

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 8 SEPTEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.20 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Alison Swaddle (Chairman), Prue Bray, Andy Croy, Ken Miall, Andrew Mickleburgh and Malcolm Richards

Officers Present

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

17. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Carol Cammiss and Councillors Jenny Cheng and Pauline Helliard-Symonds.

18. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17 June 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date.

Matters arising

Councillor Bray stated that the Executive Member for Children's Services had agreed to give an update to the Committee at every meeting and noted that this item was not in the agenda. The Chairman stated that the Executive Member for Children's Services had been invited to attend, however the Committee was advised that there were no updates at this time. This item would be included in the Committee's forward plan.

19. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

20. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

21. WESLEY BUDD HAS ASKED THE CHAIRMAN OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES O&S COMMITTEE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

Question

There is evidence nationally that just before schools closed for the summer holidays, pupils from more deprived backgrounds were least likely to return to school – and that this is one of a number of factors that will further widen the social developmental and academic attainment gaps between children from poorer and wealthier socio-economic backgrounds.

What can WBC do to ensure that this aspect of the 'return to school' is monitored and understood by schools and what practical interventions and supports can be put in place to address this?

Answer

We know that the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on a number of families in respect of their children not being able to access education for such a long period, and recognise the efforts of parents who have supported their children's home learning throughout. However, we also know of the long term impact of continued isolation for school aged children both in terms of their academic achievements and social wellbeing, and thus a return to school for all children is deemed to be in the best interest, and we fully support this.

Wokingham Borough Council has continued to work with schools and settings throughout the summer period in respect of planning for the return of all pupils to school at the start of the new academic year in September.

We will continue our regular communication and have mechanisms in place to respond supportively where there are children or young people with anxieties regarding return.

We are working with schools and the Department for Education on seeking regular attendance data in order that we are able to monitor this, with specific reference to vulnerable learners.

We are also supporting schools in relation to utilisation of the Catch-Up Premium and National Tutoring Programme that was announced by the Government in July, in respect of supporting pupils and students to return to a consistent high level of learning outcome for all children and make up for lost teaching time.

We will be discussing the issue further during this meeting.

22. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

23. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Children's Services Performance Indicators report was presented by Stephen Goss, Intelligence and Impact Performance Leader.

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 improving the quality and timeliness of EHCP had been a priority for the service for some time. The improvements shown were the result of concerted efforts to drive improvement;
- Councillor Loyes was interested to know if there were any figures relating to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). Stephen Goss stated that this could be provided;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if there were plans in place to deal with potential increases in demand. He was also interested to know what checks were in place to ensure the quality of plans. Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning Achievement and Partnerships stated that there was planning for further growth within the medium term financial plan, the service was actively planning to ensure that future capacity would be met. Sal also stated that there was a range of multi-agency activity, and the service received support from other local authorities to ensure the quality was not being compromised over timeliness;

- Councillor Croy asked if there had been an impact in staffing during this period, in relation to the pandemic. Sal Thirlway stated that there had been only one or two staff changes where interim staff had left, at the moment there was a low level of churn. Sal also stated that the next phase of development would be to recruit staff on a permanent basis;
- Councillor Richards asked if the improvements were due to having more staff or due to changes in processes. Sal Thirlway stated that as well as having more staff, there had also been an improvement in partnership working, for example better timeliness from Health professionals;
- In response to a question Stephen Goss agreed to include targets, where possible, in future reports;
- Councillor Bray wondered if the service expected an increase in EHCPs now that children were going back to school. She asked that future reports include the number of EHCPs that had been applied for but not granted.

Dashboard 2 – Early Help

- Stephen Goss stated that there had been an increase in the number of Early Help assessments in this quarter and an improvement in the length of time in days between referral and assessment completion;
- In relation to a question about staffing, Sal Thirlway stated that this was stable. Sal stated that a number of staff that had been isolating were now returning to work, there had been a lot of remote assessments during lockdown;
- Councillor Croy noted that the fact that staff had been working from home had not impacted the numbers. Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children’s Social Care stated that there had been a change in the way the service was delivered, for example with more use of WhatsApp and phone calls; with less time spent travelling staff had had more time to complete assessments;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked for an update on the development of the Early Help Strategy and the Task and Finish Group. Adam Davis stated that the strategy had been going through the usual development stages and was now waiting for the final approval; the Task and Finish Group had been delayed because of Covid-19;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if there was a trend in the types of cases as a result of the pandemic. Adam Davis stated that the cases were varied and it was difficult to say if they related to the pandemic.

Dashboard 3 – Children’s Social Care Front Door

- Stephen Goss stated that red arrows were negative, green arrows were positive and black arrows were neutral (outside of the service’s control);
- Stephen Goss stated that an increase in referrals was expected in Q2 and the service was preparing for it.

Dashboard 4 – Child Protection

- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that many visits had been undertaken virtually during the lockdown;
- Members asked Adam Davis to commend the team on the work they had undertaken and the good results achieved;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that the service had undertaken assessments and to determine if it was essential that a visit be carried out face to face and if PPE was required; 56% of child protection visits had been face to face in the period. He also stated that there had been an increase in contact with Looked After Children (LAC) as a result of the increased use of technology;

- Councillor Mickleburgh was interested to know more about the narrative behind the measures that had been taken to reduce the need for children to return to a child protection plan. It was agreed that this would be included in the forward plan;
- In response to a question from Councillor Richards, Adam Davis stated that unannounced visits were carried out if necessary.

Dashboard 5 – Children In Care

- Members were pleased to note the decrease in the percentage of children in care who had more than one allocated social worker in 12 months. Stephen Goss stated that this was a reflection of the improvement in staff permanency;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked about the progress in the new Compass Team. Adam Davis stated that a new manager had started in July, and pointed out that this was still a new team. Adam Davis offered to bring an update on the progress of the Compass Team to a future meeting;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that recruitment continued to be a challenge, not just for Wokingham but for other local authorities as well, staff had been less keen to move during the pandemic. He stated that the service was still advertising.

Dashboard 6 – Care Leavers

- Stephen Goss stated that there had been no changes in the number of care leavers who were 'in touch' with the service. He stated that the increase in the number of (Not in Employment, Education or Training) NEET care leavers was understandable during this current financial situation;
- Councillor Swaddle asked that, to give Members context, the actual number of care leavers be provided in future reports;
- Councillor Mickleburgh questioned the accuracy of the 97% of care leavers in suitable accommodation figure and asked Stephen Goss to check it. He wanted to know what measures were being put in place to reduce NEET figures and wondered if this was related to mental health issues;
- In response to a question Adam Davis explained that a young person in custody counted as being in unsuitable accommodation; if a young person became remanded in custody, this person automatically became a LAC;
- Councillor Loyes asked why the numbers of NEET care leavers were comparable to the national average if this was a prosperous borough. Sal Thirlway stated one of the reasons was that some young people lived out of the borough, also there was a historical low take up of apprenticeships in the borough;
- Sal Thirlway stated that it was important to have the right mix of opportunities available to young people. Adam Davis stated that the government had a programme of apprenticeships which was specific for care leavers.

Dashboard 7 – Children missing from Home/Care

- Councillor Swaddle pointed out that the Committee had asked to be provided with the number of children missing from home and the number of children missing from care in reports. Stephen Goss agreed to include this figure in future reports;
- Members were surprised to see the number of children missing from education in Q1, given that schools had been closed in the period. Sal Thirlway stated that this related to children missing from the school roll and not attending any alternative provision; it was agreed that this explanation would be included in the narrative on future reports;
- Councillor Richards was interested to know what happened if a child disappeared. Adam Davis stated that if this was a LAC the local authority would continue to look for

the child and the Police would investigate. Once a child returned from missing, there was return home interview with the child's dedicated social worker.

Dashboard 8 – Children's Services Workforce

- Stephen Goss stated that there was now more stability within the workforce;
- Councillor Loyes asked what was the percentage of Black Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) LAC in the borough. Adam Davis agreed to provide this information outside of the meeting;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that there had been an increase in the number of posts following April. There was now more stability in the senior leadership level within the service.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

24. SCHOOLS' PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND OFSTED REPORTS

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

Gillian Cole went through in detail over a report outlining the school outcomes results for 2019. This report had been prepared for a discussion at the March meeting which had been cancelled because of the pandemic. The 2019 school performance outcomes were as listed in the report.

Some of the comments made following Gillian Cole's presentation are listed below:

- Councillor Mickleburgh asked what attempts were being made to identify best practice in similar local authorities and he was also interested to know what other factors impacted performance, apart from financial factors;
- Gillian Cole stated that the service actively sought to identify and understand best practice from other local authorities. Wokingham was part of the PAN Berkshire wide group which shared best practice across the region; Wokingham took part in Voice 21 which was an oracy model providing help to teachers and schools to improve language. Additionally, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) had found that some local authorities were experiencing the same challenges in trying to close the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers; as a result they had created a research group which had produced material which was shared with schools;
- Gillian Cole stated that other factors that could affect performance were English as an additional language (EAL), for example;
- Gillian Cole stated that schools were required to demonstrate how they used the Pupil Premium funding to help those children who were entitled to it;
- In response to a question Gillian Cole stated that children of white and black/Caribbean mixed race tended to perform less well than their peers; there was a different data set in relation to BAME children.

Gillian Cole stated that Ofsted had suspended inspections during the lockdown period and therefore there were no new reports at this stage. Going forward, during the current pandemic, Ofsted was going to conduct survey visits in the form of a conversation with senior leaders at schools. These conversations would not lead to a formal judgement.

In response to a question Gillian Cole stated that schools had not reported any particular concerns over the proposed Ofsted survey visits and one school had volunteered to have a visit.

Gillian Cole stated that as everyone knew, the government had removed the requirement for school exams this year, therefore there would not be any national or local data set for 2020. It was anticipated that tests would take place in 2021 and it was possible they may be delayed to allow for more preparation time.

Gillian Cole stated that the service had been running round the table drop in sessions to support schools' leadership teams during this whole period. These sessions had been well attended and offered an opportunity to share experiences.

Gillian Cole stated that most teachers, parents and students had been positive about the schools re-opening this term. She pointed out that each school site was different, with different classroom layouts and different organisation methods.

Gillian Cole stated that the local authority had been discussing issues around transport to school in view of the current situation.

Sal Thirlway stated that schools would receive £80 catch up premium per child.

Councillor Croy asked about the re-instatement of hot meals at schools. Gillian Cole stated schools were trying to work out how to make this possible; at the moment class spaces were being used to eat lunches. Sal Thirlway stated that there was no additional budget for hot meals and schools had to decide how best to manage their budgets.

Gillian Cole stated that the round the table sessions were going to continue, the service would help schools to make the best use of the catch up premium and the national tutoring programme.

Councillor Bray asked that some consideration be given to helping families with the cost of uniforms, especially in view of the increased financial difficulties during this time.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

25. FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered its Forward Plan for the remaining of 2020/21 municipal year.

The Chairman urged Sal Thirlway to encourage the Regional Schools Commissioner to attend the next meeting.

It was agreed to remove the Schools Performance Indicators and Ofsted reports from the November meeting as there would be no Ofsted inspections to report.

Members were concerned about issues relating to racial incidents in schools and how these incidents were reported. They asked that a Diversity and Equality report be produced, including a review of racial incidents at schools and that all schools be encouraged to report using a standard format and definition of a racial incident.

The following items were added to the Forward Plan:

25 January 2021

- Measures taken to reduce the need for children to return to a child protection plan

22 March 2021

- Diversity and Equality - to be actively against racism in schools
- Review of Covid-19 response
- Compass Team update

26. 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.

27. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN – PART 2

The report was discussed in a part 2 session.