

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 2 NOVEMBER 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.30 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Andrew Mickleburgh (Chair), Shirley Boyt (Vice-Chair), Morag Malvern, Beth Rowland, Graham Howe, Pauline Helliard-Symons and Rachel Bishop-Firth

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Rachel Bishop-Firth
Prue Bray via Teams

Community Representatives

Sarah Clarke

Officers Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Gillian Cole, Service Manager Schools
Adam Davis, Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help
Rachel Oakley, Assistant Director Quality Assurance Safeguarding Standards
Hayley Rees, Category Manager Strategy and Commissioning
Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships
Nicola Vines, Local Authority Designated Officer
Helen Watson, Director of Children's Services

Others Present

Emma Cantrell, First Days CEO
Jake Morrison, Citizens Advice CEO

26. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor Anne Chadwick and the Reverend Canon Richard Lamey.

Councillor Anne Chadwick was substituted by Councillor Alison Swaddle.

27. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 7 September 2022 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the amendment below, and signed by the Chair.

That on page 11 under item 20, in reference to the opening of Matthewsgreen Primary, it be added that the school will initially open for KS2, as there is a shortage of school places for that cohort.

Matters arising

In relation to SEND Innovation and Improvement Programme, page 8 of the agenda, the following recommendations were developed by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman and would be put forward to the Council's Executive:

The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Executive:

- 1) Facilitates regular messaging across the Council that supporting SEND is an enduring responsibility incumbent upon all Members, Officers and activities of the Council; and

- 2) Explore with Officers ways of sharpening the focus on ensuring accountability in all SEND services, including all shared services.

28. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

29. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

30. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

31. APPOINTMENT OF CO-OPTED MEMBERS

The Chairman explained that this report was seeking to ratify the appointments of two co-opted members to join the Committee. Upon being put to the vote, Members were unanimously in favour of the appointments.

Members were pleased with the appointments and welcomed both new members to the Committee.

RESOVED That the Committee ratifies the appointments of:

- 1) Sarah Clarke, Chair of SEND Voices Wokingham (non-voting); and
- 2) Richard Lamey, Church of England representative (voting rights for education matters only)

32. YOUTH COUNCIL UPDATE

This item was deferred to a future meeting.

33. IMPACT OF THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The Committee received a presentation from Emma Cantrell, First Days CEO and Jake Morrison, Citizens Advice Wokingham CEO, both members of the Hardship Alliance.

Some of the highlights of the presentation are listed below:

- There had already been a drop in living standards nationally and locally;
- Children who grew up in poverty were four times more likely to develop mental health problems and the affected children were less likely to achieve the same level of academic success as their peers;
- Inequality was more stark in Wokingham due to the fact that this is an affluent area;
- The number of children living under the poverty line in Wokingham was listed in one of the slides, all wards had children living under the poverty line;
- The definition of poverty by the DWP was living with less than 60% of medium income of the area lived in. In Wokingham the median income was just over £34k;
- The cost of living crisis was affecting two groups in particular:
 - Those who were already living in long-term hardship – for these people there was now a sense of helplessness; and

- Those who were managing before but were not now – some in this group were not sure what options for help were available to them, the number of people falling into this category was growing;
- First Days expected to support over 6,000 children in Wokingham in the next 12 months with essential items;
- 33% of the families supported by First Days had one adult in work, this figure was 56% two years ago, it seemed that some low income families had dropped out of the job market;
- Over 1,500 requests for support had been received from Children's Services;
- Over 3,000 children were supported via the Outreach Team in the community;
- Local charities had seen a significant increase in demand for their services and some were over capacity with a waiting list;
- There was a risk of a potential increase in demand for statutory services;
- The voluntary sector was not able to sustain the level of demand. Charitable funding had dropped 40% since the same time last year and costs had increased due to inflation, some charities would not survive;
- Schools were having to deal with the social impact of the current crisis;
- It was important to ensure that families in need were accessing all the support that was available;
- There had been a significant increase in the number of single people living with children;
- Helplessness was a strong indicator of mental health issues, which could lead to suicidal thoughts;
- Citizens Advice had seen a 75% increase in the number of calls for support since last October;
- 57% of people on universal credit in Wokingham had children to support;
- Debt solution was being very difficult to achieve.

Councillor Bray agreed that the current crisis was very serious. She informed that the Council was helping as much as possible, for example with the cost of school uniform and school trips. She felt worried about the situation as there was no short or medium term solution to this crisis. In addition, the number of people who could help was reducing and the number of people who needed help was increasing.

Jake Morrison informed that Wokingham United Charities offered grants to schools for families who were struggling, however the uptake of this offer was low. He would share the details with Councillor Bray.

Councillor Bishop-Firth expressed her gratitude to the work being undertaken by the charities and the voluntary sector. The Council was providing vouchers during the school holidays to families whose children received free school meals. This scheme was funded until March 2023. The Council was committed to continuing funding it until May 2023, however funding from the government was needed after that.

Emma Cantrell explained that local authorities had been put into a difficult position since the grant for free school meals had been cut in real terms.

Emma Cantrell clarified that the figure of 33% of households with one adult in employment, was irrespective of how many adults lived in the house.

Councillor Helliard-Symonds was concerned that the Cowshed was located in Reading and it could be difficult for people to get there. Emma Cantrell explained that accommodation was a challenge for charities due to the high price of properties. Emma Cantrell stated that work was underway with the Council to try and identify resources.

Councillor Bishop-Firth asked what were the barriers preventing people from getting into work, in view of the significant drop in the number of households with adults in work.

Emma Cantrell explained that low wage incomes had not increased sufficiently to balance the budget, and childcare was very expensive. Also, flexible working arrangements were not available for low income jobs.

Councillor Howe was interested to know how the Council could help the charities and the voluntary sector, and how was their relationship in 2019. Jake Morrison stated that the relationship between charities, the voluntary sector and the Council was much improved at the time of the pandemic in March 2020, and it has continued to improve since. He explained that the current challenge was around resources. In the past his organisation had been able to answer 95% of the calls received, this number was now closer to 60%.

Emma Cantrell stated that the communication and information about what help was available could be improved.

Emma Cantrell explained that she ran a small team of five full-time equivalent positions. Her team were asking for an employee benefit programme, this was very expensive and she wondered if the Council could work in partnership with her charity to offer assistance in that respect.

The Chairman suggested that Town and Parish Councils could be approached to help charities and the voluntary sector.

Emma Cantrell stated that help with grant application processes would be very welcome.

Councillor Rowland expressed serious concern with the current cost of living crisis.

Councillor Boyt stated that the Council building was currently being underutilised, and suggested that maybe charities or nurseries could use the building. Emma Cantrell informed that imaginative ways to use the building were already being discussed.

Councillor Swaddle suggested that Emma Cantrell attend the Borough/Parish Liaison Forum to share her presentation with that group. She also suggested that the old library building could be an option of accommodation.

Emma Cantrell informed that the old library would be used during the winter for storage. However, the utility costs of that building was a big consideration for charities.

In response to a question, Jake Morrison explained that librarians would be trained to help people to maximise access to benefits, with a tool called benefit calculator. They would offer this help at local libraries.

Members were informed that consideration should be given to the fact that transport was expensive for people who were struggling financially, and that services needed to be available locally to avoid travel costs.

Councillor Boyt wondered if there was an opportunity for Council Officers to volunteer to help charities, for example working one day a week for a charity. Emma Cantrell explained that the volunteer idea was being explored, and also with businesses in the area.

The Chairman asked for more information about the relationship between Children's Services and the charities.

Emma Cantrell stated that her charity received requests for support from social workers from Children's Services. There was a very good working relationship with the Community Engagement Team. However, there was potential to improve the partnership with Children's Services.

Jake Morrison explained that recently there had been interaction with the Care Leaver's Team and that a course had been offered to care leavers as a result of this interaction. He believed that the communication between the Council and the voluntary sector could be improved further.

Adam Davis, Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help stated that his team welcomed the engagement with the charities and invited both Emma Cantrell and Jake Morrison to attend managers meetings to share information. Helen Watson, Director of Children's Services extended the invitation and welcomed the opportunity to work with the charities.

Councillor Howe stated that most big companies were involved in voluntary work and offered to share his expertise.

Members thanked Emma Cantrell and Jake Morrison for their participation in the meeting and for the work they were doing, it was much appreciated.

The Committee wished to make a series of recommendations and agreed that the final wording would be proposed by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman and circulated to Members for final agreement via email.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The Committee recommends that the Executive:
 - i. Supports Wokingham Borough Council to lobby the government to ensure adequate provision of Household Support Funding beyond May 2023, when the present arrangements end.
 - ii. Supports efforts to help groups working to support families made vulnerable by the cost of living crisis, by looking at ways council-owned properties might be made available to assist such groups requiring premises for their activities.
 - iii. Work with Senior Council Officers to help improve communications between Council staff and local organisations, including the Hardship Alliance, to further increase awareness and understanding amongst Council staff about the current local offers of these organisations.
 - iv. Request that Officers investigate possibilities for a local volunteer scheme for Council staff; and explore ways of using the Council's Communications Team to support volunteer recruitment from amongst the public.

- 2) That Officers write to the Chair of the Borough Parish Liaison Forum to request that the Hardship Alliance be invited to attend one of their meetings to give a presentation and take part in questions and answers on the impact of the cost of living crisis.

34. INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2021/22 was presented by Rachel Oakley, Assistant Director for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding.

The IROs acted independently of social workers teams, their role was that of a critical friend. They chaired the children's reviews and monitored the work being undertaken with the young person.

The number of looked after children had been increasing, however Wokingham continued amongst the lowest percentage of looked after children per 100,000 habitants in the country.

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

- Sarah Clarke asked how many of the Children In Care (CIC) had SEND, how many had educational breakdowns and how they were tracked into adult services;
- Rachel Oakley stated that there were no CIC because of educational breakdowns. *She subsequently informed that there were 18 CIC with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP);*
- It was explained that educational breakdown was a situation that occurred when a setting was not the right place for a child, which led to the child being at home without a placement, and in rare cases it could escalate to a child then going into care;
- Rachel Oakley explained that if a child was likely to need services into adulthood, contact with adult services would be made when the child was aged 14. There would be a transition worker, a social worker and a PA working with the child. The Care Leaver status continued to the age of 25;
- In response to a question Rachel Oakley stated that there were no formal challenges in respect to transitions in the last year;
- Rachel Oakley explained that the example on page 33 referred to 50% of a sample, not 50% of the whole population of CIC. The way that ethnicity was monitored was defined by the DfE, there was a project underway to work out sub-categories in order to better understand the data about the children;
- Councillor Boyt asked what was the percentage of Gipsy Roma Traveller (GRT) CIC in the borough. Rachel Oakley stated that it was between one and two percent;
- Rachel Oakley agreed to email information about the GRT training provided to officers;
- In reference to page 44, Councillor Helliard-Symonds was pleased to note that letters were being posted out in response to the difficulties with opening secure emails electronically;
- The Chairman asked for reassurance that important documentation was reaching the IROs;
- Rachel Oakley stated that officers were aware of the need to keep IROs informed;
- Adam Davis recognised that it could be challenging sometimes for social workers, to deal with critical situations and keep the IROs informed. He assured Members that IROs were always consulted when important decisions were being made.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

35. LOCAL AREA DESIGNATED OFFICER (LADO) ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

Nicola Vines, Local Authority Designated Officer presented the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO) Annual Report 2021/22.

The LADO was responsible for managing allegations made against professionals who work or volunteer to work with children. The level of allegations had now gone back to what it had been prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic there had been a decrease in the number of allegations.

Sarah Clarke asked for more information about the training offer to residential homes. Nicola Vines stated that there were various training sessions scheduled, which were open to anyone to attend, and in addition she had offered to go in person to deliver training at the residential children's home in Wokingham.

With reference to page 53 of the agenda, Councillor Helliard-Symonds was intrigued by the fact that some schools received more referrals than others, and wondered if this was due to their own pastoral teams.

Nicola Vines believed that there were a number of reasons as to why some schools had a higher level of referrals to LADO than others. This could be because of their ethos, particular cohorts or level of experience. She informed that Ofsted would contact LADO during inspections to ask if there had been any referrals made by the school. There was ongoing work to raise awareness of the LADO service.

Councillor Boyt pointed out that there had been an increase in the number of referrals for Early Years, and asked for more information about this. Nicola Vines stated that she had attended an Early Years Forum to deliver training. It was possible that Early Years settings were speaking to the Early Years Advisory Team before they contacted LADO. She observed that children were being more challenging post pandemic, lacking some of the skills that were expected at their age. The staff who worked in Early Years did not have the same level of training and experience that teachers had, this could be part of the reason for the increase in referrals for Early Years.

In response to a question Nicola Vines confirmed that out of 180 allegations 44 were investigated and 14 were substantiated. 7 out of the 14 had led to written warnings within disciplinary procedures and training required to continue within the role; 5 led to dismissal with a referral to DBS, one was against a childcare provider and was taken on by Ofsted to complete the investigation as to whether that childcare provider could continue registered, and one is undergoing further risk assessments by the employer and Children's Services.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

36. CHILD PROTECTION ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

Rachel Oakley presented the Child Protection Annual Report 2021/22. She informed that the number of Child Protection (CP) plans had decreased this year, however the level of complexity had remained very high. Work continued with partners such as Health and the Police.

The Chairman asked why there were no CP plans for children at risk of exploitation outside the home (page 66 of the agenda). Rachel Oakley stated that the categories were set nationally, and only those categories could be used. The service was using multi-agency conferences to look at children who were at risk of exploitation outside of the

home. Traditionally social workers looked at harm from inside the home, this was a new area of work. There was work being carried out with partners to protect this group of children. This related to a small number of children in Wokingham.

In reference to the use of the old library's meeting room, the Chairman asked how that was moving forward. Rachel Oakley informed that there was a new conference room in Shute End which was going to be used. Hybrid and virtual meeting had provided an opportunity to improve engagement of all parties.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

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

Councillor Bray informed that the Safety Valve negotiations had started. This work was being carried out with the DfE, the Council had three months to work out a plan to bring down to zero, in five years time, the deficit in the High Needs Block (HNB).

The pressure continued for school places for junior and early secondary school years. It would be extremely difficult to provide sufficient school places for Year 7 next year.

The national transfer scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) number for Wokingham had been increased from 28 to 41, as predicted by Adam Davis. The local authority continued to be responsible for young people in care up to the age of 25, however, from 18 to 25 the funding was significantly reduced, and this added pressure on the system.

Councillor Bray informed that Helen Watson and herself were attending a Children and Adult Social Care Conference in Manchester, with the intention of learning and obtaining information about the current challenges and examples of good practice. She gave the following examples:

- Salford had given an interesting presentation about an initiative called Salford Family Partnership. This was one-stop offering for everything involving children.
- Hillington had an initiative about sharing intelligence about children at risk of criminal exploitation. The analytical system they used was worth considering for Wokingham.

Most local authorities faced similar challenges to those encountered in Wokingham. However, it was encouraging to notice that in Wokingham Borough there was a desire to work together in partnership to deliver good services for residents.

In response to a question Councillor Bray confirmed that planning was underway to prepare for the increase in demand for school places next year, however a solution had not been found yet.

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning and Partnerships confirmed that there was significant growth in demand for school places, in particular for Year 7 next year. A higher number of applications than the Published Admission Number (PAN) was expected. However, it was also expected that some children would go to private schools and grammar schools. The local authority was actively discussing with schools the provision of additional places next year. There was a delicate balance that had to be taken into account when creating additional school places and the impact on schools' budgets.

Adam Davis added that a lot of work already took place in terms of sharing data with partners and layering information to safeguard children against exploitation.

In response to a question Sal Thirlway informed that there was a total of 2215 places were available in the borough for Year 7, and there had been 2512 applications made. He pointed out that although there was a shortage of places the figure was likely to change due to the factors already mentioned.

Councillor Howe added that there had also been growing pressure on school places for in-year applications for a few years. Sal Thirlway informed that the new Fair Access Protocol was helping with the challenges around in-year applications.

RESOLVED That verbal updated be noted.

38. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Key Performance Indicators report was considered, and the following points were made:

Dashboard item 7 – Children missing from home/care

- Councillor Swaddle asked for a breakdown of the number of permanent exclusions, in particular she was interested to know how many had SEND;
- Sal Thirlway agreed to provide a written response to this question.

Dashboard item 1 – Funded Education, Health and Care Plans

- The Chairman asked what were the possible solutions being explored to address the shortage of professionals which caused delays;
- Sal Thirlway confirmed that there were shortages within the Health providers who co-produced the EHCPs, there was also a shortage of educational psychologists within the local authority. This issue related to a national cap on the number of people who could train and qualify to become educational psychologists. Wokingham worked with universities and had psychologist trainees, however recruitment was difficult. Different ways to deliver those statutory responsibilities around assessments were being explored, for example by commissioning external educational psychologists to undertake virtual assessments when appropriate. There was continuous dialogue with Health colleagues to try and address the challenges.

Councillor Howe stated that peer reviews had taken place and suggested that these be shared with the Committee.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

39. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Youth Council and the SEND Youth Forum would be invited to attend future meeting.

Helen Watson suggested that a pre-recorded video could be used to ensure the participation of the Youth Council, should they be unable to attend a meeting in person or via Teams.

RESOLVED That the Forward Programme be noted.

40. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for items 41 and 42 on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

41. ACCOMMODATION ISSUES LINKED TO UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN

This item was discussed in a Part 2 session.

42. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN

This item was discussed in a Part 2 session.