

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 4 NOVEMBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.20 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Anne Chadwick, Pauline Helliar-Symons, Norman Jorgensen (Chairman), Andrew Mickleburgh, Morag Malvern and Jackie Rance

Councillor Prue Bray took part virtually

**Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Graham Howe took part virtually

**Officers Present**

Matthew Booth, Children's Services Consultant

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services

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

Heather Tomlinson, Interim Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships

**21. APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Rebecca Margetts, she was substituted by Councillor Sam Akhtar.

**22. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15 September 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters arising

In response to a question, Heather Tomlinson, Interim Assistant Director for Learning and Achievements stated that there was no further information on how the A-Levels and GCSE's would be assessed this year. However, it was believed that the government's intention was to re-instate exams.

In response to a request, Heather Tomlinson agreed to circulate data in relation to the catch-up fund outside of the meeting.

**23. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**24. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

**25. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

**26. CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION**

Heather Tomlinson stated that the Children Missing Education (CME) report showed a mostly positive picture in the Borough. However, of concern was the disproportionate number of Special Educational Children (SEN) who were subject of permanent exclusions.

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

- In response to questions Heather Tomlinson stated that it was the Local Government's statutory responsibility to ensure that children were not missing education. In order to reduce the number of CME it was important to ensure that there was sufficiency of suitable places to meet the children's needs. The issue of CME was complex and encompassed a broad accountability across services. The Education Welfare Service (EWS) and the Virtual School were more directly involved in working with issues relating to CME;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked if the service was following up/concerned about children who missed less than 20 consecutive days of school. Heather Tomlinson stated that schools should monitor patterns of poor absences and support to schools was given through the EWS. The School Improvement Service also monitored school attendance. She pointed out that it was important to identify needs early, with a graduated response to needs to avoid CME later on;
- Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services stated that therapeutic thinking was being rolled out to all schools, both academies and maintained. Additionally, a member of staff was employed to act as a mentor to schools and undertake reviews of plans for all Year 9 children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP);
- Carol Cammiss informed that the graduated response programme would be completed by March and it involved supporting schools to identify their needs and provide the assistance required;
- It was noted that a large number of children were re-engaged with education;
- Councillor Akhtar asked if a lack of IT equipment during the pandemic had prevented children from engaging in remote learning. Carol Cammiss explained that all children in the Borough were given access to IT equipment, either through the Local Authority or the school;
- Councillor Bray asked to have the CME data split into boys and girls and secondary and primary;
- In response to a question, Heather Tomlinson stated that there were no trends in relation to CME;
- Councillor Bray asked for further information on trends relating to permanent exclusions of children with additional needs who did not meet the threshold for EHCPs;
- Councillor Mickleburgh asked for more information on the permanent exclusions data, including a breakdown of ethnicity;
- Carol Cammiss agreed to provide further information outside of the meeting.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Officers would circulate the additional information requested.

## **27. CHILDREN'S SERVICES STRATEGY**

The Children's Services Strategy was presented by Matthew Booth, Children's Services Consultant and Carol Cammiss, Director of Children's Services.

The Strategy covered a period of three years, and it was designed to align the service delivery of the priorities. The report included details of the governance arrangements and the action plan.

The vast majority of children in Wokingham achieved very good outcomes, however it was important to acknowledge and address the needs of those children that needed additional help. One of the strategic priorities was to deliver excellent outcomes for all children, young people and families in Wokingham.

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

- Councillor Mickleburgh felt that there could be more mention of the ‘voice of the children’ within the Strategy. He asked that consideration be given to supporting the most talented children in the Borough. He also asked about support to parents struggling with child rearing;
- Carol Cammiss explained that there were various services that sat underneath the Strategy which covered those areas mentioned;
- Carol Cammiss stated that the Unicef project was one of the ways in which the voice of the children was going to be taken into account, there was also the Youth Council and other initiatives to include the voice of the children;
- In response to a comment, Adam Davis, Assistant Director of Children’s Social Care and Early Help stated that there were a range of Early Help and Early Intervention Services being provided in the Borough. These services included universal and targeted interventions;
- Matthew Booth stated that Early Intervention was very important in order to protect the most vulnerable children in the Borough;
- Councillor Helliar-Symonds stated that in the past, a strong relationship had been developed with the Fire Services with the aim of supporting the most vulnerable children in the Borough. She was interested to know if this relationship was still strong. Carol Cammiss stated that there had been changes in the Fire Service’s personnel, and the relationship was not as strong as previously. However, they still did the fire safety checks and referred into the services through the front door service. Councillor Helliar-Symonds agreed to speak to the manager of the central hub about strengthening the partnership with the Fire Services;
- Councillor Bray asked for information about the implications of the recent announcement by the DfE that the new SEND school would not open next year;
- Carol Cammiss stated that negotiations with the DfE were ongoing, including alternatives for the children. She re-assured the Committee that children’s needs would be met;
- Members were sympathetic to the challenges being created as a result of the delay in the opening of the new school;
- In response to a question, Carol Cammiss stated that Children’s Services was moving towards a more holistic approach to delivering services to children, with more integration of education and social services;
- Matthew Booth stated that the Strategy was being designed in such a way as to promote integration of services and communication between departments and partners;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss stated that the live interactive action plan did have RAG ratings, she agreed to include RAG ratings in future report updates;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss stated that a business case model was used for identifying efficiencies;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss informed that there were many partnership opportunities that the service was involved in, for example: the Children and Young People’s Partnership, the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Berkshire West Safeguarding Board, the Violence Reduction Strategy Partnership Group and others;

- In response to a question Matthew Booth stated that the service intended to complete the Strategy to tackle serious youth violence, child sexual exploitation and extra familial harm before the end of this financial year, a lot of work had already been undertaken with stakeholders;
- Carol Cammiss informed that Wokingham's training and continuous development offer for the workforce was very comprehensive and an area of strength;
- In response to a question, Carol Cammiss stated that audit reports were submitted for quality assurance purposes, however because of confidentiality these reports could not be shared with the Committee. Adam Davis added that there were core audits and themed audits;
- In relation to a question about Elective Home Education, Matthew Booth stated that the service had to be respectful of parental choice and to ensure that children were having access to good quality education, and this could be tricky. There was no legal obligation for parents for elected home educated children to engage with the Local Authority;
- In response to a question Carol Cammiss stated that IT systems were updated regularly in order to improve systems and to enable better use of data;
- Matthew Booth explained that Power BI was a data management system.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

## **28. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

The Committee discussed the Children's Services Performance Indicators report and the following comments were made:

### Dashboard Item 3 – Children's Social Care Front Door

- In relation to the number of cases that progressed to an assessment, Adam Davis explained that over the last 18 months it has been difficult to draw trends from the data. It was noted that the number of referrals went up and down, but the number that progressed to an assessment was reducing, the service was monitoring the data in order to gain a better understanding;
- In relation to the number of assessments completed in the timeframe, Adam Davis explained that some cases were being closed from Q1, others may be going into court proceedings and could take longer to process, the service was monitoring this. He stated that it was possible that the target was too high, the service was comparing it to the national average.

### Dashboard Item 4 – Child Protection

- Councillor Mickleburgh noted that the data showed small decreases if compared to the last quarter, however there were significant differences if compared to other quarters. He suggested including yearly averages in the report, in order to gain a fuller picture of the situation.

### Dashboard Item 5 – Children In Care

- % of children in care who have more than 1 allocated social worker in 12 months – Members were interested to know the trend in relation to this item. Adam Davis informed that one social worker had progressed to become a team manager, this was a positive career progression as it brought stability and knowledge to the team. However, as a result, those cases had to be moved to another part of the team and had a significant impact on statistics as the numbers were very small.

### Dashboard 1 – Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

- Members asked about the implication of the raising numbers of EHCPs. Heather Tomlinson confirmed that the numbers were going up, and this followed a national trend;
- Carol Cammiss stated that a lot of work was being undertaken to support schools and their SENCO coordinators. She stated that there was intelligence that suggested that there would be some levelling off, however it was a complex picture. The additional duties and financial implications of the Children's Act 2014 had not been fully comprehended by Local Authorities and it was a national challenge. The service was developing a number of strands of work to tackle this challenge, there was not a single solution.

#### Dashboard Item 2 – Early Help

- Members asked if there was a reason for the fluctuation on the number of referrals. Adam Davis stated that the service was monitoring this fluctuation. It was possible that the increase in the number of referrals to the Children's Social Care Front Door services had had an impact on the referrals for Early Help.

#### Dashboard Item 7 – Children Missing from Home/Care

- Members were interested to know if the number of children not currently on a school roll was known to the service. Heather Tomlinson stated that this figure should be known to the service and was monitored by the Local Authority as part of its statutory obligation in relation to children's education;
- Members asked how the service tracked children that had gone missing from the school roll. Carol Cammiss stated there was a cross over of different service areas in relation to this issue. Managed moves were tracked, and schools informed the service if there was a particular worry about a child not being in school. The service would work collaboratively if there was a concern of risk to a child;
- Carol Cammiss suggested that Members ask more detailed questions in writing for a fuller response.

#### Dashboard Item 6 – Care Leavers

- Members were encouraged to note the high percentage of care leavers who remained in touch with the Local Authority and the decrease in the Not in Employment Education or Training (NEET) percentage.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

### **29. FORWARD PLAN**

The Forward Plan for the Committee was considered and the Chairman informed that a significant number of items had been added since the last meeting.

Carol Cammiss stated that the service had a Delivery Plan with items that were being worked on. The proposed timeline of items in the Forward Plan allowed for discussions to take place at the right time to provide meaningful overview and scrutiny of the service.

The following items were added:

21 March 2022

Strategy to Tackle Serious Youth Violence, Child Sexual Exploitation and Extra Familial Harm

May 2022

Fostering Transformation (moved from March 2022)

It was requested that the Education Update item in May include information about narrowing the gap.

Members were interested to add an item about child domestic violence. Callum Wernham, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist informed that the Community Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee was receiving an update on the domestic violence contract at its meeting in March. He suggested adding this topic to that item, inviting Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Members to participate in the discussions. Members were in agreement with this suggestion.

The Committee wished to express gratitude to Carol Cammiss for her work at Wokingham Borough Council and wished her well in her new role.