

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 22 MARCH 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.41 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Andrew Mickleburgh (Chair), Shirley Boyt (Vice-Chair), Morag Malvern, Anne Chadwick, Graham Howe and Pauline Helliar-Symons

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Prue Bray

Officers Present

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Piers Brunning, School Place Planning Manager
Gillian Cole, Service Manager for Schools
Rachel Oakley, Assistant Director Quality and Assurance
Hayley Rees, Category Manager Strategy and Commissioning
Zoe Storey, School Admissions and Transport Manager
Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve/ SEN Consultant
Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Services
Ming Zhang, Interim Assistant Director for Learning, Achievement and Partnerships

59. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Fr Richard Lamey.

60. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 31 January 2023 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the amendments below, and signed by the Chair.

Amendment requested by Sarah Clarke:

Page 13 of the agenda – that the following sentence be added: Sarah Clarke stated that every local authority is supposed to have a website where parents could find *information called the Local Offer, Wokingham does have a Local Offer, but families report finding it difficult to locate the information they need.* The improvement of the *Local Offer* is *hopefully part* of the improvement plan and is linked to the Safety Valve Programme.

Page 13 of the agenda – where it says *South West* it should read South East.

Amendment requested by Helen Watson, Interim Director for Children's Services:

Page 10 of the agenda - That *David Gussi* be changed to David Goosey.

Matters arising

Home to school transport – there had been a request for information in relation to training for drivers and escorts. It was agreed that this item would be added to the Forward Programme.

Youth Council presentation to the Council – This had been arranged with the Mayor's office and was due to take place at the September meeting.

Education Update report – there was a recommendation to circulate this report to all Members of the Council. It was agreed that this would be actioned.

61. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

62. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

63. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

64. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Members considered each dashboard contained in the report.

Sarah Clarke, who was unable to be present at the meeting, had submitted questions about the Performance Indicators. It was agreed that the answers to those questions would be submitted in writing and shared with the Committee.

Comments were made as follows:

Dashboard item 1 – Funded Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

Members noted that significant improvements to the timeliness of EHCPs were expected in Q4 as a result of the actions being taken.

Dashboard item 4 – Child Protection

The Chairman asked how much flexibility the service had to deal with the increase in demand and complexity on caseloads, and what was the impact of this increase in the service?

Helen Watson explained that some flexibility was needed and on occasions the use of locum staff was necessary. Staffing levels were monitored very closely.

Dashboard 5 – Children in Care

Councillor Boyt asked for the narrative behind the increase in the % of CIC who have more than one allocated Social Worker in 12 months.

Helen Watson explained that there could be a number of reasons, such as transitions, staff sickness or maternity leave. An effort was always made to minimise changes in Social Workers, but sometimes there was no other alternative.

This was an important indicator for the service, which was monitored very closely. However, there were challenges, both nationally and locally in relation to the recruitment and retention of Social Workers.

Rachel Oakley, Assistant Director Quality and Assurance informed that there had been a decrease in the turn over of permanent staff in the last quarter.

Dashboard 6 – Care Leavers

Councillor Helliars-Symonds asked for the reasons for the number of Care Leavers who were Not in Employment Education or Training (NEET) and what was being done to help them?

Rachel Oakley explained that there was a large number of young people in this cohort who had disabilities or illnesses which prevented them from seeking employment or education. There were also some young people who were parents and looking after their children. It was also important to acknowledge that entering and sustaining work was difficult for this group of people.

Helen Watson informed that a Care Leavers improved offer was being developed, creating apprenticeship opportunities and guaranteed jobs interviews within the Council for Care Leavers.

The Chairman stated that he had once attended a NEET planning meeting, this was a monthly meeting where options for each individual were discussed. He recommended Members to attend this meeting to better understand the work undertaken to help this cohort.

Councillor Helliard-Symonds asked where were the 3% of Care Leavers who were not in suitable accommodation?

Rachel Okley informed that there were 100 Care Leavers at the time of the snapshot, and three were not in suitable accommodation. She explained that unsuitable accommodation included people being in prison, in houses of multiple occupation or homeless. However, this figure changed every month.

Councillor Helliard-Symonds asked for further clarification about the possibility of Care Leavers being homeless. Helen Watson explained that this would be on a very short period of time whilst in transition. The ambition was to have all young people in suitable accommodation.

Rachel Okley explained that each situation was unique and sometimes it was due to personal choice.

Councillor Bray explained that when young people were on benefits they were only entitled to accommodation within a shared house. There was an issue with classification, for example someone in prison was classified as being in unsuitable accommodation.

The Chairman suggested that future reports should include the narrative around the Care Leavers not in suitable accommodation.

Councillor Boyt asked if the service kept in touch with the young people in prison. Helen Watson confirmed that the service did keep in touch with young people in prison.

Dashboard item 7 – Children missing from home / care

The Chairman asked for the narrative around the number of permanent exclusions. Helen Watson offered to provide a written response on this.

The Chairman asked if data about children missing from home / care was available for children living outside of the borough? Helen Watson stated that information about children living outside of the borough was closely monitored, including data about children missing from home / care.

Dashboard 8 – Children's Services workforce

Members were aware that there was now a dedicated officer working on recruitment of Social Workers, and asked the service to bring a report to the Committee for an update on the development of this initiative. Helen Watson agreed to this proposal.

Rachel Oakley explained that ASYE stood for Assessed and Supported Year in Employment. This programme was offered for Social Workers that had just qualified, it included mentoring, coaching and a whole system support. This programme was popular, with 40-60 people applying every year to join the programme.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) A report will be brought to the Committee containing details of the recruitment of Social Workers programme.

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

Councillor Bray, Executive Member for Children's Services addressed the Committee and highlighted the following points:

- Agreement for the Safety Valve programme had been received. The DfE would give the Council £20m over the course of the programme in the next six years. The implementation of the programme would involve reviewing and updating the SEND offer in the borough. It was expected that implementing this programme would involve a lot of work in the coming years;
- £8m would be received this month in the first tranche of the programme and would almost half the High Needs Block (HNB) deficit;
- The Council had been successful in the bids for two new SEND schools. There were only three local authorities in the country that had been awarded two schools;
- The service had recently been inspected by Ofsted, the outcome of the inspection was not yet disclosed so this would be discussed at a later meeting;
- The work undertaken by all staff during the inspection was much appreciated;
- The old Farley Hill school would become an outreach site for Addington School and work on the site would commence on Monday 27th March. This facility was due to open in September.

Councillor Howe commended the work and effort undertaken by staff to achieve the agreement for the Safety Valve programme and the two new SEND schools. Members extended their gratitude to other departments within the Council that contributed to the success of the bid for the new schools and Safety Valve.

Helen Watson added that school leaders, SEND Voices and commissioning partners had also been involved in the work undertaken and should be thanked for their efforts too.

In particular, Lynne Samuel, Schools Finance Specialist was commended for her work.

In response to a question, Hayley Rees, Category Manager Strategy and Commissioning informed that Farley Hill School would offer 40 places, 14 would be available in September 2023. The places would be for Early Years, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) The Committee expressed its gratitude to all those involved in achieving the successful bids for the two new SEND schools and the acceptance into the Safety Valve programme.

66. CHILDREN IN CARE CAMHS PROVISION UPDATE

Hayley Rees presented the Children In Care (CIC) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Provision update.

The following points were highlighted during the presentation:

- In 2020/21 it was identified that CIC needed more immediate response to mental health services. The ICB and three local authorities (West Berkshire, Wokingham and Reading) decided to commission a joint service for CIC;
- Work to implement this new service had been undertaken over the last 18 months;
- Recruitment of staff started last year and it was almost completed;
- The official launch of the service was in April 2023, but work had already commenced to support CIC through this service;
- The service included an initial consultation with social workers, teachers and foster carers to identify what support was needed;
- It was hoped that one of the main benefits of this service would be team work, in recognition of the fact that CIC had many people involved in their lives.

Councillor Bray informed that she had met with the designated Looked After Children (LAC) Nurse, who had praised this service saying that it had already started to make a positive impact.

It was ascertained that the correct title for the report was Children In Care CAMHS Provision update, not *Care Leavers* as written in the agenda front sheet. However, Hayley Rees informed that there was a pilot underway with the ICB considering the offer of this service to Care Leavers.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The update be noted; and
- 2) The Committee would continue to monitor the progress and development of this service.

67. FOSTERING TRANSFORMATION UPDATE

The Fostering Transformation Update was presented by Nathan Whitley, Fostering and Residential Transformation Consultant.

The following points were highlighted during the presentation:

- There was a national and local shortage of fostering placements for children;
- There was a rise in the number of CIC;
- A Fostering and Transformation Steering Group had been set up to plan for the next three years;
- Over the last 12 months 50 children were placed in foster care, half of which were placed in in-house fostering arrangements;

- There was a local shortage of independent fostering agencies;
- There was a need to grow the number of foster carers, there was a particular shortage of places for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children (UASC);
- Nearly all of the CIC placed with independent fostering agencies in the last year had been UASC between the ages of 15-17. Most of them had gone to London;
- Work was being undertaken with local communities to build more local provision;
- It was positive that 12 young people were staying put with their foster carers;
- There were regular fortnightly meetings with foster carers to ascertain how best to support them and grow the pool of in-house foster carers;
- Part of the work being undertaken included involving foster carers as much as possible. A foster carer buddying system had been introduced to support new foster carers and applicants;
- There was great focus on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Wokingham paid competitive fees and strived to provide good support for foster carers;
- There would be a dedicated UASC recruitment strategy;
- A new website was being designed, along with a new marketing strategy.

Councillor Howe believed that the challenges being faced in Wokingham were the same or similar to the challenges faced by neighbouring authorities and asked if there should be some joint up work on finding solutions. Nathan Whitely agreed that this idea should be considered.

The Chairman asked what was being done to address the shortage of in-house foster carers for UASC. Nathan Whitely explained that in recognition of the fact that the majority of UASC were Muslim, the service was running a Friday Fostering Programme through mosques.

Nathan Whitely explained that although it was generally more desirable to place children locally, for some children it was culturally more appropriate place them in London in a more diverse community.

Councillor Boyt stated that her ward was very diverse, and Aisha Mosque was very keen to work with the community.

Councillor Malvern asked if there was a potential issue in relation to the local authority not having sufficient time to develop a relationship with UASC, given their age when entering care.

Nathan Whitely explained that the local authority had a responsibility up to the age of 25, so this was something that could be developed. He added that there was an opportunity for the local authority to build semi-independent provision in the borough to provide for the needs of this cohort.

Councillor Malvern wondered if young people would be willing to move from London to Wokingham. Nathan Whitley stated that there was a need to build more in-house provision.

The Chairman asked that the Action Plan be shared with the Committee and also with Corporate Parenting Board.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) The Committee would be kept up to date with the development of the programme, including the latest iterations of the action plan.

68. SEND STRATEGY REFRESH

The SEND Strategy Refresh was presented by Jonathan Wilding, Safety Valve and SEND Consultant.

The following points were highlighted during the presentation:

- The Safety Valve programme required the local authority to implement a new SEND service to help schools with earlier intervention and to refresh the outreach offer to schools;
- The Early Years SEND offer was being formulated;
- The refresh of the strategy was being undertaken in partnership with SEND Voices;
- Improvement to data management was being implemented;
- The new school provision would enable the local authority to make less use of independent out of borough provision, which was the largest contributor to the HNB overspend;
- Preparation for adulthood and the post-16 education were an area of focus, as currently there was no local provision for the post-16 cohort;
- Projections showed that with the measures currently being undertaken, by 2028/29 the local authority would spend £56m less;
- Even with all the measures proposed, there was a projected deficit of £41m by 2028/29. The Safety Valve programme unlocked an investment of £20m from the DfE to pay half of the deficit; the other half of the deficit would be funded by the local authority;
- There was a cost of around £7m relating to implementations costs and invest to save;
- As previously mentioned the local authority was successful in the bids for two new specialist schools. Neighbouring local authorities had also been successful in bids for new schools, therefore it was expected that there would be less demand for our school places from other local authorities;
- Free school number 1 was being prioritised. This school would offer 100 places for pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, who could not access education in mainstream settings. The proposed location for this school was Rooks Next Farm, subject to Executive approval;
- Free school number 2 was being designed for pupils with cognitive and physical disabilities, in the same style as Addington School. The proposed location for this school was Grays Farm. However, this was subject to potential change depending on the space required by leisure facilities on the same site. Alternative options were being considered, the final site location would have to be approved by Executive;
- The DfE timetable was very pacey, as shown in the presentation slides;
- The public consultation had already commenced;
- It was hoped that the Council would lead on the capital programme, however the DfE would make a decision on this;
- There would be some associated costs that the Council would have to cover, for example building access roads;
- A bid for capital funding of £6.3m had been submitted alongside the bid for the Safety Valve. This was to cover the development of resources attached to mainstream schools. The outcome of this bid would be received by the end of March

- The current SEND Strategy was due to expire in 2024, however many events had occurred and therefore a new strategy was needed. As well as the Safety Valve programme, there was a new SEND inspection framework and new improvement programmes set out by the central government;
- There was a desire to continue to work in partnership with stakeholders and further develop partnerships;
- The proposed governance of the programme was under development.

In response to a question Members were informed that Bracknell Forest and Windsor and Maidenhead councils had also been successful in securing funding for new schools.

Councillor Helliar-Symonds asked what other sites were being considered as well as Grays Farm. Jonathan Wilding agreed to offer this information outside of the meeting.

Councillor Helliar-Symonds asked if fire sprinklers would be installed in the new schools. Councillor Bray explained that the DfE would not fund it, but the Council would pay for them.

The Chairman stated that the Committee would like to be kept informed of the development of the Safety Valve programme and the SEND Strategy. He suggested that this update becomes a standing item in the CSO&S agendas. This was agreed by Officers.

Members asked that this presentation be circulated to Members via email.

The Chairman stated that Sara Clarke's contribution to discussions was very valuable. He invited Members to put forward suggestions of additional stakeholders who may be able to contribute to future discussions.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The report be noted; and
- 2) Updates on the Safety Valve programme and SEND Strategy would become a standing item in the Committee's agenda.

69. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The following items were added to the Forward Programme:

20 June 2023

- CTU update
- Draft UASC Strategy (including a review of the Steering Group)

6 September 2023

- Social Worker Recruitment and Retention update (including information about the ASYE Programme)

70. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for items 71 and 72, on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of the schedule 12A of the Act.

71. SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN

This item was considered in a part 2 session.

72. SCHOOL SUFFICIENCY UPDATE

This item was considered in a part 2 session.

73. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairman expressed his gratitude for the support received by Officers and other Members of the Committee during this municipal year.

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