changes required training and development for staff, as well as a change of language and terms used e.g. 'Early Help' would be called 'Family Help'. There were also changes to technology used, systems in place, and statutory returns required by the DfE. These would be implemented in a managed way.
- The Council had to submit a detailed Stage 2 Plan to the DfE for the FFP reforms in December, and they would feed back to the Council in January.

The Chair thanked officers for the information.

A report from the Stockton Parent carer Forum, outlining the experience of their members of accessing early help services and views of the partnerships involved, was noted. The report highlighted several areas for improvement including better and purposeful communication and training for professionals on SEND. However, it also acknowledged that Stockton Parent Carer Forum was now involved in the shaping of services through the Families First Partnership reforms meetings.

AGREED that the information be noted.

## **PEO/31/25 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2025-2026**

Consideration was given to the Committee's current work programme. The next meeting due to take place on 3 November where there would be progress updates presented for the previous scrutiny reviews of Cost of Living and Disabled Facility Grants.

AGREED the work programme be noted.

Chair: .....