

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 23 February 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Yousef Dahmash (Chair)
Councillor Pam Williams (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Margaret Bell
Councillor Jonathan Chilvers
Councillor Corinne Davies
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Daniel Gissane
Councillor Dominic Skinner
Councillor Chris Williams

Officers

Daniel Atkins, Technical Specialist - Children Transformation
Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Ian Budd, Assistant Director - Education Services
Ross Caws, Warwickshire SEND Board Development Manager
Duane Chappell, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (SEND & Inclusion)
Anita Lekhi, Performance and Evaluation Delivery Lead
Nigel Minns, Strategic Director for People
Bern Timings, School Organisation and Planning Manager

Others Present

Simon Lomax – Executive Principal (Nuneaton MAT)
Ann Melville – Deputy Chair of the Board (Nuneaton MAT)
Marion Plant – Chief Executive (Nuneaton MAT)

1. General

Before the meeting started, the Chair announced that he had received correspondence from Marion Plant, Chief Executive of the MAT, following the October meeting of the Committee. Ms Plant felt that some of the comments made during the meeting by members of the Committee were unfair and inaccurate. The Chair confirmed that he had acknowledged the correspondence and shared it with all the members of the Committee; who will have the chance to meet with the MAT team at a future committee meeting.

(1) Apologies

None

(2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on the 17th November 2020 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

There were no matters arising.

2. Public Speaking

None

3. Question Time

(1) Question to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

None

(2) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant Directors

Councillor Jeff Morgan provided the following updates to the Committee –

- A planning application has been submitted for a new Children's Home in Stratford upon Avon. The home will be OFSTED regulatory and accommodate four children (up to 12 years' old)
- Children and Family Services are continuing to manage demand during the pandemic. However, there are a number of children in care out of the county (although this number has not increased during the pandemic). There are over 800 children in care at present and does include unaccompanied young asylum seekers. It was noted that following a recent and successful recruitment campaign by the Council for social workers, the average case load is not under 16 cases per worker.
- Councillor Morgan recommended that the Committee members look online for kooth.com; which is an online platform designed for children and young people with mental health issues. The platform is used by a number of local authorities and has had a positive impact on those using it; providing 24/7 access to help and support to some of the most vulnerable children and young people.

4. Formulation of the Education Sufficiency Strategy

Bern Timings, Education Capital, Sufficiency and Admissions Lead Commissioner presented the report to the Committee which includes the process and planning of school places within the county. The Committee noted that significant housing development across Warwickshire is leading to an increase in demand for school places. Members noted that transparency in the process was a key part of the strategy and in particular when working with schools and members. It was noted that working with academies, who control their own admissions and pupil numbers was also part of the strategy.

Councillor Margaret Bell noted that the process is extremely complex and asked how many temporary classrooms were in use across Warwickshire. The Council seem able to deal with bulge classes well, but when there is an additional class in primary schools, this is not fed through into planning for high school places; ultimately resulting in the council paying for temporary classrooms and an extension. Bern Timings confirmed that capital projects often have unforeseen delays, but the example given by Councillor Bell in relation to extra classes was as a result of a lack of planning ahead. It was agreed by officers and Members that capital forward planning must be right from the start. Councillor Bell suggested that moving forward the Committee monitor the use of temporary classrooms and the costs involved.

In relation to parental preference; the Committee noted that this can be difficult, when parents request places at schools that are not local/nearest to them. Part of the work currently underway is to ensure that existing schools remain viable. The admissions code makes it clear that if a first choice can't be met, then a place at the nearest school will be offered; and the Council follow national guidance for this and reviews trends each year.

Nationally, there are issues with mid-year moves; especially in view of the continued increase in new housing developments.

Officers review and revise the forecasting predications each year. The DfE record 'score cards' each year and the council is ahead of where we need to be – which is better than being under in terms of places.

The Committee agreed that the discussion and questions highlighted just how complex the process is and thanks officers for the report. It was agreed that the Committee would be regularly kept up to date with the strategy.

Resolved

That the Children & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee comment on the existing processes and methodology used to formulate the Education Sufficiency Strategy and identify areas for further discussion or where value can be added.

5. SEND & Inclusion: Report of Task and Finish Group

Ross Caws, Strategy and Commissioning Lead (SEND), presented the report to the Committee highlighting the work of the recent Task and Finish Group.

The Committee noted that the group had met four times and had strong discussions and debate which resulted in twelve recommendations (section three of the attached report). It was noted that some of the recommendations link directly to the current programme. Councillor Pam Williams commented that she had found it to be a very useful and productive group and thanked all those who had been involved.

Councillor Jonathan Chilvers asked if those who had been involved now felt more confident that the Council can now meet the increased need in SEND. The Chair stated that he absolutely felt more confident, which was supported by Councillor Pam Williams. The group had worked together well and there was a complete consensus about all twelve of the recommendations.

Councillor Margaret Bell added that the key issue would be to support the schools so that they can support SEND pupils. The Committee agreed that it was vital to keep checking in with teachers, and parents, to see how things are going and that it is all moving forward positively.

Resolved

That the Committee approve the recommendations of the task and finish group set out in Section 3 of the report.

6. Child Friendly Warwickshire

Anita Lekhi, Technical Specialist - Performance and Evaluation, introduced the Committee to the initiative for Warwickshire to become child friendly. The Committee learnt that “a child friendly city, town or community is committed to improving the lives of children, and is a place where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are fundamental in decisions”.

The aim of the initiative is that all children in Warwickshire are –

- safe and secure
- happy and healthy
- live stable lives
- able to enjoy learning and have employment opportunities
- involved in decisions that shape services that impact their lives.

The initiative is being led by the Council’s Children and Families Services but with the aim that everyone in the Council will become involved, recognising the key role that children have in the county. The initiative comes from Leeds City Council, who introduced theirs some years ago and who are recognised as an outstanding local authority in this area.

The following points were noted –

- The initiative will involve talking to children and young people via surveys and virtual workshops to see what they would like.

- A brand will be created to share and promote Child Friendly Warwickshire across the county.
- Communication will not only be within the Council, but also with all partners, local communities, and businesses.

Following a question from Councillor Jeff Morgan, Daniel Atkins, Advanced Practitioner, gave an explanation of Restorative Practice; highlighting that it is about how Warwickshire County Council works with colleagues, partners, children and families. The practice recognises that relationships are at the heart of everything that the Council does, and this initiative puts the child at the centre. Restorative Practice relationships are about supporting and challenging each other to avoid any 'blockages' to the process. In simple terms, it is about restoring family relationships.

The Chair asked how important officers feel it is to install a sense of resilience in young people; to encourage them to take responsibility. Nigel Minns, Strategic Director suggested that each generation faces different challenges, perhaps none more so than the current generation facing the pandemic. Child Friendly Warwickshire will support independence and it will be a key part of the work done; recognising that it is important to do things 'with' children and young people, and not 'for' or 'to' them.

Resolved

That the Committee endorse the Child Friendly Warwickshire initiative and action plan

7. Work Programme

The work programme as per the attached report was noted and agreed by the Committee.

It was agreed that any items Members wished to be added to the work programme should be emailed through to the Chair or Democratic Services to be discussed at Chair and Spokes meetings.

8. Date of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on the 20th April 2021, at 10am.

The meeting will be held via Microsoft Teams.

9. Confidential Reports

Resolved

That members of the public be excluded from the meeting for the items mentioned below on the grounds that their presence would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

10. Nuneaton MAT Performance Report

Resolved

That the Committee note the briefing and supporting documents including the new 3-year Strategic Plan from Midlands Academy Trust MAT regarding the progress and performance of the Trust.

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Chair