

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 30 September 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

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

Officers

Nigel Minns, Strategic Director for People
Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children and Families
Maureen Oakes, Customer Service Manager
Mark Ryder, Strategic Director for Communities
John Findlay, Service Manager (Business & Customer Support)
Daniel Atkins, Technical Specialist - Children Transformation

1. General

The Committee noted that Seán Taylor has stepped down from Trade Union Representative Duties and therefor will no longer be the Teacher's Representative on this scrutiny panel. Paul Gillett of the National Education Union has been elected by the Teachers' Representative Panel and will replace Seán moving forward on this committee.

Seán wished to let the committee know that he has enjoyed attending the meetings and the common purpose of those involved – “It has always been a pleasure to work across party politics and to see Councillors work towards the best interests of the young people of Warwickshire and this particular way of working and collective attitude marks this committee out as special!”

The Chair thanked Seán for his contributions to the committee and welcomed Paul. He noted that a letter would be written to both Seán and Paul.

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Pete Gilbert and Paul Gillett, Teachers' Representative.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting - 20 July 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Public Speaking

There were no public speakers at the meeting.

3. Question to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

There were no questions to Portfolio Holders.

(1) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant Directors

Councillor Jeff Morgan, Portfolio Holder for Children, Families & Education provided an update to the Committee in relation to the recent OFSTED inspection. It was confirmed that there had been some critical points identified by OFSTED and that officers were now working on a response which is required by 24 December 2021 which will include a statement of action for Warwickshire County Council

The five areas identified as needing improvement were as follows –

- Waiting time for ASD (it was noted that this is a national issue)
- Communication and Relationships with parents. A new parent/carer forum has been introduced.
- Special Needs Local Offer – the inspectors felt this is not visible or clear. Officers confirmed that inspectors only saw a draft version of the offer rather than the final offer – which is now live.
- There are too many SEND pupils in special schools when their needs could be met by mainstream schools.
- Lack of staff uptake for SEND training

Nigel Minns, Strategic Director – People Directorate confirmed that there were no surprises from the inspection which was positive; officers were aware of the issues raised.

Following a question from Councillor Brett Beetham it was confirmed that an OFSTED inspection was started in March 2020 but had to be suspended due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. Since then, a range of improvements have been made to services. The Committee noted that many of the issues identified are national issues such as a shortage of Social Workers, a shortage of foster and residential placements.

It is unclear how much OFSTED balance National and Local issues.

Following a question from Councillor Marian Humphreys, it was confirmed that Warwickshire County Council has invested heavily in Children's Services over the last few years but the national issues are driving costs up.

John Coleman, Assistant Director – People Directorate stated that Warwickshire County Council was able to provide evidence to OFSTED on how they are facing issues that perhaps there is not much control over and how officers have worked to solve them.

4. Warwickshire Children's Strategy 2021-2030

John Coleman, Assistant Director – People's Directorate, presented the report to the Committee confirming that it is a draft version for comments from the Committee. It was noted that this is the first Warwickshire County Council strategy that is just for children and young people. The development of the strategy included head teachers, health colleagues, partners, parents/carers and young people.

It was noted that the strategy clearly outlines the intentions of Warwickshire County Council and that so far, all the feedback has been positive with children put at the heart of decision making. It was noted that there has been engagement with partner agencies but it is a Warwickshire County Council Strategy.

The engagement with children and young people has varied between the five districts but the intention is that there will be an annual survey with engagement increasing each time.

Real engagement with children and young people – variations between the districts. First survey aimed at children and young people 1800 (120,000) – intention is that this will be an annual survey.

The Committee noted that Officers would welcome views on the document ahead of the Cabinet meeting on 14th October 2021.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince requested that additional information relating to the overall population of Warwickshire would be helpful and would add more context to information in the strategy such as the number of social workers per children. John Coleman accepted the suggestion and agreed to add the information to the strategy.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse added that he felt some areas needed further development and that he agreed with the proposal for the strategy to come back to the Committee each year for a review. Councillor Justin Kerridge agreed with Councillor Roodhouse in relation to the measures not quite matching with what precedes them in the documents; it is not always clear how things are going to be achieved. John Coleman added that not all priorities can be delivered at the same time, with some that will need to be completed before others can be started.

Following a question from Councillor Breet Beetham, John Coleman confirmed that the survey asked for district information but not division information. It was agreed that this information

can be shared with elected members and that division information is something that can be added to future surveys.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince added that the strategy needs to be clearer about the services that the council is already offering; and what will continued to be offered; some parts of the document suggest that the council is not offering services that are already in place.

Councillor Brian Hammersley added that it is important that the strategy recognises that not all children are academic and they want to follow a vocational path. There needs to be support for all children, not just the academic ones.

John Coleman thanked members for their comments and grammatical corrections and confirmed that officers have tried to provide a statement of intention to integrate to partner agencies and service users.

5. Update Children's Transformation Plan

Dan Atkins - Advanced Practitioner, presented the report to the Committee to bring elected members up to date with where Warwickshire County Council is within the transformation programme.

Members of the Committee were pleased to note that there has been progress despite challenging times. The Council is starting to see emerging benefits and investments delivered. The main focus now is that people and programmes are working as they were intended to and to look into what difference the programme has made.

The Committee noted the following information -

- There has been an increase in family meetings
- There has been a reduction in children placed into care
- There has been an increase in support around domestic abuse
- There has been an increase in the number of SGOs granted

Following a question from Councillor Jo Barker in relation to domestic abuse and the council's relationship with alternative housing providers, John Coleman, Assistant Director – People Directorate confirmed that the council is working with the Sanctuary Scheme which focuses on the victim and if it safe for them to stay in their own home and remove the perpetrator. It was confirmed that there is also close working with the local heads of housing in the district and boroughs with a clear understanding of the urgency of the issue. The Committee noted that the council will always try to avoid having to use a B&B for victims but there is a housing supply concern in Warwickshire so sometimes that is the only solution. It was confirmed that Domestic abuse workers are being introduced into the children's service teams and that officers are responding to an increase in demand since the start of the pandemic. Nigel Minns, Strategic Director – People Directorate confirmed that a detailed presentation on domestic abuse had been presented to the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee; it was agreed that the report would be shared with members of this committee.

Dan Akins informed the Committee of the Caring Dad Programme which is aimed at the perpetrator of domestic violence and supporting them to rebuild relationships. Predominately,

men are the perpetrators and this programme identifies that we need to improve our relationship with men and ensure that engagement is with all members of the family, not just Mum and Dad but all connected people (e.g. Grandparents). There has been a lack of support for perpetrators in the past, there is progress in this area which is a positive thing.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse requested information in relation to the financial planning for services and resources. John Coleman confirmed that the sustainability of services is always a challenge and that recruitment has been affected by covid but that all services and resources are now up and running.

The Committee noted that there has been an increase in the number of children coming into care during covid, including afghan refugees and other unaccompanied asylum seekers. The placement mix means that more children are now with family. Warwickshire County Council recorded the highest amount of SGO's (leaving care) in the last year. The pressure is with children placed in residential care – and there is a lack of stability for those children due in part to financial constraints.

6. Complaints Report

John Findlay - Service Manager (Business & Customer Support People) presented the report to the Committee and shared the following information -

- There were 282 complaints during 2020/2021 – an increase of 6% on the previous year.
- The number of processed and closed cases decreased by 12% during 2020/2021
- There was a 30% increase in the number of digitally created cases

In relation to the reason for complaints the following information was provided -

- Communication - 63%
- Protection of abusers - 14%
- Service Standards – 13%

The Committee noted that communication was the top reason for complaints within Warwickshire County Council. IT was confirmed that there is a new Team Leader (Louise Churchill) for complaints working on how complaints are received and why they are received. There has been an increase in all complaints during the pandemic.

Following a question in relation to the nature of complaints received and any trends identified, it was confirmed that it can be incredibly complicated; the process can take time to unpick and fully understand the true nature of the complaint.

The Committee raised concerns that the top reason for complaints is communication and asked if there is a further breakdown of reasons why communication is. The Committee asked if there was a point in the complaints process where the service user could opt to inform their local elected member? John Findlay confirmed that there is no option at present but that he would be taking all suggestions on board.

The Committee acknowledged that the council is looking to replace the current customer relations system and that a new complaints recording system would be part of this. The new system would provide interactive solutions along with a history of all interactions, across

services, with the customer and then be able to offer a better solution. The hope is that this will allow Warwickshire County Council to get much better at providing answers and solutions, quickly to customers who are aware of what is happening to them from the service. The system will allow customers to access the status of their enquiry/complaint etc.

Following a question from the Chair in relation to officers working from home during the pandemic potentially causing the spike in complaints, it was confirmed by Nigel Minns, Strategic Director – Peoples Directorate that across the Children and Families Service there had been limited, if any, working from home for officers. There had been an impact on response times due to a change in the targets but this is not as a result of working from home. The Committee was asked to note that the number of complaints is relatively small when you look at the number of children and families that officers are working with.

7. Work Programme

The Committee noted and agreed the work programme as attached.

Future items for the work programme will be discussed at the next Chair and Group Spokes Meeting on 3rd November @10am. The meeting will be held virtually via Microsoft Teams.

8. Any Other Business

None

9. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting has been scheduled for 19 October 2021 @ 10am.

The meeting will be held at Shire Hall, Warwick.

10. Exclusion of Press and Public

11. EXEMPT Minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2021 were agreed as an accurate record with the following amendment –

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse wished it to be recorded in the minutes that he voted against the motion.

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Chair