

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 17 JUNE 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.28 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Prue Bray, Anne Chadwick, Pauline Helliard-Symons, Norman Jorgensen (Chairman), Rebecca Margetts (Vice-Chairman), Andrew Mickleburgh, Morag Malvern and Jackie Rance

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Graham Howe

Officers Present

Sudeshna Banerjee, Service Manager Intelligence and Impact
Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services
Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools
Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help
Jo Jolly, Acting Service Manager Children's Services Programme Implementation
Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

Councillor Bray suggested that an effort be made to fill the parent governor representative vacancies on the Committee. The Chairman agreed to write to Chairs of Governors in an attempt to fill the vacancies.

2. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Councillor Bray on the basis that she was a Governor for the Forest School.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22 March were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters arising

Councillor Mickleburgh made the following comments:

- He asked for an update on permanent exclusions data;
- He asked that a report on the effect of the pandemic on children's development, including the national picture, be brought to the Committee when this information becomes available; and
- He asked for an update on the Committee's request to influence new policies and strategies through pre-scrutiny of draft proposals relating to Children's Services.

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships agreed to circulate information about permanent exclusions. He stated that the data/analysis relating to the impact of the pandemic on children was not yet available. However, he would provide a report when possible.

Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services stated that draft policies would be added to the forward plan, as agreed with the Chairman.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

5. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

6. CHILDREN'S SERVICES RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help and Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships presented the report.

Adam Davis stated that during the pandemic the service had to adapt to continue the delivery of its statutory duties. He highlighted the following:

- Front door contacts continued to be reviewed throughout the year, there was an increase in activity (7%) in March. However, the total number of referrals and the number of Looked After Children (LAC) remained relatively stable;
- The service provided to Children In Care (CIC) and Care Leavers had continued as it had been prior to the pandemic;
- The Fostering Team provided support to foster carers through various initiatives, as listed in the report;
- Bridges, the respite and residential care for children with disabilities remained opened, with reduced capacity and adjustments;
- The Early Help service, which is not statutory, continued to provide support to families via telephone and online communication during the pandemic;
- Supervised contact with birth parents for LAC was sustained during the pandemic. A new contact centre for LAC in the town centre had recently opened.

Sal Thirlway highlighted the following:

- The service continued to provide support to schools and early years settings, including guiding them through the new legislation;
- Weekly meetings were held with headteachers and senior leaders to provide advice and guidance and share experience;
- Additional guidance was provided to early years settings in relation to Covid risk assessments;
- The Education Welfare Service, which was normally a traded service, was provided for free during the pandemic;
- School attendance remained good in the Borough;
- All schools and early years settings in the affected wards had been engaged with the surge testing arrangements;
- There was a holistic approach to provide mental health and emotional wellbeing support to children and young people, the service worked with Social Care, Health and other professionals to provide a joined up offer. This included Kooth and mental health support teams to schools.

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

- Councillor Helliard-Symonds made reference to a recent national report which had identified failures in early help to families during Covid. She was interested to know how the service remained its focus in early help to families in need. Adam Davis stated that Wokingham had a very well established early help service, and this had continued throughout the pandemic;
- Councillor Margetts asked for more information about how the offer of mental health and wellbeing hub was going to be communicated. Adam Davis stated that the work had involved schools, school governors and campaigns to share information with parents;
- Councillor Bray asked if the contract for Kooth was going to be renewed and about the option of extending the offer to 25 year olds. Carol Cammiss, stated that the Kooth contract had been extended for a further year, there had been a slight increase in cost which was going to be absorbed by Children's Services. She would look at the possibility of extending the age range of the offer;
- Councillor Chadwick asked if the Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) covered the whole Borough. Sal Thirlway stated that the MHST was part of a national programme which the local authority had bid to, at this stage the project involved 12 schools in the Borough. It was hoped that the project would, in time, expand to all schools in the Borough;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if there had been unexpected concerns during this period and how the service was responding to these concerns. Adam Davis stated that initially there had been concerns over children who were not in contact with any professionals. As the pandemic progressed, nationally there was growing concern over the risk around the non-mobile, under 2 year olds cohort of children. In Wokingham, the service had carried out a review of cases that had been closed, recent cases, and an officer undertook targeted work with the under 5 year old cohort;
- Sal Thirlway stated that the Education Welfare Service had provided support with school attendance;
- Adam Davis stated that in Wokingham those children considered most at risk with Child Protection Plans, had continued to have their visits, with 95% completion during the pandemic period; even where legislation had allowed for flexibility;
- Carol Cammiss stated that the service had made contact with all young carers to ensure they were supported during the pandemic;
- Adam Davis stated that social workers had been able to use technology to engage young people, this had been positive and some young people preferred this method of communication;
- In response to a question Sal Thirlway stated that the traded service arrangements were regularly reviewed, and the provision of the Education Welfare service was dependent on capacity.

Members wished to express gratitude to Officers for the work undertaken during the pandemic. Members were also appreciative of the work undertaken in preparation for this meeting, given the fact that the service was undergoing an Ofsted inspection at this time.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

7. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Sudeshna Banerjee, Service Manager Intelligence and Impact presented the report.

Sudeshna Banerjee went through each indicator outlining the findings contained on the report. During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Councillor Bray asked if the timeliness of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) issued within 20 weeks of referral could be sustained. Sal Thirlway stated that the previous dip in timeliness had been due to staff churn. Currently, the workforce was more stable and more permanent staff were being recruited, therefore he was confident that the timeliness could be sustained. There was also a programme of improvement and innovation in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) offer within the Borough;
- Carol Cammiss stated that there was now a tracker in place to monitor the timeliness of all partners, to ensure timescales were being met. Also, families were being informed when and why there were delays;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss stated that there was a lot of information about all the children with EHCP. She offered to answer specific questions via email on request;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked what was being done to address the anxiety expressed by parents over the length of time to complete the EHCP process. Sal Thirlway recognised that there had been issues with timeliness in the past, but these had now been improved and the vast majority of plans were being issued within the statutory 20 week timescale;
- Councillor Chadwick expressed concern about the number of Care Leavers who were Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) and asked for the narrative around the figure. Adam Davis stated that there could be various reasons why care leavers may be NEET, they could be parents themselves or between jobs. He stated that the number was in line with other local authorities. Wokingham had recently changed the virtual school offer to extend it to working with care leavers;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if there was a timeframe showing how long care leavers were NEET. Adam Davis agreed to look into providing this information;
- Councillor Malvern asked for more information about children missing from home/care. Adam Davis stated that when a child went missing from home a return interview was carried out to try and understand the reason for that occurrence. The service looked at themes or patterns to address any issues;
- Councillor Bray expressed concern that the children/young people who were avoiding the return interview might be the ones who needed it the most. Adam Davis stated that the services also looked at contacting other adults and professionals involved with the child to find the best way to reach them;
- Councillor Mickleburgh was concerned that children missing from home may be at risk of exploitation and suggested that a more detailed report be brought to the Committee in a part 2 session.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

8. UNICEF APPLICATION

Jo Jolly, Acting Service Manager, Children's Services Programme Implementation shared a presentation about the Unicef application.

Some of the points highlighted are listed below:

- Wokingham Borough Council was applying to be part of the Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme, this programme worked with councils to put children's rights into practice;
- The programme aimed to give all children a chance to have their voice heard;
- In the UK there were seven cities/communities that were either already part of the programme or in the process of applying;

- Unicef had been particularly interested in working with Wokingham because of its unique demographics, being a wealthy Borough with significant pockets of deprivation;
- This initiative was part of an ambitious improvement programme in Children's Services;
- Wokingham had been working on the application with partners in across the area;
- The result of the application would be known in August and if successful it would start to be implemented in September;
- The programme was split into four sections:
 - Discovery – 6 months
 - Development – 2 to 3 months
 - Delivery – 2 to 4 years
 - Recognition – 3 years
- Unicef set out badges to work towards;
- Councillors were encouraged to get involved in the discovery and implantation phases.

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

- Councillor Margetts asked how Councillors could get involved in the programme. Jo Jolly stated that the programme would be child led, so the involvement of Councillors would be based on what the children/young people decided;
- Carol Cammiss stated that as part of the work that had already been undertaken, the child friendly Officers had already started to ascertain what the priorities for young people were. An event with the Youth Council was going to take place on 6 July, where a Unicef person was going to attend. The Youth Council was going to be consulted on the direction of travel of the programme;
- Carol Cammiss stated that communication would be sent to Councillors with opportunities for engagement;
- In response to a question Jo Jolly stated that the programme was for all children that lived or attended school in the Borough;
- In response to a question Jo Jolly stated that the service was looking for guidance from Unicef into how best to engage with children for this programme, in addition to the forums that were already being used;
- Councillor Helliard-Symonds stated that Councillor Batth was already undertaking a piece of work to engage with young people and suggested that he be contacted to work together on this programme;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss stated that this programme was very broad and would be part of various strategies and policies within the service;
- Councillor Bray asked if the equalities agenda was being considered. Jo Jolly stated that equalities had already been identified as a priority for young people.

Councillor Bray asked how Members could be involved in the 6 July meeting. Carol Cammiss stated that the agenda was being drawn up with young people, she would let them know that Members were interested in taking part and communicate with Members accordingly.

Members commended the work being undertaken to take part in this project.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

9. SCHOOL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND OFSTED REPORTS

Gillian Cole, Service Manager for school presented the School Performance Indicators and Ofsted reports item.

Gillian Cole highlighted the following points:

- Ofsted had suspended its inspections at the beginning of the pandemic, they decided to visit schools in the Autumn to undertake research and evidence gathering activity;
- Section 8 survey visits resulted in a letter which was posted on the school's Ofsted outcomes page, however no judgement was made as they were research visits;
- One school in the Borough had been subject to a Section 8 visit, this was St Crispin's School;
- During the Autumn term the School Improvement Team visited virtually all the schools and asked the same questions that Ofsted had used in its research visits;
- The research undertaken showed that the local provision mirrored the national provision;
- From the start of the Spring term 2021 Ofsted changed focus and undertook remote monitoring visits to schools, based on priority order in relation to current Ofsted grades. These were non-graded visits;
- Initially, there had been a focus on the quality of remote learning, this moved onto the curriculum and how schools were preparing to move back to face-to-face education;
- Two schools in the Borough had experienced the virtual visits, these were the Forest School and Gorse Ride Junior. Both were considered to be providing effective education;
- Section 8 visits were continuing in the Summer term and would take place on site;
- In response to the pandemic, significant changes were made to the operation of schools and examinations;
- The Department for Education (DfE) removed the testing requirements in respect of all reportable statutory outcomes for 2020, all the statutory testing and reporting for 2021 has also been cancelled;
- The DfE have indicated that all performance tables are suspended and no data from 2020 outcomes will be used to judge school performance. This means that there will be no Analyse School Performance (ASP) reports issued by the DfE and no local statistics for 2020 are available;
- There has been a removal of all statutory testing processes in KS1 and KS2 and a switch to Teacher Assessed Grades (TAG) for GCSE and A Level students;
- The DfE confirmed that all performance tables remain suspended and no data from 2021 outcomes will be used to judge performance. Ofsted will be using 2019 published data as the start point for any future judgement-based inspection activities;
- The TAG process is completely different from the process used last year, this process is complex and has added to the teachers' workload.

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

- Councillor Bray stated that, as a Governor, she had been involved in the Section 8 inspection at the Forest School. She reported that there had been questions that had prompted the school to think about its arrangements going forward. For example, changing from having a two year KS3 and a three year KS4 to having a three year KS3 and a two year KS4, in recognition of the fact that learning was disturbed and children in KS3 had not been taught the whole curriculum as they would have been in a normal year;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if the TAG process was addressing some of the issues encountered last year. Gillian Cole stated that algorithms were not being used this year, the responsibility of grading the students was now with the school. She felt confident that schools were being able to achieve a fair assessment of their pupils.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

10. FORWARD PLAN

The forward plan for the Committee was considered and the dates of meetings were noted.

Sal Thirlway agreed to include the planning of pre-school provision with the Early Years' Service Review in the 10 January 2022 meeting.

In relation to the Youth Centre item, Carol Cammiss sought direction from the Committee as to what was expected. She stated that there was no Youth Service in Wokingham and offered to provide a report on the general offer for young people.

Councillor Bray suggested that more thought be given to determine what the Committee would like to receive in relation to youth services.

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 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.

12. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN – PART 2

The report was discussed in a part 2 session.

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