

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 2 FEBRUARY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.54 PM**

Committee Members Present

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

Officers Present

Matthew Booth, SEN Consultant
Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services
Adam Davis, Assistant Director Children's Social Care
Nick Hammond, Service Manager Intelligence and Impact
Kelli Scott, Interim Service Manager, Children with Disabilities and Early Help
Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

41. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

Councillor Malcolm Richards was appointed Vice-Chairman for the remainder of the 2020/21 municipal year.

42. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor UllaKarin Clark.

43. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5 November were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date; subject to a change on page 18 under the third bullet point so that it would read as follows:

Councillor Richards asked if there were any statistics available in relation to the educational outcomes for Wokingham's children who were attending colleges; he believed that children who stayed at a school sixth form tended to do better academically.

44. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

45. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

46. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

47. UPDATE FROM THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

48. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Children's Services Performance Indicators report was presented by Nick Hammond, Service Manager Intelligence and Impact.

Members were pleased with the report format and the timeliness of the information provided.

The following comments were made in relation to each dashboard:

Dashboard Item 1 – Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

- In response to a question Nick Hammond stated that the reason for the decline in the timeliness of EHCPs issued within 20 weeks of referral in Q3 was due to a number of factors, including an increase in complexity of needs which slowed down assessments, and staff changes. However, this was already improving with 100% completion having been achieved in December and January;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships stated that the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) team had been operating with a number of locum staff which had now moved on. Permanent staff had now been recruited, however the churn of staff had impacted on the timeliness of assessments.

Councillor Blumenthal suggested that a key be added to report to make it clearer if the arrows are being benchmarked in relation to national or local indicators.

Dashboard Item 2 – Early Help

- Nick Hammond stated that the number of referrals and assessments for Early Help services has significantly increased;
- Members were interested to know if this increase was occurring as a result of the pandemic;
- Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care stated that an increase in referrals had been expected after the summer, but that it had not materialised. The service was starting to look at themes and how to group it into categories;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that the service was conscious of the impact on staff of the different way of working;
- Adam Davis stated that the service was currently managing the demand for services, but this was kept under review;
- Adam Davis stated that given the significant increase in the number of referrals, it was positive that the average length of time between referral and assessment had only gone up only marginally.

Dashboard 3 – Children's Social Care Front Door

- Nick Hammond stated that there had been a reduction on the number of referrals in Q3;
- Members were interested to know how the service would deal with a Child In Care (CIC) who lost a loved one during the pandemic. Adam Davis stated that this would be dealt with in the same way as with any bereavement involving a CIC;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that measures had been put in place to deal with potential increase in demand; such as providing additional support for front door, by drawing up resources from other areas. There was capacity within the service;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that it was possible that there were unidentified needs due to the current lack of direct contact with children.

Dashboard Item 4 – Child Protection

- Nick Hammond stated that there was a significant increase in the number of children with plans in Q3;

- Nick Hammond pointed out that there was a commitment to carry out face to face visits as much as possible, with the percentage of virtual visits being below 6%;
- In response to a question, Adam Davis stated that only a small number of people had been worried about Covid security during visits;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that further analysis was needed to understand the impact of the pandemic on the percentage of children starting a plan who had a previous one in the last two years.

Dashboard Item 5 – Children In Care

- Nick Hammond drew attention the significant improvement in the percentage of CIC who have more than one allocated Social Worker in 12 months;
- Members were very pleased to note the improvement and asked what led to it. Adam Davis stated that the service had undertaken a lot of work to improve recruitment, retention and creating stability;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that having a stable workforce was a continuous aspiration;
- Members were interested to know if there was a reason that the number of CIC in Wokingham was significant lower than other areas in the South East and if there was a danger that children were being missed out;
- Adam Davis stated that the service had looked into this and there were various different themes: the demographics; the prevention services being really good; the high number of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) and the high number of adoptions;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that CIC had different visit requirements (in relation to frequency) depending on each individual circumstance.

Dashboard Item 6 – Care Leavers

- Members were interested to know if Care Leavers were being given priority into the new employment and work experience initiative being promoted by the Council, and if there were any particular concerns about how they were coping during the pandemic;
- Adam Davis was not aware of any ring-fencing for Care Leavers in relation to the Kick Start Programme;
- Adam Davis stated that Care Leavers were receiving additional support during this time from Here4You and PA's;
- Members were concerned by the number of Care Leavers who were Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) and asked how the service was looking to improve this situation;
- Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services stated that a new member of staff had recently been employed to specifically look at this. Options around work experience, working with local businesses, training opportunities and others would be considered. She also stated that this was something that the service was committed to improving, she believed that improvements would be seen in the next six months;
- Carol Cammiss stated that Virtual School had recently extended its offer Post-16 education, it was expected that this would make a significant difference to the numbers.

Dashboard Item 7 – Children Missing from Home/Care

- Members were concerned about the high number of Permanent Exclusions, especially during the pandemic when less children are attending school. Sal Thirlway stated that the service was working with schools, trying to understand the reasons for this number, he offered to provide an answer outside of the meeting;

- Members asked that a breakdown of the number of children with SEND who are permanently excluded be provided every quarter, and if possible also by gender and ethnicity;
- Members asked if permanently excluded children were being able to access learning remotely. Sal Thirlway stated that those children who were permanently excluded were placed in alternative schools/provisions and there was an effort to minimise the disruption to their education;
- Members asked if there was a correlation between the number of children missing from education and the current pandemic. Sal Thirlway believed that it was unlikely that the five children missing from education listed in the report were as a result of the pandemic;
- Sal Thirlway explained that under the current rules parents were not compelled to send their children into school, therefore those children would not be classified as missing from education;
- Members asked to receive information in relation to school attendance data. Carol Cammiss agreed to provide a report with this information;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that around 12% of the children who would normally attend school were currently attending school. The current attendance for children with EHCP or with a Social Worker was around 41% to 42%;
- Sal Thirlway stated that the service was working and engaging with families of children who were eligible to attend school but choosing not to attend, to ascertain what was best for the child;
- Carol Cammiss stated that the situation was constantly under review, it was necessary to balance the needs of certain children to be in school with the school's ability to operate under the current restrictions;
- Adam Davis stated that number of CIC attending school under this lockdown is significantly higher than previously, at around 60%.

Dashboard Item 8 – Children's Services Workforce

- Nick Hammond stated that had been a significant improvement in the permanency of workforce;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss stated that Social Workers left for a range of reasons, the service conducted exit interviews and tracked the reasons. She pointed out that the numbers were much improved from previous years, and that there was now a stable workforce;
- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that the service was looking to review the offer to keep it attractive to the workforce. The service was always looking at new ways of recruiting new and experienced Social Workers and retaining staff by providing a supportive environment.

RESOLVED That the report be noted and that data on permanent exclusion of children with SEND and school attendance would be provided to the Committee.

49. SEND STRATEGY

The SEN Strategy report was presented by Matthew Booth, SEN Consultant.

Sal Thirlway stated that the service had undergone an inspection in 2019 which had identified the need for producing a new SEND Strategy to replace the existing one.

Some of the comments made by Matthew Booth during his presentation are listed below:

- The consultation had now finished and the results would be shared with the Committee;
- The Local Authority has huge legal responsibilities in relation to the education of SEND children, but limited resources to deliver services. Therefore, it was important to work in partnership with all the stakeholders;
- There was an aspiration that Wokingham continue to be a great place for children and young people with SEND to grow up;
- The strategy contained a needs analysis with facts and figures. The understanding of the needs was continuing to improve, including predicting what the needs might be in the future;
- There had been support from stakeholders in relation to co-producing the strategy and also challenges in relation to the delivery of the strategy;
- The number of children with EHCPs and SEND needs was growing at a much higher pace than the population growth;
- Feedback from carers and parents was included in the strategy;
- Wokingham's position in relation to SEND challenges was similar to those faced by other local authorities;
- The priorities (as listed in the report) intended to improve services for children and young people with SEND and their families;
- There was an effort to improve provision within the Borough;
- Improving transitions was one of the areas that the strategy was focusing upon;
- Using data more efficiently was part of the strategy;
- The details of how the strategy was going to be measured were explained in the report, including key performance indicators;
- 50 full responses to the consultation were received, which was positive; the feedback received was encouraging and challenging;
- Conversations with partners were being undertaken to decide how the services would be resourced, in the context of the financial demands to deliver the strategy; funding models were being reviewed;
- The public sector equality duty would be further refined for the final assessment.

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

- In response to a question Matthew Booth stated that one of the main differences between this strategy and the previous one was the element of co-production and engagement with partners; he believed it was also more evidence based;
- In addition, Carol Cammiss stated that the previous strategy was educationally centred, whereas this was a local area partnership piece of work;
- Members noted that the number of boys with EHCPs and SEND needs was significantly higher than the number of girls; and asked if there was a reason for this and wondered if girls were being missed out and potentially not getting the help which they needed;
- Members also asked if the data could be broken down further, by gender and ethnicity;
- Matthew Booth stated that Health professionals had explained that behaviour signifiers showed up earlier for boys for certain disorders; there was concern by Health partners that girls were being diagnosed later;
- Members suggested that there could be cultural reasons that girls were not having their needs identified and suggested that this be investigated;
- Members questioned why there had been a drop in the number of EHCPs after KS2;
- Matthew Booth stated that educational professionals had explained to him that at KS2 education became more formal, thus was important to address needs so that the

children did not fall further behind; he also added that KS2 had the highest volume of children in education;

- In response to a question Matthew Booth stated that one of the major strands of work in the action plan was a resource space review, to maximise the utilisation of local places;
- Members believed that the new strategy was much improved from the previous one, and congratulated Carol Cammiss and her team on the work they had undertaken to produce the strategy;
- Members questioned the statement that Wokingham was a great place for children to grow up, in that there were some areas of deprivation in the Borough, and perhaps this was not a statement that was true for everyone. Matthew Booth stated that some parent and carers groups had also pointed out that there was much improvement still needed in the services provided for SEND children in the Borough in relation to that statement. This may still be reviewed in order to strike the right nuance;
- Sal Thirlway stated that SEND Improvement Board would continue and that strategy would be co-delivered in partnership with stakeholders;
- Carol Cammiss stated that improving the outcomes for children was the focus of the service.

RESOLVED That the Committee noted and supported the SEND Strategy.

50. CHILD EXPLOITATION

The Child Exploitation report was presented by Kelli Scott, Interim Service Manager, Children With Disabilities and Early Help.

Kelli Scott stated that the report provided an overview of what constituted child exploitation and Council's response to it through contextual safeguarding.

Kelly Scott stated that the strategic response to Child Exploitation involved a series of partnership meetings at strategic level, aiming to understand and mitigate risk factors at an individual and community level through relationship based practice and disruption techniques.

Kelly Scott stated that the operational response to Child Exploitation was delivered through: Early Help provision; Statutory Social Work Services; KICKS Project; Youth Mentoring; Positive Pathways Project and Youth Offending Service.

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

- Members noted that the report did not contain data and asked if this could be provided;
- Kelly Scott stated that a decision had been made not to include data in order to avoid potential identification;
- Carol Cammiss stated that the data was confidential and she would investigate the possibility of being able to share this data;
- In response to a question Kelli Scott stated that partnership working was being developed in relation to contextual safeguarding;
- Members were concerned that it was not possible to know the scale of the problem without knowing the numbers. Carol Cammiss agreed to look into the possibility of presenting the data in a Part 2 session;

- In response to a question Kelli Scott stated that professionals were increasingly able to recognise/identify and respond to child exploitation, and therefore aware of more cases;
- In response to a question Kelli Scott stated that there was generally more awareness of child exploitation resulting from national and local campaigns.

Members recognised that this was a difficult area of work and thanked Kelli Scott for the report.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Future reports on Child Exploitation would include data whenever possible and the use of Part 2 to enable this would be explored.

51. COMPASS TEAM UPDATE

Adam Davis presented the Compass Team update report.

Adam Davis stated that the Compass Team had been set up to address gaps that had been identified in the provision of services. The focus of the team was to work with children at the edge of care and to support children to remain in placements for as long as appropriate.

The report contained details about the staff in the team and how it was developed.

Adam Davis stated that positive results had already been achieved since the establishment of the team.

Members suggested the inclusion of figures on outcomes to measure the impact of team in future reports.

In response to a question Adam Davis stated that he believed that the team had the appropriate number of staff at the moment, but this would be kept under review.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

52. MEASURES TAKEN TO REDUCE THE NEED FOR CHILDREN TO RETURN TO A CHILD PROTECTION PLAN

Adam Davis presented the Measure taken to reduce the need for children to return to a child protection plan report.

Adam Davis pointed out to the statistics in the report, including benchmarking.

Adam Davis stated that Childrens Services monitored the number of children becoming subject to a protection plan on a monthly basis and there was a specific indicator for the numbers becoming subject to a Protection plan for a second or subsequent time. This number fluctuated and could be influenced by a number of factors. Benchmarking against other Local Authorities and our statistical neighbours is an important component in assessing where we are. Despite “in year” peaks, Wokingham Borough Council remains below the average of statistical neighbours (communities that are similar). We collect information about children becoming subject to Child Protection plans either in the

previous 2 years and ever in their lifetime in order to test the impact of recent interventions and decision making, to give an idea of how practice is improving or otherwise.

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

- In response to a question Adam Davis stated that the term statistical neighbours referred to local authorities that had similar population demographics and they may not be neighbouring authorities;
- Members questioned the impact of the pandemic in relation to putting children on plans. Adam Davis did not believe that there was a more risk averse approach which was resulting in more children being put on a plan. He stated that decisions were made in a multi-agency process.

Members were pleased with the impact of the measures being put in place to reduce the need for children to return to a child protection plan and thanked Adam Davis for the report.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

53. FORWARD PLAN

Members asked about the vaccination programme in relation to Addington School. Carol Cammiss stated that there had been an issue with the interpretation of the legislation, this had now been resolved.

Members noted that it was positive that all staff in Foundry College and Northern House had now been vaccinated.

The Chairman asked that a date for the Briefing be identified in March, before the next meeting.

Members asked that 'inclusion' be included in the Diversity and Equality at Schools item. Carol Cammiss suggested to add inclusion as an item later on in the year. Members agreed with this approach and felt that it was important to gather data around diversity and equality issues in schools in order to monitor it.

The Chairman stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee would be discussing ideas for the forward plan for the next municipal year at its next meeting. Some Members suggested the following items:

- Work opportunities for Care Leavers
- Update on the take up of the provision of free sanitary products
- Virtual School update

54. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Carol Cammiss addressed the Committee and made the following statement:

Our education community has suffered a number of losses recently, with the passing of staff across a number of schools. Two members of staff, the Care Taker at St Teresa's Catholic Academy, the Co-Head of Year 10 from Bulmershe School have died from Covid related illnesses. Additionally Jay Blundell, Headteacher at the Foundry College, passed away at the weekend following a short period of illness.

All of these colleagues will be missed by their own school community as well as the broader education system within the Borough; and our thoughts are with their families, friends, colleagues and pupils who knew them well, at this very sad time. We are working with all schools to provide support from our educational psychology service and our school improvement service.

The Chairman asked Carol Cammiss to pass on the Committee's sympathy to the schools involved.

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