

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 19 October 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

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

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Sally Nash, Service Manager (Youth Justice)
Mark Ryder, Strategic Director for Communities

Others Present

Councillor Jeff Morgan, Portfolio Holder for Children, Families & Education

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Jo Barker, Pete Gilbert and Justin Kerridge.

Apologies were also received from Joseph Cannon, John McRoberts and Rev. Elaine Scrivens (all co-opted members of the Committee).

Apologies were received from John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children & Families and Nigel Minns, Strategic Director - People Directorate. The Committee wished their best wishes be sent to John and Nigel who were both unwell.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

There were no matters arising.

2. Public Speaking

None.

3. Question Time

(1) Question to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

Following a question from Councillor Jerry Roodhouse, Mark Ryder, Strategic Director for Communities agreed that a briefing note and proposed timeline for actions following the update on the SEND programme will be shared with the Committee after the meeting.

(2) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant Directors

Councillor Jeff Morgan, Portfolio Holder for Children, Families & Education confirmed that a temporary appointment in Education Services has been made to cover Ian Budd, Assistant Director (Education Services) who is on long term sick. Chris Baird has been appointed as Interim leadership support (Education Services) and has a strong background in education and children's services.

The Committee noted that there are area workshops being held across the county in relation to School Placement Sufficiency Planning. This is an opportunity for elected members to get together with officers to look at predications and planning, raise any concerns, share information from developers. This will help bring local members closer to the process. Councillor Morgan agreed to share the dates for the meetings after the meeting.

4. Child Exploitation Annual Report

Sally Nash - Service Manager (Youth Justice) started by thanking the Committee for inviting her to the meeting, stating that she was pleased to be able to present two items on the agenda. The Committee noted that there is an interconnectedness between the two reports to be presented. It was confirmed that although the report is a Warwickshire County Council report, all the work mentioned is done on a multiagency basis.

It was confirmed that the topic used to be Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) but is now known as Child Exploitation; the types of exploitation being reported are no longer just CSE; although that remains a highly concerning issue.

Child Exploitation is not new, but modern phenomena such as social media and the prevalence of weapons in society means that it is very different.

Warwickshire County Council is one of the first authorities to set up a dedicated team to address child exploitation and should be commended for being ahead of the curve.

The report confirmed that there has been a significant impact on front line services to vulnerable children due to the pandemic. The Committee was pleased to note that Warwickshire County Council Officers were prompt in Providing full PPE to allow officers to sustain front line services. Members noted that there has been no virtual working for the team.

The amount of work for the team has gone up, with more assessments being carried out. There has also been an increase in the number of children and young people supported and there has been an increase in the amount of information sharing across agencies.

The quality of resources and support from Warwickshire County Council officers and elected members is excellent. The demand is going up and additional resources would be great, but the Committee noted that it isn't just about money; attitudes to children, attitudes to women and how we view each other all need to change.

The Committee noted the contents of the report in relation to the work done with perpetrators, including working with the Police and Safeguarding Board. Officers have also recently contributed to a Parliamentary Enquiry. The report has not yet been published but it will be bought to the Committee once completed.

The work undertaken with the Police includes the sharing of intelligence and mapping of information to draw a better picture of what is happening across the county. It was noted that many children are not from Warwickshire but neighbouring authorities. Travel to the county is relatively cheap and easy; and there are areas of tourism that attract activity.

The Committee noted information in relation to the Philomena Protocol where authorities provide intelligence to the police about children in care homes; when they go missing. Routine descriptions of children in care are given to that so that the police can respond quickly to a missing incident. This is a national protocol and information is handled extremely carefully.

Warwickshire County Council launched the "Somethings Not Right" campaign, across the county, to encourage everyone to check, in a positive way, that children are ok. The website has been updated and now includes an ambitious communications plan.

In relation to children who have gone missing from placement, the Committee learnt that there is a Statutory Function to interview all children who have been missing on their return from being missing. Officers are able to filter those who are missing from home with sinister concerns and add the information we are able to share with other agencies. The number of missing incidents has increased but the number of children has decreased with multiple incidents per child/ren. The Committee learnt that the threat of non-involvement with perpetrators will often leave children and young people with little or no choice to get involved. The level of threat and control is overwhelming. These children often fear for their lives if they do not follow instruction.

In relation to the development of the team, it was confirmed that there is now an Adult Transitions Worker, in response to an identified need. From 17 years old, children services end and the transitions worker can support young people move into adult services.

Following a question from Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince in relation to children who are not originally from Warwickshire, Sally Nash confirmed that the cooperation with neighbouring

authorities can vary. There are examples of excellent joint working and there are areas that need improving. Some areas are not as in tune with these concerns and issues and out of hours responses can be hard to get.

Councillor Brett Beetham asked if it was possible for members of the Committee could have a summary of where incidents occur and where the areas of concerns are so that Councillors can be aware of issues in their divisions. It was noted that the location of incidents can vary and change almost weekly and it can be hard for officers to keep on top of where the biggest concerns are. It was agreed that information could be provided after the meeting. It was confirmed that the team of officers is co-located in order to offer support and cohesion across the team. The work is demanding and challenging and having a home for staff is important.

Councillor Brian Hammersley asked if there had been any marked increase in asylum seeking children coming into the county. Sally Nash confirmed that there does not seem to be any relation to the county of origin of the perpetrators. There are people who come into this country for a variety of unpleasant reasons. Trafficked children do arrive in the county and young children find themselves alone and in a place with very different cultures; children can then become more vulnerable to exploitation. The uncomfortable truth is that there is no rule to identifying perpetrators or the county that they come from.

The Chair asked if, in relation to the sexual exploitation of children, if there is a disproportionate problem among any groups? Sally Nash confirmed that there has been an increase in the number of young men who are being sexually exploited and forced into transporting drugs. There is no clear ethnicity, but activity is often within certain communities.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse asked if there was any performance data in relation to how Warwickshire County Council is performing in comparison to other authorities across England. Sally Nash confirmed that generally, the council is in line with national figures. But we should always strive for better. Officers are looking at building a new performance matrix, but this will be done locally as there is nothing in place nationally. Consideration has been given to looking at what it is that needs to be measure but as the landscape changes it can be hard to keep on top of what should be measured.

Councillor Marian Humphreys MARIAN asked if there was any multiagency work done within a family, rather than just the child/young person. It was confirmed that multi-agency working is getting better in this area. It can be hard but modern thinking in this area has led to things getting better. Experiences are continuing to improve but at times can still be clunky. There are sound information sharing protocols in place now that really help.

Following a question from Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince in relation to children that go missing multiple times and the reasons why, it was noted that this was most often the case with children in care. Sally Nash confirmed that repeated missing occasions are increasing; but sometimes it can take three or four time of a child going missing before a child will talk to officers but they will not give up. Extraordinarily powerful control is exerted on these children, so it is often about increasing the self-belief of the child and to help them to see that there are other options for them and it can take time.

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince and was seconded by Councillor Brett Beetham. A vote was held, and the Committee voted unanimously in favour of the recommendation.

Resolved

1. That the Committee note the contents of the Warwickshire Child Exploitation Annual Report 2020/21.
2. That the Committee support the ongoing delivery and development of the team.

5. Contextual Safeguarding and Extra Familial Abuse

Sally Nash, Service Manager (Youth Justice) introduced the report to the Committee and confirmed that there is a new, modern understanding towards safeguarding across the country, much of which has been learned from Child Exploitation as per the report presented under Item 3. Childcare law frameworks stand up in a world constantly evolving.

It was noted that often parents are looked at the ones who should be protecting their children but sometimes parents struggle and the presumptions behind the existing law framework put a responsibility on parents that they can't undertake.

The Committee noted that contextual safeguarding means that protection is beyond parents. The abuse is extra familial; officers need to ensure there is a level of understanding for this and that it is every one's responsibility. There is a role for community intelligence. [The Contextual Safeguarding](#) website offers a lot of useful information and it was recommended that members of the committee have a look.

The approach of the Children's and Families team at the council is to expand the understanding of safeguarding and not replace what is already part of the work we do.

Following a question from Councillor Jerry Roodhouse in relation to the feedback from children and families, it was confirmed that Warwickshire County Council is currently using in-house feedback to ensure that the right approach is established. It will be rolled out across district/borough/other partnerships when appropriate. It will be a long journey; but once our own house in order we can look to broader partnerships adopt the same processes.

Councillor Jeff Morgan asked if contextual safeguarding practices would ask a lot of the council's social workers? Sally Nash confirmed that it is a challenge to traditional social work practice; it is another, complex dimension. The development within Warwickshire is to look at the internal system with training for staff. Contextual Safeguarding is a complex world which demands experience and knowledge, but the journey has started.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince added that there is an inherent fear with parents that the moment a social worker gets involved with a family, the child will be taken away and this report shows that there is reassurance, that if the issue is outside the home, they will be supported.

Councillor Brain Hammersley asked if the justice system should deter others with the current level of punishment? Sally Nash stated that there is a lot of research in this area. The key issue is the volume of money and material gain available to those prepared to take the risk. The further up the chain you are, the less of a risk you face. Our work concentrates on not blaming the parents but supporting them; while taking care to avoid victim blaming. It is complex. It is important to let perpetrators know that there will always be consequences.

Councillor Marian Humphreys stated that she agrees with comments made by Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince; this is an excellent and positive report. The work being done to get this right is exactly what should be being done at this point. Councillor Humphreys asked if there was support for other children within the family and not just the parents. Sally confirmed that there was; the council service is called Children and Families. Officers take a whole family approach and that is something that Warwickshire has stood for, for a long time. Officers work with schools and other key services for the family where needed. There are protocols about what officers can and can't share but where we can, we do. The relationships with schools are consistently improving.

Sally Nash finished the presentation and noted that all comments and feedback from the Committee were very welcome. Everything will all be taken on board and updates can be brought to the committee in the future.

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor Marian Humphreys and was seconded by Jill Simpson-Vince. A vote was held, and the Committee voted unanimously in favour of the recommendation.

The Chair wished it to be placed on record that the Committee thanks all staff in Children and Families; and not just those on the front line. The reports presented at the meeting have been excellent and there was clarity in the answers to questions asked by members.

Resolved

That the Committee note these developments and approach within the Children and Families Services.

6. 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.

7. Any Other Business

None.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting has been scheduled for 16 November 2021 @ 10am. The meeting will be held at Shire Hall, Warwick.

Meetings for 2021/2022 have been scheduled as follows –

- 22 February 2022 @ 10am
- 11 April 2022 @ 10am

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Chair