

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 17 JUNE 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.00 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Alison Swaddle (Chairman), Jenny Cheng (Vice-Chairman), Prue Bray, Andy Croy, Pauline Helliar-Symons, Ken Miall, Andrew Mickleburgh and Malcolm Richards

**Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Sarah Kerr and UllaKarin Clark

**Officers Present**

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools  
Adam Davis, Assistant Director Children's Social Care  
Patrick Finegan, Virtual School Headteacher  
Stephen Goss, Intelligence and Impact Performance Leader  
Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

**5. APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services.

**6. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman of the Committee at a later date.

**7. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**8. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

**9. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

**10. EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES STATEMENT**

With the agreement of the Chairman, Councillor Clark, Executive Member for Children's Services addressed the Committee.

Councillor Clark stated that her statement was in relation to a question that had been submitted to the Council meeting on 16 June 2020, in respect to the impact of the Covid-19 virus on Children's Services and how the Council has countered them.

Councillor Clark's statement:

All Learning, Achievement & Partnership activity has been maintained throughout the coronavirus outbreak, with staff working from home to maintain service delivery. We have utilised online and mobile platforms to continue to engage children and families in supporting activity with them. We have worked closely with all schools and early years settings to support them in keeping them open for vulnerable children and children of key workers, and to support home learning for students that are unable to access schools

during 'lock-down'. We have offered all looked after children an online tutor to support them with their school work.

In children's social care we have followed Government guidance, lockdown restrictions and Public Health advice and we have adapted the way that work ensuring that we can continue to deliver our statutory duties, keeping both children and staff safe. Most social workers are now working from home, this has been supported by the roll out of IT equipment. The Front Door (Duty Triage and Assessment) are continuing to take referrals, although these are lower due to the reduction of children having contact with partner agencies.

All Child Protection visits in Borough are ongoing and are face to face using all safety precautions which includes PPE where required. Strategy Meetings, Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Children Reviews are taking place remotely via conference calls and all 'Looked After Children' cases have been reviewed and where possible visit time frames amended, in line with the statutory requirement relating to each case. The availability of new Apps and software has supported the use of video calling to communicate with children and families regularly.

The Bridges Resource Centre is continuing to offer a Residential Respite service for children with disabilities, although this has been slightly reduced.

All court applications for Public Law (where we need to protect a child) and Youth Justice are being completed remotely via video link.

The performance of Educational Health and Care Plans (EHCP) within 20 weeks has improved significantly from 12% in January to 95% in April 2020.

The following comments were made during the discussion of the item:

- Councillor Bray thanked officers in the service for their work during this period. She asked about what was being done to support young carers;
- Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care stated that young carers had been contacted as part of a welfare call to establish if they had any additional needs, support was then offered where needed;
- Councillor Mickleburgh was pleased to note the significant improvement on the number of EHCP completed within the timelines. He asked if the number of requests for assessments had been impacted during the pandemic and whether there was a risk of a back log in the future;
- Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Achievement stated that the number of requests for assessments continued steady throughout the period;
- The Chairman asked about the take up of the offer for online tutoring to looked after children. Patrick Finegan, Virtual School Headteacher stated that it had been increasing weekly, now there were around 15 children who had taken up the offer. He also stated that following a Corporate Parenting Board meeting, the offer was extended from two hours a week to three hours a week;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that children of various ages had taken up the offer.

The Chairman invited Councillor Clark to give an executive update to the Committee on a regular basis.

## **RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The update by the Children's Services Executive Member be noted; and
- 2) The Committee would receive regular updates by the Children's Services Executive Member.

### **11. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

Stephen Goss, Performance Leader Intelligence and Impact presented the Children's Services Performance Indicators.

The Committee reviewed each dashboard indicator and some of the comments made during the discussions are listed below.

#### Dashboard 1 – Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

- Stephen Goss stated that the number of EHCPs had been completed within the 20 week of the referral target had increased;
- Members were pleased with the progresses in the timeliness of completion of EHCPs.

#### Dashboard 2 – Early Help

- Stephen Goss stated that the numbers in relation to referrals for Early Help fluctuated during the year. However, the numbers had increased as a result of lockdown;
- Stephen Goss stated that the average length of time taken to complete Early Help assessments had risen in Quarter 4;
- Adam Davis stated that a Task and Finish had been set up to look at ways to improve the service and work with partners. The Early Help Strategy was being developed, however, this had been delayed because of Covid-19;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked for information in regards to the complexity of referrals and how the new way of working from home was affecting the service;
- Adam Davis stated that complex cases and where the level of concern was high, would be dealt with by Social Care; he also stated that a lot of the work undertaken by Early Help had moved online and some capacity had been created as a result of working from home. He stated that the Covid-19 related questions would be dealt with in more detail at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee.

#### Dashboard 3 – Children's Social Care Front Door

- Stephen Goss stated that the number of contacts had increased;
- Adam Davis stated that with the increased number of staff now working from home, there had been a lot more virtual work; some staff who had been shielding still managed to maintain a certain level of activity by working from home;
- Stephen Goss stated that the level of staff permanency had improved and this was reflected in various areas of the service.

#### Dashboard 4 – Child Protection

- Stephen Goss stated that despite the current difficulties, the number of visits undertaken within the timescales had improved;
- Councillor Cheng asked what plans were put in place to prepare for the lockdown. Adam Davis stated that when it became apparent that the lockdown would be implemented, the service had reviewed all cases and sustained the level of statutory child protection visits. An assessment was made to determine where PPE would be needed, WhatsApp was downloaded into the staff phones and visits moved online where possible. A visit was only suspended if a family was presenting symptoms, in

such instances the service would weigh up the risk of the visit to staff and the risk to the child;

- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that most visits were planned and not random, depending on the case;
- Councillor Mickleburgh expressed concern around children's safeguarding, and potential increase in vulnerability during the lockdown, and asked about the schools involvement in safeguarding;
- Sal Thirlway stated that there was engagement and communication with schools, on a daily basis, to ensure children's safeguarding continued during lockdown;
- Adam Davis stated that the challenge was now to prepare for the next phase of the pandemic. The service had had good support from the IT department in the move to working from home. There was engagement with other agencies such as the Public Health England to keep up to date with current governmental advice.

#### Dashboard 5 – Children In Care

- The Chairman asked who did Wokingham compare to the national figures in relation to the % visits to CIC within timescale; Stephen Goss agreed to find out and circulate the response;
- Members were pleased to note the reduction in the percentage of CIC who have more than one allocated Social Worker; Adam Davis stated that this was as a result of a more stable workforce
- Stephen Goss stated that the main reason for the increase in the number of visits undertaken within timescales was better recording;
- Adam Davis stated that the permanency and recruitment strategy had changed; for example, a member of staff had been employed to promote recruitment and permanency and the offer had been reviewed;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that there had been an increase of around 8% in the number of CIC since the lockdown, but he could not ascertain if this was related to Covid-19. It was possible that the pressure created by the current circumstances might create an increase in the number of CIC.
- Adam Davis stated that there was new Compass Team, this team worked to support children to stay at home or to stay in stable placements.

#### Dashboard 6 – Care Leavers

- Stephen Goss stated that there had been a decrease in the number of Care Leavers who were NEET. The percentage of Care Leavers in suitable accommodation had decreased;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked for more information about unsuitable accommodation, that the data include actual numbers, not just percentages; he also asked for the types of accommodation to be listed;
- Stephen Goss stated that the percentages related to small numbers, there were only 72 Care Leavers. Therefore, small changes could swing the date considerably. He stated that custody and B&B were considered unsuitable accommodation, B&Bs were rarely used;
- Adam Davis stated that it was important to understand the nuances of the situation. For example, a child who was remand in custody became a looked after child for the period of remand, they would become a care leaver by default at the of 18, they may never have been in the service's care when they were in the community;
- Adam Davis stated that the service was actively working with the young person who was in a B&B accommodation to find a suitable placement. He stated that the service had a good relationship with Housing;

- Councillor Bray asked when did the Council stopped being liable for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC);
- Adam Davis stated that the Council carried on supporting UASC up to the age of 21 financially, if needed. There could be challenges in relation to the child's legal status and a human rights assessment sometimes was necessary.

#### Dashboard 7 – Children Missing from Home/Care

- Stephen Goss stated that the number of children missing from home had decreased and the number of return interviews had increased;
- Members asked to have more information around the reasons for children going missing;
- Councillor Mickleburgh was concerned about the risk of child exploitation, in particular in relation to CIC, and ask for a report around this issue;
- In response to a question Stephen Goss stated that new legislation was expected in relation to children missing from education and statutory attendance, in the context of the current pandemic.

#### Dashboard 8 – Children's Services Workforce

- Stephen Goss stated that the turnover had stabilised, and there was a positive move towards increasing the number of permanent staff;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated there were around just under 100 permanent qualified Social Workers employed by the Council;
- In response to a question Adam Davis confirmed that the service did employ Newly Qualified Social Workers and they did tend to stay with the Council for a period of two to three years. However, it was important to have a balance between experienced Social Workers and Newly Qualified Social Workers in the service;
- Councillor Miall asked to have numbers in the report, as well as percentages;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that the aspiration was to have around 10% agency staff working for the service, 100% permanent work force was difficult to achieve.

#### **RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Future reports would include numbers as well as percentages.

## **12. SCHOOL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND OFSTED REPORTS**

Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools presented the Schools Performance Indicators and Ofsted reports report.

Gillian Cole stated that Ofsted had ceased its inspections process due to the current lockdown. The reports presented had been published prior to the lockdown. The reports were in relation to Maiden Erlegh and St Dominic Savio, both schools had achieved outstanding ratings.

Members were pleased to note the outcomes of the inspections at both schools. In particular, it was noted that St Dominic Savio had shown a considerable improvement.

Gillian Cole stated that St Dominic Savio had had a trajectory of improvement, from requires improvement to good and now to outstanding. She stated that St Dominic's

Headteacher had been able to talk to other primary school heads about his trajectory before the lockdown.

Members wished to formally congratulate those schools on their achievement. The Chairman agreed to write to both schools, on the Committee's behalf, to congratulate them on their significant results.

In response to a question, Gillian Cole stated that Ofsted investigated and would report bullying at schools if this was found to be the case. She confirmed that schools and academies were required to keep a log of bullying incidents.

Councillor Helliar-Symonds stated that it used to be customary for the Executive Member for Children's Services to write to schools following positive Ofsted inspections outcomes. She was particularly pleased with a sentence in St Dominic Savio's report which stated: "Leaders and teachers do not place a ceiling on what pupils can do and achieve...", she felt that this was particularly aspirational.

Gillian Cole stated that as a result of the Covid-19 situation, the government had removed the exams requirement. Therefore, there would be no performance data for this year.

Members stated that they wished to review the performance indicators for 2019 at the next meeting.

In response to a question Gillian Cole stated that there were ongoing discussions with schools' leaders to determine how schools would assess the gap in learning created by the current situation, and how to address it. The service was waiting for government guidance.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

### **13. VIRTUAL HEAD REPORT**

The Virtual Head report was presented by Patrick Finegan, Virtual School Headteacher.

Patrick Finegan made the following points during his presentation:

- When he joined the service the Virtual School overlooked the education of 5-16 year old children, he had changed this to 0-25, to reflect the parental responsibility towards CIC;
- He had identified issues in relation to the high percentage of Care Leavers who were Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). He believed that this was because there was no Virtual School for post 16 children;
- He was pleased that the Council had now agreed to fund resources for the provision of post 16 Virtual School. However, it would take some time for the impact of this investment to be seen;
- Personal Educational Plans (PEPs) were now being carried out online. Also, carers were now being able to share their views and contribute to PEPs; there was now a website that all professionals could use to share information;
- At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were 5 CIC attending school, now there were 20;
- All CIC and Care Leavers had been offered two hours a week with a private tutor. Following a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board (CPB), this had now been

extended to three hours a week. Currently 15 children had taken up this offer, but this number was growing every week;

- Additionally, CIC and Care Leavers had been given access to various online resources, including the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which was very well used;
- Eton College had offered free online courses, the service had opted to offer a course on Resilience for the CIC and Care Leavers;
- Some children had benefited from being educated at home;
- All CIC from Year 5 and above were given laptops, therefore there had been no issues with accessing education online;
- It was recognised that children may need help to catch up as a result of the current situation in relation to not being able to attend school.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- The Chairman asked if carers had been given printers, particularly in relation to children under Year 5;
- Patrick Finegan stated that he had not been asked for printers;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that the laptops belonged to the children, they did not have to give it back. In addition, laptops were replaced every three years;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that currently there was no support from the Virtual School to post 16 students, this included A-Level, University and Apprenticeships. This had been recognised as a weakness and had been addressed. The service had been given resources to recruit a member of staff to work with the post 16 cohort;
- Adam Davis stated that Care Leavers had a high level of contact with their Personal Advisors who supported them;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that universities encouraged CIC to attend, however they did not have priority to the same extent that they had at schools;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that the service was encouraging carers to send children back to school, however this was not being enforced. The service was minded not to put placements at risk, recognising that some carers were in the at risk group;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that the tutor offer was going to carry on during the summer and beyond;
- In response to a question Patrick Finegan stated that if a child wished to take the grammar school exams and needed extra tuition, this would be provided.

Sal Thirlway announced that Patrick Finegan would be leaving the Council at the end of July and he thanked Patrick for his contribution to improving the Virtual School during the past year.

Members of the Committee and the Executive Member for Children's Services also wished to thank Patrick Finegan for his work with the Virtual School.

Members were reassured that plans were underway to find a replacement.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

#### **14. FORWARD PLAN**

The Committee considered the Forward Plan for 2020/21.

It was agreed that the Executive Member for Children's Services update would become a standing item. Members also decided to add the following items:

8 September 2020

- 2019 GCSE and A-Level results

5 November 2020

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- School Placements Sufficiency

25 January 2021

- Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy
- Child exploitation

The Chairman would liaise with Councillor Croy about the possibility of a report being brought to the Committee around the issue of Black Lives Matter.

Members discussed the idea of having a training session at some point in the future. They suggested that the training could include:

- The legal framework around Social Work and legal definitions;
- The Social Worker's role;
- A deep dive into one or two cases, the journey through different teams and how the legal status affects the services provided;
- Details about EHCP

Adam Davis stated that a training session had been planned for newly elected Members after the May elections. He agreed to do a refresher training session for the Committee.

Councillor Richards asked that an updated list of acronyms be circulated to the Committee. Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist agreed to follow this up.

## **15. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of the Part 1 Schedule 12A of the Act as appropriate.

## **16. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN - PART 2**

The report was discussed in a part 2 session.