

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 21 MARCH 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.47 PM**

Committee Members Present

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

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Pauline Helliard-Symons and Graham Howe

Officers Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Sudeshna Banerjee, Service Manager Intelligence and Impact
Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools
Adam Davis, Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help
Depak Patel, Children's Social Care Analyst Lead
Hayley Rees, Category Manager Strategy and Commissioning
Helen Watson, Interim Director for Children's Services

39. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

40. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 10 January 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters arising

Members asked if there was an update on the arrangements for Home to School Transport, especially for the new cohort in September.

Helen Watson, Interim Director for Children's Services explained that parents had been asked to respond to offers by 15 March, and the service was still working through the offers for September. She offered to provide a written update to the Committee.

41. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

42. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

43. PETER WILLIAMS ASKED THE CHAIRMAN OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION

Question

Noting WBC says it is for "everyone", will the Chairman ensure the committee undertakes to treat all census category ethnic minority groups as defined by Equalities & Human Rights Commission equally in provision of cultural and support services, comply with EHRC in replacing excluding terms BME/BAME, by "Ethnic minority" or e.g. EM, and

ensure that all under achieving under privileged pupil sub-groups are treated equally on merit regardless of colour or ethnic group?

Answer

Wokingham Borough Council is committed to equality and there is no place for any ethnic minority group to be favoured above any other in decisions on provision of cultural or support services.

We work closely with families, early years settings and schools to support *all* pupils whose background, socio-economic status or characteristics mean that they may be at risk of underachieving at school.

In line with guidance, the Council is moving away from terms such as BAME and BME, recognising that it is more appropriate to be specific when talking about different communities. A guide to inclusive language has been developed to support colleagues across the organisation. Guidance is also being developed regarding equality data monitoring to include alignment with the categories used by the Office for National Statistics and use of language around aggregated data.

44. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

45. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Sudeshna Banerjee, Service Manager Intelligence and Impact and Depak Patel, Children's Social Care Analyst Lead presented the report.

During the presentation and discussions, the following comments were made:

- It was noted that around 30% of EHCPs were placed out of the Borough, and that the reason for this was that Wokingham did not have a FE College, most of Post-16 cohort were placed in out of Borough provisions. Members wondered if there were other reasons for this and what the implications were, such as cost and children's welfare;
- Sudeshna Banerjee stated that she did not have the information about the cost, she confirmed that the main reason for the high percentage of out of Borough placements was the lack of places in Wokingham. She added that there was also a number of high complex needs that required out of Borough placements;
- Members noted the increase in the number of HHCPs and the drop in the number of EHCPs issued within 20 weeks of referral, and asked if there was an issue with capacity and what was being done to address those issues;
- Sudeshna Banerjee stated that the Children's Services workforce had been hit hard by covid since November, the main issue was not receiving information by 12 weeks from partners;
- Helen Watson stated that Wokingham had a very proactive Innovation Improvement Programme (IIP) Board which was keeping oversight of the demand in relation to ECPs and places;
- A Member asked for more information in relation to Early Help. Depak Patel informed that normally it was parents or partner agencies that asked for help. This was on a voluntary basis and there was no child protection concern;
- A Member asked how long it would take to assess 100% of front door referrals. Depak Patel stated that this depended on the complexity of the case and whether there was good engagement with the family and agency through the process;

- Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children’s Social Care and Early Help stated that the Council’s website had a lot of information about the offer of Early Help;
- A Member asked what was the number of assessments that progressed to referrals. Depak Patel informed that this was regularly monitored by the service and that there was no target number;
- A Member asked what was the impact of agency workers in the workforce. Adam Davis explained that there was a difference between stability and permanence in the workforce. There was a local and national challenge with staff permanence, which had been exacerbated by the pandemic. This was an area of focus, to try and improve permanence. Recently, the Council had signed a memorandum of cooperation in relation to how to employ interim workers to try and prevent workers moving from permanent positions to interim posts, with the local authorities across the southeast region;
- Members asked for reassurance that nothing was being missed, in relation to the number of assessments that did not progress to referrals;
- Adam Davis stated that there was risk both ways, in terms of over assessing those that did not need it and those that maybe need it. Audits and reviews were undertaken to ascertain that a proportionate threshold was being achieved;
- A Member asked what was the profile of the children missing from home/care. Depak Patel stated that the ages varied but were predominantly teenagers. Usually the parents or carers reported the child missing for some hours, and the police would look for them. Sometimes they turned up at home some hours later. Adam Davis explained that this definition was a police definition of missing from home for a number of hours, and the responses varied depending on the case;
- A Member asked if there were any trends in the children missing from home/care dashboard. Depak Patel informed that there were no trends, but sometimes the numbers were higher in particular periods such as Christmas;
- A Member asked if there were any particular concerns in relation to particular groups (gender, ethnicity or other), and suggested that this information could be provided outside of the meeting;
- A Member asked if there was cause for concern in relation to the decline in the number of return home interviews carried out on time;
- Depak Patel informed that sometimes the same child could go missing several times in the same period of time, also the child could refuse to have a return home interview. Adam Davis stated that this was closely monitored by the service;
- Adam Davis explained that the service was more concerned about what the pull factors were in relation to those children that went missing (rather than focusing on statistics about particular groups);
- A Member asked if agency staff were more likely to be deployed to work with a particular group or cohort of children, and whether a group of children may potentially be disadvantaged by having a high turn over of social workers;
- Adam Davis explained that agency workers were deployed where there was a need or a vacancy, rather than it being related to a particular cohort. He added that Looked After Children had the lowest number of locums. However, he added that some areas were harder to recruit due to the nature of the work. The service was particularly careful to not hold vacancies in the front door team.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

46. SPECIALIST ACCOMMODATION

The Specialist Accommodation report was presented by Hayley Rees, Category Manager Strategy and Commissioning.

Some of the points highlighted during her presentation are listed below:

- A number of teams across the Council were working together to provide accommodation for children leaving care and homeless 16-17 year olds, to support their transition into adulthood and independence;
- The Council did not currently have sufficient local provision to meet the demand. In order to meet its statutory duties, the Council commissioned externally when needed;
- It was desirable to have more accommodation locally as this provided more control and enabled young people to retain local links;
- There were two phases of work to this work programme. The first phase was to provide for care leavers (16-21) and the second phase was for care leavers who were 18 or older and for 16-17 year old who were homeless;
- The current provision included a property in the centre of Wokingham which provided for 16-25 year olds, some of which were care leavers. This property provided a range of accommodation options within it, it was very high quality, however there was a waiting list for it;
- Another property, also within the town centre, which the Council had recently renovated was dedicated for care leavers only. This was also high quality and provided a range of accommodation with support 24 hours a day seven days a week. This property had a staff and training room and could provide emergency accommodation if needed;
- Phase two of the programme was in the early stages, a potential property had been identified, a feasibility exercise was being carried out and a business plan was being produced to ascertain the requirements of the building. It was hoped that this property, pending planning application and other approvals, would be ready for occupation by 2023.

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

- A Member asked how the Council proposed to tackle the waiting list;
- Hayley Rees explained that there was a desire to have accommodation for young people locally as it allowed more control in terms of affordability and quality. The number of care leavers could be predicted, but it was not possible to predict the number of homeless 16-17 year olds who would need accommodation. There was ongoing work with colleagues in Housing to provide adequate accommodation for care leavers and homeless 16-17 year olds;
- A Member asked how the service providers in those two properties were going to be monitored;
- Hayley Rees stated that there was a contract and a procurement process had taken place, which had involved various aspects of quality assurance. The procurement process had involved a panel of care leavers. The team was very experienced in monitoring contracts, through targets and outcomes. Quantitative and qualitative data was used to monitor the provider. An annual report would be produced that could be shared with the Committee. If the service was not happy with the contract, there was a mechanism to deal with it;
- Adam Davis added that each care leaver had a personal advisor who would also be able to provide feedback;
- In response to a question Hayley Rees clarified that the first phase had been focused on accommodation for care leavers, the second phase was also going to provide accommodation for 16-17 homeless young people. She confirmed that it was hard to predict the number of 16-17 homeless young people;

- Hayley Rees pointed out that the property in Reading Road provided accommodation for 16-17 year old homeless young people. The new project involved Housing and Children's Services working together to increase the capacity for this cohort, to ensure sufficiency. Through the Front Door team, an assessment took place to determine the type of support that a young person needed;
- In response to a question Hayley Rees confirmed that a member of staff was on site 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Care leavers received an allowance through Social Care. The provider was expected to offer support with training in relation to budgeting, finance, cooking and to offer mental health and wellbeing support;
- Adam Davis added that each child had a pathway plan which covered preparation for independence;
- A Member asked if it was possible to arrange to meet with young people in the facility to gain feedback;
- Hayley Rees informed that conversations about this possibility were already taking place, and if young people did not feel comfortable meeting at the property, a different mechanism would be found. It was important to gain their feedback, especially in preparation for other similar projects;
- Adam Davis informed that it was more appropriate for Corporate Parenting Board Members to be involved in the feedback exercise;
- A Member asked if there was a preference for properties in Wokingham town centre and if there was a need in other areas of the Borough;
- Hayley Rees stated that central Wokingham worked well because of transport links and because it was near the town, but there was also an element of availability of properties;
- A Member mentioned that there was no bus from Woodley to Wokingham, so that was not convenient.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) The Committee supports the programme of work

47. HARM OUTSIDE THE HOME STRATEGY

Matthew Booth, Children's Services Consultant presented the Harm Outside the Home Strategy. Some of the highlights of his presentation are listed below:

- This was a progress update report, as the strategy was still being constructed;
- This was a multi-agency strategy involving many partners;
- The purpose of the strategy was to tackle all related issues to reduce the risk of children and young people coming into harm outside of the home environment;
- Some examples of harm outside the home were:
 - Child sexual exploitation
 - Child criminal exploitation
 - Children missing and/or excluded from education
 - Risks of becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious youth violence;
 - There were various contexts in which harm outside the home could take place;
- This strategy lived in the intersection between exploitation, extra-familial harm and serious youth violence;
- One of the challenges had been to keep focus of the most important factors for Wokingham and to limit the scope of the strategy;

- The strategy had received input from a wide range of stakeholders and partners, and a review of best practice had also been undertaken;
- There were already other strategies and lines of work within Wokingham to prevent children from harm (as listed in the report);
- Over a dozen datasets had been submitted by partners to help inform the evidence base behind the strategy, these datasets were being analysed;
- Some priorities had already been identified:
 - Focus on prevention
 - Right response, right time
 - Effective partnership
- Wokingham's absolute numbers (in relation to crime and violence incidents) were very small, if compared to national data;
- Groups of more vulnerable children had already been identified (as listed in the report);
- Information sharing was an important part of the strategy, as such there were initiatives to strengthen it;
- Discussions had focused on a unique approach which integrated contextual safeguarding and Public Health approaches to improving outcomes;
- Work was being undertaken to decide on the best approach to assess risk, including a review of best practice in other local authorities;
- Consultation and engagement activity were currently being undertaken, including with children and young people;
- The report contained the timeline for the strategy, the completion day was 19 May.

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

- A Member asked what was the scale of the problem in Wokingham;
- Matthew Booth stated that it was difficult to identify trends from the last few years because of covid. As an example, pupils exclusions had gone down in the last two years, but this was because children had not been in their normal place of learning and education. Also, it was difficult to draw trends when the numbers were so small. However, professionals were raising concerns about online and social media related risks;
- A Member expressed concern about cyber bullying and online crime, and the fact that it was less visible and more difficult to identify. Matthew Booth agreed that education professionals and the police were also concerned about the risks around online crime, and this highlighted the importance of engaging with children and young people to prevent such crimes and to facilitate the reporting of online incidents;
- A Member asked for more information about the involvement of the voluntary sector in the strategy;
- It was suggested that identifying the underlining causes of risk be added to the prevention focus (to identify the perpetrators of harm);
- Matthew Booth agreed that more involvement from the voluntary sector was important and desirable; the aim was to increase their participation and input;
- Matthew Booth confirmed that the strategy was for 0 to 25 years old;
- Matthew Booth agreed that it was important to try and identify the causes of harm, however, he pointed out that it was difficult to decide how far to go in identifying underlying causes;
- A Member asked how the service was engaging with schools about the strategy;
- Matthew Booth stated that a Borough Educational Partnership had recently been established, with representatives from primary and secondary schools was one of the channels that would be used. This piece of work would be presented to the

Partnership and they would be asked how they wished to input on the work going forward. Also, the Innovation and Improvement Programme (SEND) was being involved in discussions. All available existing channels with schools were being used to gain their engagement and input;

- A Member asked how young people were going to engage with the strategy and how ethnic minority groups were going to be involved and considered;
- Matthew Booth informed that colleagues had already approached the Youth Council to get their views and engagement. Officers were mindful that some topics were very sensitive and were being careful when approaching young people to take part in discussions;
- In relation to online threats, the service relied on young people's feedback, national surveys and research;
- In relation to ethnic minorities, the service relied on the available recorded data to analyse and come to conclusions, however this was difficult due to the small numbers in Wokingham;
- A Member asked who undertook intervention on the ground (as mentioned in the report);
- Matthew Booth stated that a number of people did interventions on the ground, such as: Social Workers, Early Help, Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub, teachers and certain professionals;
- In response to a question, Matthew Booth stated that there was lot of partnership work with colleagues in Berkshire. Issues that were linked to London were picked up with the police;
- A Member asked if there were any difficulties with sharing data due to confidentiality;
- Matthew Booth stated that there were multi-agencies involved that already had integrated systems between them; there were some gaps to improve but some good work to build upon too.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The work on the strategy be commended; and
- 2) The update report be noted.

48. SCHOOL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND OFSTED REPORTS

Gilian Cole, Service Manager Schools presented the School Performance Indicators and Ofsted Reports. Some of the comments made during her presentation are listed below.

- There had been a change in practice by Ofsted in relation to the inspection of schools that had previously been deemed outstanding, those schools were now back into the inspections schedule;
- Some of those outstanding schools in the Borough had not been inspected for up to 14 years. Ofsted's Chief Inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman was very clear of her view that a school should be inspected at least once during a child's journey through that establishment;
- There was some work to undertake with outstanding schools to bring them up to date with the inspection framework;
- Those schools that had had their last inspection prior to 2015 would receive a full section 5 inspection, which could change the overall grading at the end of the inspection process. Other schools would receive a monitoring section 8 inspection;

- The challenge for schools previously judged outstanding was that the Ofsted framework had changed significantly since the last time they were inspected; particularly in relation to the expectation for outstanding;
- Ofsted had clarified that an outstanding grading was 'exceptional'. It was expected that a school would have to achieve outstanding in all areas of judgement in order to achieve an outstanding grading;
- Officers had been in conversations with schools in preparation for these inspections, and help to understand expectations;
- One important factor for Ofsted was that school leaders were required to make an accurate judgement call with regards to the school's quality of education. Officers were having conversations with school leaders explaining this requirement;
- A number of Ofsted inspections had been carried out since September 2021, and the details and outcomes were as detailed in the report;
- It was pointed out that Highwood Primary and Radstock Primary had now achieved positive outcomes of 'Good' ratings;
- There was no national data set for 2021, the last published data set was for 2019. However, it was anticipated that there would be data for KS4 for 2022, this would be brought to the Committee when available;
- Primary school assessments would take place, but the results would not be published at national level, they would be shared with schools and parents. It was still to be understood how this information would be shared with the local authorities.

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

- Members were pleased to note the progress and the achievement of 'Good' ratings by schools in the Borough;
- In response to comments, Gillian Cole stated that it was important to acknowledge the challenges being faced by school communities and their leaders in relation to the new Ofsted framework and potential Ofsted outcomes;
- Gillian Cole informed that schools were being alerted to factors that influenced Ofsted inspection outcomes, such as the importance of the quality of education, an accurate self-assessment and continuous focus on safeguarding;
- Ofsted recognised the impact the pandemic had had on schools' ability to drive change, in relation to curriculum changes for example;
- In response to a question about how to deal with staff absences during an Ofsted inspection, Gillian Cole stated that there were mitigations in relation to staffing shortages. For example, it could be that senior leaders had left the school because they were moving to more senior positions after a good succession growth programme;
- Gillian Cole informed that Ofsted had increased its focus on deferral of inspections. Some schools within the Borough had successfully applied for a deferral in their inspections (particularly due to covid);
- A member stated that some of the Ofsted ratings in the report needed updating, Gillian Cole agreed to check.

RESOLVED That: The report be noted.

49. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Committee's Forward Programme, which was set out in pages 77-81 was discussed.

It was agreed to condense the items for the next meeting June to a general Education Update.

It was agreed that the Fostering Transformation be moved for discussion at the Corporate Parenting Board.

Members asked that the Education Update includes an update on issues arising in relation to accommodating Ukrainian and Hong Kong children in the Borough.

RESOLVED That the Forward Programme be noted with the changes above.

50. 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 Ac as appropriate.

51. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN

The report was discussed in a part 2 session.

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