

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 16 November 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Yousef Dahmash (Chair)
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jo Barker
Councillor Brett Beetham
Councillor Barbara Brown
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Brian Hammersley
Councillor Marian Humphreys
Councillor Justin Kerridge
Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince

Officers

Rachel Barnes (Delivery Lead, Change Hub Lead)
Duane Chappell (Strategy and Commissioning Manager (SEND & Inclusion))
Nigel Minns (Strategic Director for People)
Mark Ryder (Strategic Director for Communities)
Sarah Tregaskis (Service Manager – Education Service Delivery)

Others Present

Councillor Jeff Morgan (Portfolio Holder for Children, Families and Education)
Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Paul Gillett (Co-opted Member) and John Coleman (Assistant Director for Children and Families).

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 October 2021 were agreed as an accurate record to be signed by the Chair.

2. Public Speaking

No members of the public had registered to speak.

3. Question Time

(1) Question to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

There were no questions to Cabinet Portfolio Holders.

(2) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant Directors

Councillor Jeff Morgan (Portfolio Holder for Children, Families and Education) informed the committee that Ofsted was due to commence an inspection of Children's Services on Monday 22 November 2021. This visit has been known of for some time. As a result, it has been possible to undertake a considerable amount of preparatory work. Any inspection can be stressful, stated Councillor Morgan, but the Council will demonstrate the very best of what it does.

Councillor Pete Gilbert observed that officers and members should be prepared to present the most accurate impression of services. In response the committee was informed that Ofsted inspectors are trained to assess that which they see and not to rely on what they are told.

Mark Ryder (Strategic Director for Communities) informed members:

- 1) that education services will work closely with John Coleman's team around the inspection.
- 2) That a workshop had recently been held on school admissions systems. Run by Vanguard, the session had attracted considerable engagement by head teachers.
- 3) Five workshops concerning schools' capacity have recently been completed. Each workshop covered a separate district/borough area.

Councillor Jo Barker thanked officers for the school sufficiency workshops and asked that they be held on a regular basis. Councillor Jeff Morgan stated that the briefings mark the start of longer-term engagement with members. Officers had needed to be able to triangulate the intelligence they had gathered concerning school sufficiency with members' own experience working in their communities.

Councillor Marian Humphries had been unable to attend the meeting in her area. She was informed that she would not be at a disadvantage at the second meeting because of this.

4. SEND Inspection - Verbal Update from Officers

The Chair welcomed Duane Chappell, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (SEND & Inclusion) and Rachel Barnes (Delivery Lead, Change Hub Lead) to the meeting. Between them Duane and Rachel briefed the committee on the SEND and Inclusion Change programme and the local area SEND inspection that had been undertaken in the summer of 2021.

Members were informed of an anticipated increase in demand for SEND services of 14%. This will significantly increase the service's overspend to around £95m. To build momentum a number of projects delivering rapid results were identified. These included the reduction of the number of panels from nine to two and a review of the service's structure to make sure that staff are in the best place to deliver an effective service.

The vision for SEND and inclusion was set out in the meeting and the three phases of the change programme explained. The committee was informed that Warwickshire needs to introduce a whole system change to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND. For this to happen there needs to be a focus on promoting inclusion in mainstream settings, giving schools the skills and resources to meet the needs of learners, and building the confidence of parents and carers. To aid in the delivery of this over 30 projects will take place up to 2023.

Regarding the local area inspection, the committee was informed that in July 2021, Ofsted & CQC visited Warwickshire to assess how the local area fulfils their responsibilities for children and young people with SEND age 0-25. (The local area includes WCC, CCG, Public Health, NHS providers, early years' settings, schools and Further Education providers). The inspection final report was published on 23 September on the council's website.

Although several areas were commended, there are significant areas of weakness that the local area needs to address. A Written Statement of Action is being co-produced with partners, parents and carers showing how the council will deliver the improvements needed.

The committee was informed of a series of strengths identified by the inspection. These were:

- Commitment of leaders to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND
- Children and young people with SEND achieve positive educational outcomes. A high proportion remain in education, training and employment
- Attendance rates are very positive and fixed term exclusions have reduced dramatically
- Leaders understand the strengths and weaknesses with an accurate, well-informed and detailed self-evaluation
- Leaders have developed and started to implement an ambitious change programme, which identifies what needs to change and why

A series of significant weaknesses had also been identified. These were:

- Waiting times for ASD assessments, and the support for children and young

people awaiting assessment and following diagnosis of ASD.

- Relationships with parent/carers and communication and co-production at a strategic level.
- Incorrect placement of some children and young people with EHC plans in specialist settings, and mainstream school leaders' understanding of why this needs to be addressed.
- Uptake of staff training for school staff to help them understand and meet the needs of children and young people with SEND.
- Quality of the online local offer

The committee was then updated on progress to date as follows:

- SEND and Inclusion Steering Group set up with partners from Education, Social Care and Health and Warwickshire Parent Carer Voice (WPCV)
- SEND & Inclusion Change Programme Board governance strengthened with CCG and WPCV representation
- Robust comms plan to ensure we engage with stakeholders in developing the WSoA, including a monthly newsletter and a programme of events
- Areas already in progress as part of the SEND & Inclusion Change Programme:
 - establishing the new Parent Carer Forum (Warwickshire Parent Carer Voice) - April 2021
 - refresh of local offer webpages, bringing together information about local services and support for families with children and young people ages 0 to 25 - October 2021
 - introducing an inclusive framework in schools – trial of a new model of support to schools (in Rugby initially) to enable early intervention and improve outcomes – began October 2021
 - workforce development to improve the knowledge, skills and understanding of school staff in meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND – began October 2021

Members were informed that the Written Statement of Action will be presented to Cabinet on 7 December. It was also noted that the framework of inspection is being reviewed. Any reinspection is likely to be under the revised framework.

Councillor Yousef Dahmash (Chair of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee) thanked Duane and Rachel for their presentation and asked whether all schools are engaged with the initiatives being developed by the council. Duane Chappell responded that not all schools consider that they have the skills or the staff they would need. Some special schools are feeling vulnerable although this is not necessary. The objective is to ensure that children attend the correct educational setting. There will always be some that require the services of special schools.

Some schools work hard to be inclusive whilst others choose not to be. In the future it will be necessary for all schools to embrace inclusivity.

Councillor Jo Barker sought clarification over the data used to establish demand for services. The committee was informed that this is not reliant on National Census data. In October of every year a school census is held locally. In addition, national data is gathered annually allowing for thorough comparisons to be made with statistical neighbours.

Concerning the panels, members were informed that whilst these comprise senior managers and school leaders anyone can attend to observe proceedings. An interesting aspect of this is the different approaches displayed by schools.

Councillor Marian Humphries asked about children living on the county boundary. In these instances, they may attend schools in neighbouring authority areas. However, the plan for that child will remain with Warwickshire.

Councillor Barbara Brown observed that placing children with special needs into mainstream schools is an expensive option. It is not cost neutral. Given that a new special school is being developed in the north of Warwickshire Councillor Barbara Brown asked whether there was still a need for it. In reply, the committee was informed that even with a model of inclusivity there will always be a need for some special provision away from the mainstream. In addition, the development of a facility in Warwickshire will reduce the need for children to travel out of county. Councillor Barbara Brown asked whether there were instances of schools holding on to children with special needs to the detriment of the education of other children in the school.

By way of response the committee was informed of the way in which schools are supported financially concerning their special needs provision. Funding comes from pupil weighting, the notional £6000 (notional as schools are not told how they must use it) and the High Needs Block. In some instances, it is not clear how schools are using the notional £6000.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group) agreed that it is not good practice to send children out of county. He also concurred that some schools may use the notional £6000 for purposes other than that for which it is intended. The findings of the inspection were not a surprise he stated adding that it would be of interest to understand the impact of reductions in health visiting. Regarding co-production Councillor Jerry Roodhouse observed that this came take a long time to deliver. It needs to be driven from the top and not left to those at the bottom to press for it. Councillor Roodhouse also challenged whether the parent/Carer Voice is truly representative. A fully inclusive approach is required with the child at the centre.

Concerning health visitors Duane Chappell informed the committee that a child's development begins during pregnancy. It is important that information on babies at that stage is relayed by health authorities to the council. Within 6 weeks of birth children's needs can be identified. Duane Chappell offered to review health visiting budgets and service delivery and report back to Councillor Roodhouse. Duane Chappell also agreed that child-centred planning is required to capture the voice of the child. She agreed that co-production takes a long time adding that a major challenge is in identifying the capacity to develop it. There are concerns over data sharing. The health service remains wary about sharing data.

Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell agreed that obtaining the voice of the child is essential. It is important to get the message across that diagnosis is not required before an EHC plan can be developed. It was noted that the number of panels has been reduced. However, is there member support on these panels? Elected members want more training on special education needs. This should not just focus on high level demand. Councillor O'Donnell asked why some schools are unwilling to take children with special education needs.

On the subject of schools Duane Chappell informed members that peer to peer support is practiced by schools. SEND needs to engage with this so that all head teachers receive the support they require. Some needs do not present very often (eg multi-sensory deprivation) but when they do then it is essential that the right level of care is in place.

In response to a question from the Chair members were informed that the Pandemic had impacted on the robustness of data. Some children are entitled to support that they have not been accessing and in some instances simple issues are not being picked up early enough. Consideration needs to be given as to how to get staff to undertake assessments.

Resolved:

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. notes progress with the SEND and Inclusion Change programme, and
2. welcomes progress to date following the Local Area SEND inspection conducted by Ofsted in July 2021.

5. Outdoor Education and Learning Strategy

Sarah Tregaskis (Service Manager – Education Service Delivery) introduced the report along with the draft strategy and appendices.

Councillor Dahmash, acknowledging the closure of the Marle Hall facility in North Wales asked what should be said to people who miss it. In reply the committee was informed that outdoor education is about more than one facility. Marle Hall was a facility and not a provision. It had not been widely used by schools in recent years. The strategy aims to open up opportunities for more schools to pursue outdoor education activities.

Councillor Pete Gilbert observed that very often outdoor education relies on having a teacher with a passion for it. It is an important element of the curriculum and should not be overlooked. Schools, he added, need to work with the County Council. Would the strategy ensure that outdoor education is included in the curriculum? Councillor Gilbert closed by suggesting that there is a role for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in monitoring future outdoor education provision.

In reply, Sarah Tregaskis stated that a part of the delivery plan is a proposal to set up a professionals' network for Warwickshire. This will bring schools and teachers together to share practice and obtain feedback. A recent survey had found plenty of activity going on already.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places overall responsibility for health and safety on educational visits with the employer. Where Warwickshire County Council is the employer; which includes community schools, community special schools, voluntary controlled schools, maintained nursery schools but not academies, foundation, voluntary-aided or free schools, WCC provides support to schools via the web-based system EVOLVE to facilitate the efficient planning, management, approval, and evaluation of visits.

One school that operates a forest school approach has offered to provide training for other schools wishing to follow this route. One school that operates a forest school approach has offered to provide training for other schools wishing to follow this route.

Councillor Brian Hammersley recognised the difficulties of providing outdoor challenges and activities in a climate of blame and litigation.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse suggested that outdoor education had been given a low priority for some time. The closure of Marle Hall had brought it to the fore. A clear definition of outdoor education and provision is required, and it will be important to monitor delivery of the strategy over time.

Councillor Roodhouse challenged the status of the emerging strategy. At one stage it was to have been a sub-strategy of the Education Strategy, but this had been considered inappropriate. It should, he suggested, be a corporate strategy signed off by the Leader of the Council. It would then sit at a high level with other corporate documents.

Councillor Jeff Morgan agreed that it would be useful if the strategy included a definition of outdoor pursuits. Some activities that were undertaken in the 1970s would not be considered acceptable now he added. The committee was reminded that outdoor activities are not a statutory service. Nevertheless, they do need to be given a high priority.

In reply to a question from Councillor Marian Humphries it was agreed that a list of those schools that engaged in the review would be shared.

Councillor Jo Barker expressed the view that young people need to be given the opportunity to enjoy outdoor activities. People need to be encouraged to become leaders for outdoor activities.

Councillor Justin Kerridge called for a specific measure to be created to establish the take up of opportunities by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It will also be important to measure the extent to which schools are engaging and what they are doing.

Councillor Kerridge also requested that the draft strategy be reviewed to make it more concise.

Councillor Barbara Brown supported the suggestion to reduce the size of the strategy and also endorsed Councillor Jerry Roodhouse's comments regarding its status. Schools, she stated, need to be clear on the management of outdoor education and there is a need to provide evidence of its benefits.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse requested that the strategy be sent to partners including district and borough councils and health colleagues for them to endorse. The committee was informed that this is an element of the delivery plan.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince (who was a member of the first working group to examine outdoor education) emphasised the need to produce an effective strategy. There is a need to get head teachers engaged although many will consider that some outdoor education offers carry too much risk.

Councillor Marian Humphries observed that schools had been engaged with as part of the strategy development process at a busy time for them. In reply the committee was informed that the original plan had been for engagement with school to take place in June or July. However, the Pandemic had delayed matters.

Councillor Piers Daniell (Chair of the member working group) stated that the closure of Marle Hall had highlighted the importance of outdoor education. A concise strategy is now necessary to encourage schools and children to engage in such activity. He suggested that surveys may struggle to be able to identify the success of the strategy. The delivery plan will be key to engaging with partners and other initiatives eg Youth Justice, country parks and Child Friendly Warwickshire. Councillor Daniell concluded that previously there has been too much emphasis on outdoor education in the school environment. It is important to push for outdoor adventure.

Councillor Pete Gilbert noted that the County Council undertakes a great deal of non-statutory activity. He had been concerned over the data presented to the committee concerning Marle Hall. It is important that the Outdoor Education Strategy is given a high priority.

Councillor Brian Hammersley agreed that the document should be made more concise.

Resolved:

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny,

1. Requests that in approving the strategy, Cabinet acknowledges its high priority.
2. Requests that a performance report that sets out progress against the strategy's objectives be produced annually for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
3. Requests that officers identify ways in which the strategy can be made more concise.

6. Work Programme

Members considered the committee's work programme. Councillor Pete Gilbert requested that the committee undertake a body of work to review why some children in certain communities, struggle with education. It was agreed that this would be considered at the next Chair and Group Spokes meeting.

7. Any Other Business

None

8. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting of the committee will be held at 10am on 22 February 2022.

The meeting rose at 12.32

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Chair