

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 10 JANUARY 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.07 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 (online)

Officers Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools
Zoe Storey, School Admissions and Transport Manager
Daniel Robinson, SEN Consultant
Heather Tomlinson, Consultant, Learning Achievement and Partnerships
Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Services

30. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

31. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 November 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters arising

Members thanked Officers for the information which was circulated relating to permanent exclusions after the meeting. The data showed that there was a large number of permanent exclusions data relating to pupils with recognised Special Educational Needs (SEN). Members asked what support was being given to schools in relation to this issue. Heather Tomlinson, Consultant Learning Achievement and Partnerships explained that the response to this question was complex and offered to circulate a written answer to Members outside of the meeting.

Daniel Robinson, SEN Consultant stated that the service was aware of issues around transitions, for example from Year 6 to Year 7 and more support was needed to help with this transition. Also, there were issues with supporting children without Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and delays in issuing EHCPs. However, the service was aware of the challenges and there was ongoing work with colleagues from schools and from Health to improve the situation.

Members also asked for information about permanent exclusions of Looked After Children (LAC) and Care Leavers.

Members agreed to receive further information outside of the meeting.

In response to a question relating to lateness in EHCPs assessments, Daniel Robinson stated that Speech And Language Therapy and Assessment (SALT) relied on the service of Educational Psychologists (EP), and there was a local and national shortage of EPs.

The lack of capacity was the reason for delays. However, the service was working to address this issue and the timeliness of EHCPs was improved this year if compared to last year.

Members questioned the absence of the Key Performance Indicators report in the Agenda. Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Services agreed to schedule this item back into the forward programme.

32. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

33. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

34. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

35. REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT PROCESSES

The Committee received the Review of Home to School Transport Processes report which was set out in Agenda pages 13-18.

Daniel Robinson, SEN Consultant and Zoe Storey, School Admissions and Transport Manager presented the report. The following comments were made during discussions of the item:

- Members noted that one of the issues which had caused difficulties last year was the lateness of parental responses and asked what actions were being taken to prevent it from happening again;
- Zoe Storey stated that communication had been sent out to parents in the beginning of the summer and the lack of responses had not been anticipated. The plan was to send out communications earlier this year;
- Daniel Robinson explained that this application process had not happened for four or five years, and parents were not expecting it. This year there would not be a need to ask for a form from each family in order to re-commission the service. The communication going forward would be through schools and SENCOs, he acknowledged that last year the communication with parents had not been sufficiently clear. It was necessary to have 90% of responses in order to commission the service accordingly;
- Daniel Robinson informed that the process for commissioning home to school transport had been signed off today with Corporate Transport Unit (CTU) and SEN teams. He offered to share more information about this with the Committee;
- Members were pleased that a review had taken place and that there was acknowledgement that things had gone wrong in the past year. A Member shared an example of unsatisfactory travel arrangements for an autistic child, and expressed frustration that the report listed excuses for bad practices which should not have occurred;
- It was suggested that Officers should have telephoned parents who had not returned their forms on time. Daniel Robinson stated that the SEN Team had, later on, called parents asking them to return their forms;
- A Member felt appalled by the distress that the lack of efficiency had caused parents in the Borough;

- Daniel Robinson stated that the report sought to give an overview of the situation at the start of the review and to explain the actions which were being put in place to prevent errors from occurring again;
- It was explained that because so many forms were received late, the service had had to be re-commissioned, which had resulted in changes two days before the start of term;
- Part of the review was looking into strengthening communication with parents going forward;
- A Member believed that the key issue was that there had not been joint up work between CTU and Children's Services; she believed that the transport for SEND children should be placed under Children's Services. It was also worrying that communication with schools had not been good;
- A Member was very concerned that no one had realised that the process of re-commissioning all the providers would be complex and time consuming, and therefore not enough time and resources had been allocated to deal with it;
- Members urged Officers to learn from the mistakes that had taken place and not to let the same situation happen again;
- Daniel Robinson stated that the new role of the liaison officer, linking CTU, SEND and Admissions would be very important in improving the communication between departments going forward;
- In response to a question it was clarified that all children who were eligible to home to school transport would be provided with the service. If there were enough children from one area, it was preferable to arrange for collective transport for those children, as taxis were the most expensive form of transport;
- In response to a question it was explained that the Council did not have a statutory obligation to provide sole transport. The review found that some children who had in the past been provided with sole transport, could in fact use collective modes of transport. However, this had caused some complaints as some children were used to sole transport;
- In response to a question Daniel Robinson stated that the SEND review would be made available to the Committee, it had concluded too late to be included in the Agenda papers for this meeting;
- It was explained that the process of applying for home to school transport would involve parents sending a completed form, which would be submitted to a panel for a decision on eligibility. Communication with parents would be directly from the panel, including information on how to appeal;
- In response to a question it was explained that the SEND Team had 12 members of staff who would be able to answer questions from parents with regards to eligibility. Questions relating to problems with drivers would be directed to CTU;
- A Member asked if there were sufficient resources to deliver the service and what input schools would have in the process of arranging home to school transport, for example in terms of pick up timings and safety;
- Daniel Robinson stated that structurally, it was important to use the expertise from both the CTU and SEND departments and to enable better communication between them for better outcomes. It had also been identified that a better transport management system for collecting data and producing reports was needed;
- It was clarified that the Local Authority only had a duty to provide home to school transport during school hours. On cases where a staggered start to school was required, this was worked out with SENCOs at schools.

Members considered making a recommendation to help Officers to acquire the necessary resources/systems to improve the service. After discussions it was agreed that the Committee would wait to make recommendations at a later stage, with more information from the SEND Review and further analysis from Officers.

Members asked if there were any current issues with the provision of home to school transport. Zoe Story stated that there were issues in relation to availability of drivers, cost of petrol and the availability of buses. She stated that the review had streamlined the transport system, with the new routes 11 buses were taken out of the roads, reducing pollution and emissions.

A Member pointed out that communication with schools should not be limited to communicating with SENCOs, schools needed to be kept informed of changes and bus times. There had been serious issues last year with schools not receiving information about changes to bus times, this had damaged the relationship between the schools and the Local Authority. However, it was recognised that the Local Authority was taking action to repair the relationship with schools.

Members asked that a follow up report on Home to School Transport be submitted to the Committee, including information about the Budget.

In response to a question Daniel Robinson explained that the request for a new transport system was going to be submitted for approval to the Corporate Transport Board. He felt confident that there was sufficient information to gain approval for a new system.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) A follow up report will be submitted to the Committee, which will include information about the Budget.

36. EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee received the Education Partnership Terms of Reference report which was set out in Agenda pages 19-28.

Councillor Howe, Executive Member for Children's Services stated that over the last few years, many maintained schools converted to academy. There had been a perception that academy schools were independent from the Local Authority. There had also been a belief that there ought to be a line of command. However, both assumptions were now outdated.

Councillor Howe believed that the conduit to the schools were the headteachers. The Partnership sought to reconnect schools and the Local Authority through working in partnership with headteachers, in order to achieve the needs and aspirations of the children.

Heather Tomlinson added that the Partnership sought to enable collaboration and co-production to find solutions for big issues. It was also a mechanism for schools to work together and to hold each other and the Local Authority into account.

During discussions of the item the following comments were made:

- Members were in support of this initiative and asked to be regularly updated on its progress;
- Heather Tomlinson stated that this was going to be a completely open and transparent forum. She informed that schools had also requested to be kept informed of its progress;
- Members asked that care be taken to not overlap the work of the Partnership with Schools Forum and to avoid any duplication of work;
- Heather Tomlinson explained that Schools Forum had a very specific financial role and function. However, some complex strategic issues had been discussed at Schools Forum because there had not been another place to debate those issues. The Partnership would sit in parallel with Schools Forum and would have representations from Schools Forum in it;
- A Member asked if examples of best practice in other local authorities had been looked at. It was also asked if the cost implications could be included in future reports;
- Heather Tomlinson informed that there were many different versions of such partnerships across the country, which had developed to meet the needs and culture of specific areas. There was a national association of partner education partnerships. She stated that she had experience of working with different local authorities with different versions of education partnerships. Wokingham's Education Partnership was being established to provide a forum for collaborative strategic discussions, which was something that did not exist before. The model could change shape in the future according to local needs. She agreed that costs could be included in future reports;
- In response to a question Heather Tomlinson stated that there were no limits to which discussions could take place in the partnership. The main priorities identified by schools leaders were school organisation and the delivery of additional school places due to population expansion, school admissions and fair access protocol. Some of these work had already been undertaken and would be discussed at the first meeting of the Partnership on 27 January;
- A Member asked if the Partnership's Chairman would receive a salary. Heather Tomlinson stated that she would temporarily chair the Partnership, it was for the group to decide who would be the chair. headteachers had indicated that this should be an independent person with broad experience in education;
- Councillor Howe stated that other similar partnerships did not pay for the position of chairman, and he was of the opinion that it was not necessary for this to be a paid position.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) The Committee would receive regular updates on the progress of the Wokingham Borough Education Partnership.

37. CHILDREN'S SERVICES COVID TASK FORCE

The Committee received the Children's Services Covid Task Force report which was set out in Agenda pages 29-36.

Gillian Cole, Service Manager for Schools addressed the Committee and made the following points:

- The Task Force had been providing support to schools by:

- signposting and disseminating information
- helping to interpret national guidance from central government and health agencies
- working with local and other partners
- coordinating additional resources
- supporting schools with local outbreaks
- Currently, the Task Force was helping schools with their business continuity planning, dealing with the spread of Omicron and its impact on the attendance of both children and staff;
- There were limited mitigation plans in primary schools, most mitigation plans were in place for secondary schools (mask wearing was mandatory in secondary schools). Primary school children were also not vaccinated and were the most vulnerable section of the population;
- Conversations were ongoing with the Department for Education (DfE) to find mitigations for primary school aged children to support continued uninterrupted learning;
- The corporate Health and Safety Team produced guidance on air cleaning devices and ventilation for schools.

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

- A Member asked if there were any particular concerns in relation to LAC and Care Leavers;
- Gillian Cole informed that there was a dedicated Officer checking that the children for whom the Local Authority had corporate parenting responsibilities for were having their needs met during the pandemic, and identifying any additional needs;
- A Member asked if there were sufficient resources to continue this high level of provision and if the costs were being covered by the central government;
- Gillian Cole stated that additional capacity had been secured at the end of October, which would run until the Autumn term. The funding for the additional hours came through the central government;
- The contingency threshold framework measures had changed since Christmas, the national guidance in relation to isolation rules and advice on lateral flow tests had changed. The advice was now for primary aged children to undertake lateral flow tests;
- When schools reached the threshold they would be advised to carry out lateral flow tests for seven days, be advised on ventilation and be encouraged to purchase air cleaning devices. There was now an air cleaning marketplace for which schools would have to self-fund to purchase devices to clean the air;
- CO2 monitors were funded by central government, however they only measured the particles in the air, they did not clean out the air;
- The Health and Safety team was advising schools on ventilation and technical aspects of air cleaning devices;
- There was ongoing work with the communications team to advise parents and the community on the current guidance;
- A Member stated that there had been an increase in the number of children with eating disorders since the start of the pandemic and asked if the Local Authority was working with the community around awareness about this issue;
- Gillian Cole stated that there was a Wellbeing for Education Return Programme, this was a DfE funded initiative which the Council had been working with since August 2020. There were also a range of activities being delivered to schools by the Education Improvement Team and Educational Psychologists for all age ranges.

Members thanked Gillian Cole and the Task Force Team for the work that had been undertaken to support schools during this difficult time, it was much appreciated.

In response to a question Gillian Cole stated that CO2 monitors eventually arrived after some chasing, but for some schools they arrived very late.

In response to a question about the availability of Covid testing kits, Gillian Cole informed that the Council was having to manage and prioritise the distribution of kits. WBC had a stock of kits which could be provided to schools that had not received their orders. Also, communication was being signposted to advise residents where kits were available in the community.

In response to a question Gillian Cole stated that the current expectation was that exams would be going ahead this year. However, it was possible that this could change, therefore schools were being advised to run three mock exams in preparation for possible Teacher Assessed Grades, should they be needed.

In relation to a question about anti-vaccine material that schools had been subjected to, Gillian Cole stated that the DfE was providing very strong legal support on this issue. Every such correspondence received by schools were being passed straight to the DfE's legal department who were dealing with them.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

38. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the Forward Programme of work which was set out in Agenda pages 37-40.

The following items were added:

- Review of Home to School Transport Processes
- Key Performance Indicators
- Wokingham Borough Education Partnership update
- Education Welfare Service Review
- Secondary School Strategy
- Schools Causing Concern (Part 2 report)

Members asked that the Schools Causing Concern (Part 2) report be submitted to every meeting of the Committee, and that the local ward Members of the schools causing concern be invited to attend the meeting and take part in the discussion of this item. Members pointed out that this was important to keep Members, especially local ward Members, informed of schools that were underperforming in the Borough. They stated that the monitoring of schools' performance was not limited to Ofsted reports.

A Member explained that the Schools Causing Concern (Part 2) report had been included in the Forward Programme following the recommendation of a Task and Finish Group. There had been an issue with lack of information in relation to a school which had been underperforming. At the time the relevant local ward Member had not been informed of the situation until it became public.

Helen Watson agreed to liaise with Officers to decide the best time to present the reports which were added to the work programme.

RESOLVED That the Forward Programme be amended to include the added items.