

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 15 JUNE 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.50 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Andrew Mickleburgh, Morag Malvern, Beth Rowland, Anne Chadwick, Graham Howe and Pauline Helliard-Symons

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Alistair Neal as a substitute

Officers Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools

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

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning Achievement and Partnerships

Helen Watson, Children's Services Director

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

Councillor Andrew Mickleburgh was elected Chairman for the 2022/23 municipal year.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

Councillor Shirley Boyt was appointed Vice-Chairman for the 2022/23 municipal year.

3. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Shirley Boyt, she was substituted by Councillor Alistair Neal.

4. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Councillor Beth Rowland on the basis that she was a school governor for two local schools.

5. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21 March 2022 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the amendment below, and signed by the Chairman.

Amendment: Councillor Helliard-Symonds had been present online as a Committee Member (not as a guest).

Matters arising

Councillor Chadwick asked for an update on the arrangements for home to school transport for September 2022. Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships offered to provide a written answer after the meeting, to be included with the minutes.

The Chairman stated that there had been two vacancies for diocese representatives and two vacancies for parent governors on the Committee for a long time. He believed that it would be beneficial for the Committee to have the engagement of such representatives. He asked if there was a requirement for those representatives to be on the membership of the Committee and he also asked Officers to make an effort to recruit volunteers to fill those vacancies.

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist explained that the vacancies referred to were listed in the terms of reference for the Committee. Officers had not been very successful in the past in recruiting volunteers to fill in those roles. However, it was agreed that a renewed effort would be made to try and find volunteers to join the Committee.

The Chairman asked if there was an update on the possibility of Members meeting with the residents of the new Care Leavers accommodation on London Road to gain their feedback.

Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help explained that the Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) was also interested in gaining feedback from the resident of the new accommodation for Care Leavers. CPB was still waiting for a response from residents with regards to a visit.

The Chairman asked if Members of CSO&S who were not members of CPB would also be able to speak to the residents. Adam Davis explained that this was dependent on consultation with the residents.

The Chairman asked for information about the Youth Council: do they produce minutes? If so, could this Committee receive a copy of the minutes? Could this Committee engage with the Youth Council?

Helen Watson, Interim Director for Children's Services confirmed that the Youth Council had been meeting regularly and there were notes taken of those meetings. She agreed that it was a good idea for this Committee to engage with the Youth Council, and that the Youth Council could be invited to attend a meeting of CSO&S.

6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

7. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

8. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Some of the comments made during the discussion of the item are listed below.

Dashboard item 1 – Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

- Councillor Chadwick asked why the number of EHCPs had gone up so significantly in Q4;
- Sal Thirlway stated that there had been a greater need for assessment and placements, with an increase in the number of Special Educational Needs (SEN) children. This increase in demand impacted on the timeliness of completion of assessments;
- Councillor Rowland was concerned that the service was not good enough for schools and asked what the plan was to tackle this situation;
- Sal Thirlway stated that the service and level of activity had improved, but there was still work to do to improve the service. The capacity and nature of SEN services was continually monitored to support EHCPs requests. A Wokingham Partnership was being established in order to better understand the needs for support at schools;

- Councillor Rowland asked that this item be brought back to the next meeting to monitor the improvement of EHCPs;
- Councillor Helliard-Symonds asked for the whole total averages of the year (not just 20/21) to be included in all of the dashboards;

Dashboard item 2 – Early Help

- Councillor Rowland was concerned about the direction of travel on this indicator, she believed that Early Help for children was very important;
- Adam Davis explained that a downwards trend was not necessarily negative for this indicator. The downward time between referral and assessment was a positive result;
- Adam Davis added that there had been a significant increase in the front door referrals of 57% and the service had retained the timescales, so this was a doubly positive result.

Dashboard item 3 – Children’s Social Care Front Door

- The Chairman stated that, in relation to the percentage of assessments completed within 45 days, Wokingham continued to be below the national average and statistical neighbours averages. He asked what was being done to address this?
- Adam Davis stated that work was being undertaken to clear out the backlog. He explained that sometimes delays were caused because other activities were underway, however this was an area of focus;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that there were 25 assessments out of the 45 day timeframe, but this number fluctuated up and down. Delays could occur because of delays in court proceedings for example, or in the case of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC) delays were caused as the assessment could take longer. The service was looking to improve this performance where possible;
- In response to a question Adam Davis explained that there was a threshold document which assessed if a contact should be progressed or not. However, this judgement was complex and subjective.

Dashboard item 4 – Child Protection

- In response to a question, Adam Davis explained that child protection visits were undertaken every ten working days continuously.

Dashboard item 5 – Children In Care (CIC)

- The Chairman asked if there were any particular concerns in relation to the increase in the number of UASC;
- Adam Davis explained that any increase in any cohort of CIC would cause a challenge, not just UASC. There were additional challenges in relation to UASC in terms of culture, faith and language, where Wokingham alone may not have the resources to fully meet their needs;
- In response to a question Adam Davis made reference to the Ofsted focused visit letter, in which they talked about how to meet the emotional wellbeing of UASC. Part of the solution to this challenge was the new Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for CIC. Adam Davis added that it could be particularly difficult to support UASC in the first three to four months of their arrival;
- Helen Watson pointed out that Ofsted had commented on the “Herculaneum” effort which had been undertaken by all Children’s Services staff to deal with the increase in numbers of CIC. She added that the virtual school was also focusing on the education of UASC;

- The Chairman, on the Committee's behalf, wished to commend and thank Children's Services staff for all their ongoing work;
- Councillor Rowland asked if it was possible to include a breakdown on the number of CIC to show the number of UASC;
- Adam Davis stated that some metrics used by the service did split the numbers. He confirmed that at the this point in time, out of 136 CIC 28 were UASC;
- In response to a question, Adam Davis explained that children from Hong Kong or Ukraine did not qualify as UASC;
- Councillor Howe reminded the Committee that this was a public meeting, and that all had to be mindful of that fact in relation to sharing data in the meetings;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that there was an error in the date in the table for this dashboard, it should have been rolled over to 2022. He explained that all visits had moved to face-to-face. There were four categories within children's social care:
 1. Child In Need– a child with a plan of support
 2. Child Protection – a child with a plan of support and protection
 3. Child In Care – a looked after child with a care plan
 4. Care Leavers – a young person with a pathway plan
- The total number of visits listed in the report included the first three categories. He confirmed that a high level of face-to-face visits had been sustained throughout the pandemic;
- Adam Davis explained that the table showed the level of activity, every visit related to one social worker meeting a child and producing a report;
- In response to a question Adam Davis explained that an upward arrow did not necessarily mean an improvement, it meant an increase in the numbers;
- Councillor Helliars-Symonds expressed concern that the number of children with more than one social worker in 12 months had gone up;
- Adam Davis agreed that this was an area of concern. However, this could be related to a particular month when a social worker became a team manager. He added that this issue related to the national challenges in the recruitment of social workers.

It was noted that there was some confusion with interpreting the presentation in the report. Officers agreed to review the format of the report, to make sure that the presentation was clear for Members.

Dashboard item 6 – Care Leavers

- Councillor Chadwick asked what was the future of Care Leavers who were Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET), she wondered if they would go on to receive benefits long term;
- Sal Thirlway explained that although there was an increase in the percentage, this equated to two young people. The figures were in relation to care leavers who were in touch with the local authority, this represented 99% of Care Leavers. The higher the number of Care Leavers in touch, the higher the NEET figure was likely to be. By having a better understanding of the numbers, the local authority would be better placed to help and support them;
- Adam Davis added that with changes in legislation, the offer to Care Leavers had been extended to 25 year olds, therefore increasing the cohort of Care Leavers;
- Sal Thirlway pointed out the NEET figures were improved compared to the same period last year.

Dashboard item 7 – Children Missing from Home/Care

- The Chairman asked what the plan of improvement in relation to the return home interviews was? (this had been mentioned in the Ofsted report). He also asked if the improvement plan could be shared with the Committee:
- Adam Davis informed that the service had challenged that figure, explaining that some children had only been 15 minutes late returning home, the figure was in relation to the police being informed of a child going missing and their status. However, the service was reviewing this issue and it was part of a plan of improvement. It was important to ensure that the reporting was right, he added that when Officers looked into the figures, there was no concern of risk to those children;
- Adam Davis stated that this was being monitored by Corporate Parenting Board. He agreed to copy Members of the CSO&S into the documentation in relation to this improvement plan;
- Councillor Chadwick asked about the statistics in relation to Elective Home Educated Children (EHEC);
- Sal Thirlway confirmed that EHEC were not included in the figures for this dashboard. EHEC were considered to be receiving an education and were not required to be on a school roll;
- Sal Thirlway explained that currently there was no legal requirement to hold the information about the number of EHEC, it was up to parents and schools to inform the local authority about EHEC. The local authority had a level of knowledge on the number of EHEC, the Education Welfare Service worked with families of EHEC. The Department for Education (DfE) was looking to put in place more robust legislation in relation to the powers of the local authority to monitor EHEC.

Dashboard item 8 – Children’s Services Workforce

- Councillor Howe suggested that Officers comment on the rise of staff turn over, in particular of social workers;
- Adam Davis explained that around two years ago, a recruitment campaign had been implemented, the figure at that time was of 33% locums, and the service set itself a target of 10% - including maternity and sick leave gaps. The service got very close to the target and achieved 15%, and this remained for a period of time. The figure now was closer to 28%, this was due to a number of factors, such as covid and the ‘great resignation’ (people re-evaluating their lives and choosing to do different things).

A number of measures were in place to bring down the number of locums, such as offering training opportunities for newly qualified social workers. Wokingham was also part of Memorandum Of Cooperation (MOC) this was a Member association of 19 local authorities across the South East which prevented permanent social workers from living a permanent role and becoming a locum in one of those authorities.

There were a number of work streams underway, including a very good training offer, to tackle the recruitment challenges, this was a national challenge.

- Councillor Rowland acknowledged the efforts being made and stated that it was important to keep this under review, and to treat staff very well in order to retain staff and maintain the level of service;
- Adam Davis agreed that part of the solution was offering manageable case loads;
- Councillor Neal was concerned about the MOC, and wondered if this constituted an abuse of power, by stopping people from becoming self-employed;
- Adam Davis explained that this was the approach used in the Southeast and many other parts of England.

The Chairman stated that the demographics of CIC profile was changing. He would like to know the implication of these changes, both in terms of challenges and opportunities.

Adam Davis stated that some of the changes were the increase in the number of UASC (30% of CIC were UASC) and the variation in the age range of CIC, with more CIC now being 16 to 17 years old. This variation in age had an implication in the need for Care Leaver's accommodation, there was work being undertaken with Housing to support this need. There was also a focus on transition to adulthood.

Adam Davis explained that in terms of opportunities, the service offered a number of engagement opportunities with CIC. These events were regularly reported to CPB.

The Chairman stated that another issue that was often mentioned, was the increase in the level of complex needs. He asked about the implications of this increase on the services.

In response to the question about complexity, Adam Davis explained that this was about the layers of complexity. The covid situation and the rise in cost of living also had an impact on the services.

Helen Watson added that the level of complexity in relation to children and young people's mental health was increasing. There was an opportunity to make a bid to the DfE for capital funding for some provision to meet the needs of very complex children and young people. This opportunity was being explored with the CCG.

The Chairman proposed that the data in relation to UASC be continuously monitored, given that this cohort was increasing and that this trend was likely to continue in the foreseeable future. He also proposed to review data in relation to emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Councillor Rowland agreed that it was important to monitor the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people. She added that children faced a lot of challenges currently, in the context of the digital age that we are living.

Councillor Howe stated that there was a lot of activity that occurred in the services in relation to UASC, he supported the proposal to monitor this data. He added that Children's Services was a very complex service. He suggested that the training session for Members include information about the structure of the service.

Councillor Helliard-Symonds agreed that training sessions were very useful to understand how the service was structured and its complexities.

Helen Watson suggested that separate information about UASC be provided in a part 2 session, given that those children were part of a small cohort that could be easily identified.

Adam Davis confirmed that a training session was scheduled for later in the month. Helen Watson added that if needed, more training sessions could be provided during the year.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The Committee would continue to monitor the activity of EHCPs (Dashboard item 1) at its next meeting;

- 2) Data on UASC would be provided in a part 2 session;
- 3) The number of Elective Home Educated Children in the borough would be circulated with the minutes; and
- 4) Training sessions would be provided to Members in accordance with the need.

9. EDUCATION UPDATE

The Education Update report was presented by Sal Thirlway. He explained that the report outlined the work being undertaken to continue to provide for the children's educational needs. It covered attendance, the ongoing development of the Borough Education Partnership, an update on the white and green educational papers and implications for Children's Services.

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

- Councillor Chadwick asked if children with a sick note or with covid who were not at school were counted in the number of those absent;
- Sal Thirlway explained that the government had changed its coding system to allow for covid related attendance recording. However, this was no longer in existence, the 93% attendance mentioned in the report was for all pupils on schools rolls;
- Councillor Chadwick asked for clarification in the 1.2 section of the report as to whether the guidance published by the government was statutory or non-statutory;
- Sal Thirlway explained that this was non-statutory guidance that the local authority had to follow, it was a quirk of the law;
- Councillor Rowland explained that some overseas families with children in schools had not been able to see their relatives for a couple of years due to covid. They were choosing to take their children out of school and pay the fine as this was cheaper than the cost of travelling during the school holidays. She asked how many fines had been issued in Wokingham schools because of this issue;
- Sal Thirlway explained that the local authority held the information on the number of fixed term penalties related to school attendance. There was support to schools in relation to improving school attendance. However, the level of fixed term penalty notices was set by the government, and some families felt that it was more cost effective to take their children out of school for their holidays;
- Councillor Helliard-Symonds was of the opinion that this law did not tackle the issue of children with intermittent absences, which was originally its intention;
- The Chairman asked what the implication for the services was of the new statutory obligations;
- Sal Thirlway explained that resource implications on the school attendance team were likely. Options around meeting the capacity challenge were being explored;
- Councillor Helliard-Symonds commended on the Wokingham Education Partnership, she believed that it was a great idea. She recommended that the group looking at the sufficiency of school places in the borough considered also the issue of travelling to school;
- Councillor Howe explained that when schools became academies, there was a disassociation of the local authority from schools. However, the schools and the local authority were still bound by their responsibilities in relation to SEND and school admissions. The responsibility for the education of children in the borough still remained with the local authority, but there was not a mechanism to share resources and to work strategically together. The Borough Education Partnership (BEP) was

created in an effort to bring together schools and the local authority to jointly formulate strategies;

- Councillor Malvern asked if there was a provision for governors' participation in the BEP;
- Councillor Howe explained that the primary and secondary schools federation, the senior officers and the Executive Member for Children's Services were part of BEP, this was aimed at headteachers and not governors, in an effort to keep the focus of the meetings;
- Sal Thirlway stated that governors would be regularly informed of the discussions at the BEP in other strategic meetings.

The Chairman wished to formally express the Committee's gratitude to the work being undertaken by the BEP, and that this be passed on to the partnership. He also thanked Councillor Howe for the background information and to Officers for their work in setting it up.

The Chairman asked for more information in relation to the Fair Access Protocol (FAP). Sal Thirlway explained that the FAP existed to support the placement of children who had either left their previous educational setting or who had moved into the area mid-year and needed to be placed in a school. Schools signed up to the FAP and were supportive of the policy. BEP had been involved in the creation and development of the FAP. FAP had already met twice since the implementation of the new FAP policy and placed around 40 pupils.

The Chairman asked for timescales in relation to the re-structuring and re-organisation of the leadership team. Sal Thirlway stated that the aim was to achieve a more effective leadership structure. He explained that currently the large scope of 'Learning Achievement and Partnerships' limited his capacity to engage in strategic thinking and discussions. The aim was to rationalise the leadership function without loss of service delivery. This was an operational change which did not require Executive approval.

Sal Thirlway explained that there were two phases of work in this re-organisation, and he welcomed the Committee's input.

Helen Watson confirmed that the aim was to have a structure that was fit for purpose, in line with the new requirements of the white and green papers. BEP was aware that this work was underway.

Councillor Chadwick was interested to know what were the IT issues mentioned in the report. Sal Thirlway explained that, for example, in the case of recording the number of EHCPs, an investment was needed for a recording system. Also, school admissions needed a better IT system for data collection.

The Chairman asked how reliant on WBC's IT system Children's Services were, and he also asked if the proposed changes would require changes in other areas of the Council.

Sal Thirlway stated that the white and green papers would impact other areas of the Council, IT infrastructure being one of them.

Members asked to be kept informed of further iterations in the development of the re-organisation. Officers agreed with this proposal.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) The Committee would be kept informed on the development of the re-organisation.

10. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Chairman requested that the Executive Member for Children's Services be invited to attend future meetings, in order to share their thoughts on the service and answer questions.

Luciane Bowker informed that Councillor Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services had already offered to attend meetings.

Councillor Mickleburgh asked that stakeholders who were involved in co-producing the SEND Strategy, such as SEND Voices be invited to attend the next meeting in September when the SEND Strategy was due to be discussed. Officers agreed with this proposal.

The Chairman asked if the CSO&S Committee could receive the Children's Services Draft Strategy at its next meeting in September. Helen Watson agreed to present this update.

The Chairman suggested adding the following item to the November meeting:

Concerns about the cost of living crisis affecting children in the borough and the impact on Children's Services. He suggested that the Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty be invited to discuss this report. In response to a question Luciane Bowker suggested that Members email her with the specific requirements for this report.

Helen Watson informed that the Council was working on an Anti-Poverty Strategy, part of which involved tackling poverty in schools. This was due to be discussed with the BEP.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The Executive Member for Children's Services would be invited to attend future meetings of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- 2) The stakeholders involved in developing the SEND Strategy be invited to the next meeting; and
- 3) A report about the cost of living crisis and its implications for children in the borough and Children's Services be added to the November meeting.

11. 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 items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of the Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as appropriate.

12. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN

This item was discussed in a part two session.

It was agreed that future reports would include a list of all schools in the borough and their current Ofsted status. Also, the local ward Members of the schools causing concern would continue to be invited to attend this part of the meeting.

It was suggested that for schools inspected by Ofsted since the last meeting, the 2-3 page overviews at the start of each Ofsted report be included with the Agenda pack.