

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 22 MARCH 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.40 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

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

**Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: UllaKarin Clark (Executive Member for Children's Services)

**Officers Present**

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services

Adam Davis, Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

**55. APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence.

**56. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 2 February 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date.

Matters arising

Councillor Mickleburgh asked for an update on the reasons for the high number of permanent exclusions (page 10) and for data in relation to the number of permanently excluded children in the Borough (including a breakdown of SEND, gender, age and ethnicity). Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships agreed to circulate this information to the Committee via email.

In relation to the comments arising from the Child Exploitation report, Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help agreed to include the data required at the last meeting in future reports in a Part 2 session.

**57. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**58. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

**59. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

**60. REVIEW OF COVID-19 RESPONSE**

Adam Davis presented the Review of Covid-19 Response report which was set out in agenda pages 17-24.

Some of the points made during the presentation are listed below:

- During the pandemic Children's Services continued to report to a range of forums and bodies, including the Department of Education (DfE), Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership and Corporate Parenting Board (CPB);
- One of the challenges in relation to social care had been to reach a balance between keeping the children protected and ensuring the safety and welfare of staff;
- The majority of child protection visits continued to be face to face (95%);
- There had been a reduction in the number of contacts received at the Front Door and also a reduction in the number of contacts that progressed on for a social care assessment. However, in the last two weeks there had been an increase in the number of contact referrals;
- Engagement with Looked After Children (LAC) and Care Leavers continued during the pandemic, with particular attention to Care Leavers during the Christmas period;
- Engagement with Foster Carers continued and only one placement with a Foster Carer had to end because of Covid;
- Ongoing communication and contact with schools was maintained throughout the pandemic, with weekly meetings and discussions with headteachers and senior school leaders about the management of schools and delivery of education in a pandemic context;
- Schools were supported in relation to access to ICT and equipment to assist remote learning;
- Schools were being supported to develop the Wellbeing for Education Return programme designed by the DfE;
- Schools were supported in the development of the asymptomatic lateral testing;
- Schools had continued access to the help provided by the School Improvement Team;
- Support and guidance was given to schools in relation to the delivery of Free school meals;
- Home to school transport continued to be provided to those eligible;
- The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people was supported and included the provision of Kooth (an online counselling and emotional well-being support service provided for young people aged 11-18) and other material more appropriate for younger children;
- There had been an amazing level of commitment and flexibility from the staff. It was now important to mitigate the impact of working remotely, particularly for social workers.

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

- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that one of the challenges had been relation to recruitment of staff to cover potential gaps as a result of Covid;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that on reflection, taking stock at the beginning of the pandemic would have been beneficial, as the speed of changes from the central government was considerable;
- Councillor Blumenthal asked about the uptake of Kooth and any feedback. Adam Davis stated that this had been successful and it was agreed that any data would be shared with Members;
- Councillor Clarke provided an update on the usage of Kooth:
  - during the period 1 July 2020 to 31st December 2020 and across the Borough there were:
    - 1606 log-ins
    - 392 new registrations
    - 61 chats with Kooth Counsellors, 626 therapeutic messages exchanged

- 364 article reviews and 1,934 forum views
- the majority of the new registrations were in the age bracket 11 - 13
- 71 % of log-ins were outside core office hours with between 7 to 9 pm being the most popular hours.
- Wokingham Borough accounted for 67 % of all new log in across Berkshire West.
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that all CIC were provided with a laptop. The criteria for access to a laptop in schools was the eligibility for a free school meal, targeting those most disadvantaged;
- Sal Thirlway clarified that the service had been agile in commissioning home to school transport providers when needed and when not needed;
- Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services stated that the Council also utilised the wider refurbishing laptops scheme to provide laptops to those that needed them. In addition, dongles were provided to strengthen Wi-Fi connections for young carers;
- Carol Cammiss agreed to speak to the CCG about undertaking a survey to determine how useful the use of Kooth had been;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked what was the impact of Covid on children's development and he also asked how the £100k grant for Early Years was being used;
- Sal Thirlway stated that the impact of Covid on children's development was still being analysed, both regionally and at a national level. An initial survey showed that schools had noticed a slowdown in language usage and comprehension. He stated that the grant for Early Years was a business grant to prevent closures;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if the lack of clear pattern in complex cases (referred to in page 18) and increase in calls for services was cause for concern. Adam Davis stated that sometimes it was difficult for small local authorities to establish patterns or themes; he stated that it was important to remain curious and support the social care team in their work;
- Carol Cammiss informed that Public Health England was undertaking a research piece of work to understand the impact of Covid on 1-3 year old children's social development. Information about this would be shared with the Committee when available;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that there was a good take up of schools' staff take up of the lateral flow test. He informed that the test was not compulsory.

Members were praised the work undertaken by Children' Services during the pandemic and asked that this message and their thanks be passed on to the staff.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **61. DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY AT SCHOOLS**

Sal Thirlway presented the Diversity and Equality at Schools report which was set out in agenda pages 25-46.

Some of the points made by Sal Thirlway are listed below:

- The School Improvement Service, as part of Learning Achievement and Partnerships commenced a programme with schools to respond to the issue of racial equity in schools which arose following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and other related incidents at the time;
- The programme started in the 2020 summer term, engaging with schools and developing a work plan in partnership with schools;

- Three key areas of focus were identified:
  - Learning – to understand the issues and improve awareness
  - Outcomes for pupils, staff and parents – to achieve positive change
  - Workforce – to promote a diverse workforce
- The report contained the results of a Racial Equity Survey, to which 32 schools had responded. This data was being used to shape the proposals;
- This was the start of a journey hoping to achieve racial equity in schools.

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

- Councillor Croy stated that the Committee had requested a review of how racism incidents are measured in schools in the Borough, in recognition of the fact that currently there is no way to compare and evaluate the situation because schools do not use the same report format and standards. In his opinion the report was valuable but it did not address the issue of reporting racial incidents. He was concerned that he could no longer find the reporting page in the internet; *(subsequently Councillor Croy found the relevant page <https://wsh.wokingham.gov.uk/learning-and-teaching/mea/equality-act-2010/racist-incidents/>);*
- Sal Thirlway apologised that the report had not addressed the issue of reporting racial incidents in schools. However, he stated that schools were no longer obliged to report such incidents to the local authority, therefore the local authority was not able to compel schools to report back to the Council;
- Sal Thirlway stated that it was hoped that this programme would build relationships with schools and encourage them to share their data with the local authority. He also stated that the ambition was to have a consistent approach across the Borough;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that 32 responses was an average level of response to a survey, especially in the context of the pandemic;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that he was not aware of formal national standards for reporting racial incidents, there were guidelines;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if other factors such as social-economic status, housing and family structure were going to be included for monitoring, along with ethnicity. Sal Thirlway confirmed that the intention was to include other factors that influenced children's lives;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked for a breakdown in the data relating to exclusions, such as gender and age; he also asked if there were examples of good practice in tackling this issues that the local authority could learn from. Sal Thirlway agreed to provide this information to the Committee via email;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if it was possible for Members of the Committee to attend as observers the workshops which were being organised for the summer. Sal Thirlway agreed to contact the organisers about this possibility;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that there were no specific targets in relation to school exclusions;
- Councillor Blumenthal asked for information in relation to exclusions criteria. Sal Thirlway stated that each school would have its own behaviour policy. However, schools would contact the Council's Education Welfare Service when a pupil was at risk of permanent exclusion and schools and parents would receive support during the process;
- Councillor Blumenthal asked if any targeted work was being planned to address the minority groups more at risk of permanent exclusion. Sal Thirlway stated that this

was proposal was part of the work to understand and address the complexities of the issue;

- Councillor Bray stated that permanent exclusions were a complex process, and she informed that SEND children were more at risk of permanent exclusion than others. She asked if SEND, school attendance and family support was being considered as part of this work;
- Sal Thirlway stated this particular piece of work was focusing on racial equity;
- Councillor Helliar-Symonds stated that every school should have an anti-bullying policy and she wondered if those policies included racial bullying. Sal Thirlway stated this could be checked by the School Improvement Team;
- Councillor Croy asked the service to ask schools what forms they were currently using to record racial incidents. Sal Thirlway agreed to ask schools;
- Councillor Richards asked if the proportional representation of the workforce was supposed to reflect the regional make up of ethnicity in the Borough and wondered how this worked in line with potential changes in demographics;
- Sal Thirlway recognised that communities changed year on year, what the programme was trying to achieve was an improvement in aligning the workforce proportions to reflect the diversity within their community;
- Councillor Bray reported that most secondary schools seemed to tackle racism in their anti-bullying policies.

Councillor Croy stated that this report, although valid, had not addressed the initial request from the Committee to which was to review the reporting of racial incidents at schools, in an effort to find a consistent approach to enable measurement and comparison.

Sal Thirlway stated that this report intended to raise awareness of the issues around race and equality in schools.

Carol Cammiss pointed out that schools could not be compelled to report racial incidents to the local authority, and that it may be more productive to undertake this discussion in another forum. She offered to discuss this further with Councillor Croy outside of the meeting.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **62. ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION**

Sal Thirlway presented the Elective Home Education (EHE) report which was set out in agenda pages 47-68.

Some of the points made by Sal Thirlway are listed below:

- The local authority had a statutory oversight of children and young people's education, employment and training up to the age of 18, including those being home educated;
- EHE was an active choice, and parents chose this option for a variety of reasons;
- Since the pandemic started there had been an increase in the number of EHE, in line with the national picture;
- Three main reasons had been identified for this increase:
  - Covid anxiety
  - Successful experiences of home education during lockdown
  - Consistency and stability – rather than stop/start throughout Covid, looking to return to school once the pandemic is over;

- When families chose to home educate, the Education Welfare Service offered support to schools and families to make sure this was the right decision to deliver that child's education, assessing suitability;
- During the course of the autumn term the Education Welfare Service assessed the suitability of education to over 164 families of the 221 electively home educating and had made sure that all new families that decided to Electively Home Educate were seen to ensure they were making an informed decision and life choice (and not being off-rolled);
- There were 57 families left to visit this academic year and then all families would have been visited either in person or virtually;
- EHE families were not compelled to engage with the local authority, but most agreed to engage voluntarily;
- The service was exploring the reasons why certain parts of the Borough had seen a higher number of families choosing to electively home educate their children.

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

- It was noted that the figures for Bearwood Primary were missing from Fig 2 (page 50), Sal Thirlway agreed to provide this information;
- Councillor Bray asked if the raising number of EHE registrations for Bohunt was because the school was off rolling children with low attendance and children who did not have good prospect for their exams; she also asked if parents were choosing to home educate their children because of concerns in relation to religious education and sexual education in schools;
- Sal Thirlway stated that the service was trying to understand the reasons for the peak of EHE in Bohut, this was not yet known;
- Sal Thirlway was not aware of religious or cultural reasons for EHE, he pointed out that parents had the option to remove their children from religious lessons;
- In response to a question from Councillor Richards, Sal Thirlway stated that EHE was different from supporting remote home education during lockdown. EHE was an active decision to remove children from school and educate them at home;
- In response to a question from Councillor Richards, Sal Thirlway stated that should families decide to revert back to school education, they would have to follow a normal in-year school admission application process, there was no guarantee that they would be able to return back to the original school;
- Sal Thirlway stated that schools would undertake assessments of any child joining the school to ascertain their level and what support they may need in their learning;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that many EHE children took national exams/qualifications and some schools supported this;
- Given that this year there would be no exams and grades would be based on teachers' assessment, the Chairman was interested to know how EHE children would obtain their grades. Sal Thirlway stated that he was expecting guidance from the government in relation to this issue;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that the local authority welcomed continued engagement and offered advice and guidance to EHE children and families; where the local authority believed that the home provision was not sufficient (which was rare), there was the option to serve a 15 day notice.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **63. FORWARD PLAN**

The Chairman informed that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee would be considering the suggestions that had been put forward for the next municipal year at its next meeting.

Members considered the list of items that were within the agenda for Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee.

Councillor Croy believed that the Committee should be able influence plans/policies and not just review items.

Councillor Bray stated that it would be good to be able to consider Children's Services strategies at an early stage, as part of the Committee's work programme.

Members noted that the Committee's membership could change in May and it was important to maintain flexibility within the work programme.

Carol Cammiss stated that the work undertaken by Children's Services was heavily regulated and statutory, therefore there was an element of repetition.

Councillor Helliar-Symonds informed that Executive Members would be invited to the first Overview and Scrutiny meeting in the new municipal year, in order to discuss their plans for the year ahead.

Members asked to review the Secondary School Strategy and the school admissions allocations at an early stage.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The Committee endorsed the suggestions being considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee;
- 2) The Committee wishes to influence new policies and strategies through pre-decision scrutiny of draft proposals relating to Children's Services;
- 3) The work programme will remain flexible and open to new suggestions.