

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 16 March 2022

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

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

Officers

Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Chris Baird - Assistant Director(Contractor) Education Management
Nigel Minns, Strategic Director for People
George Shipman, Service Manager
Calvin Smith, Service Manager (Safeguarding & Support)
Paul Spencer, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Sophie Thompson, Intervention Data and Project Management Officer

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Pete Gilbert, Councillor Jeff Morgan, Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince and John McRoberts (Co-opted Member of the Committee)

Apologies were also received from John Coleman, Assistant Director (Children & Families).

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on the 16th of November 2021 were agreed as a true and accurate record. There were no matters arising.

2. Public Speaking

None.

3. Question Time

(1) Questions to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

None.

(2) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant Directors

Following a question from Councillor Brett Beetham in relation to the Nuneaton Academy Trust, it was confirmed that officers are waiting for an update from the Regional Commissioner and this will be presented to the Committee when available.

4. Quarter 3 Council Plan 2020-2025 Quarterly Progress Report (April 2021 to December 2021)

The Council Plan Quarter 3 performance progress report for the period 1st April to 31st December 2021 was approved by Cabinet on 17th February 2022. Chris Baird Assistant Director (contractor) (Education Management) presented a tailored update relevant to the remit of the Committee.

The report focused on the Council Plan 2020 – 2025, giving strategic context and a performance commentary, including the Council's two high level outcomes. These were assessed against 54 key business measures (KBM), of which fourteen were within the remit of this committee. The education examination regime had been suspended for a second year due to the Covid pandemic. Eight proxy measures had been introduced for educational attainment.

The report set out two areas of note and good progress, concerning the number of children open to an early help pathway and the percentage of care leavers who were not in education, employment and/or training. Of the five areas not on track, one required improvement activity, which related to the number of children in care, excluding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The report set out the current performance narrative, improvement activity and an explanation of the projected trajectory.

Current performance showed that one KBM was paused from reporting due to national suspension of inspection or examination regimes. Eight KBMs were on track and three were not. There were two areas of note, with a current performance narrative provided for each of these. Of the three areas not on track, none required escalation at this stage. Summary information was provided and the associated commentary and improvement activity for all reporting measures was available. The impact of the Covid pandemic on these measures was noted.

The report mentioned the ongoing impact of the Covid pandemic on some KBMs. A new performance management framework had been developed and was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 10th March 2022.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the summer exam series for the 2020/21 academic year was cancelled. The report comprised the assessments used for 2021, the proxy measures used for both 2020 and 2021 and contextual information for 2021. Warwickshire results compared favourably to the national, regional and statistical neighbour data. Context was provided on the results data. Charts showed average attainment scores and data on grade five and above in English and maths. This was disaggregated to provide data for disadvantaged/non-disadvantaged pupils. Contextual information was provided about attendance levels in 2020/21, remote learning and the mental health of both pupils and school staff. Further sections focussed on disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils, performance levels prior to the pandemic, key trends and issues in 2019, closing the gap in disadvantaged pupil attainment and recovery from the impact of the pandemic.

Following the presentation, the Chair asked a question in relation to disadvantaged pupils and what could be done differently to improve performance in this area. Sophie Thompson - School Improvement Networks Lead Officer, confirmed that this had been an issue for the Council since 2015 but it is also a national issue. Chris Baird added that there are different levels of funding available and that some of it goes directly to schools. He confirmed that this is an issue across the country and it isn't shifting.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse stated that it was concerning that the country has not moved forward in this area and asked that information from the Closing the Gap Board is shared with members of the committee and it was agreed that a briefing note would be sent out with a view to a full item being added to the work programme for a later meeting. It was confirmed that Councillor Jeff Morgan has been invited to join the Closing the Gap Board in his role as Portfolio Holder for Children, Families & Education.

Following a question from Councillor Brian Hammersley in relation to the number of teaching staff and heads that are leaving the role, Sophie Thompson confirmed that 25 head teachers had left the job in the last academic year which is unprecedented. The Committee noted that predominately, the reason for leaving has been the impact of the pandemic and the challenges faced. A small number have been retirements, or early retirements. To combat the challenges faced because of staff leaving, a course for aspiring head teachers has been introduced and officers are supporting schools with recruitment and inductions courses that are spread over two terms. It was noted that the number of staff leaving, including non-teaching and support staff, is an issue. The level of applications is not reaching the right level but it is hoped that the new range of courses and support will help to retain new staff. Following a question from the Chair, it was confirmed that this is a national issue; and is a post-pandemic problem across many sectors, health and social care, as people reassess their lifestyles after the last two years.

Councillor Brett Beetham requested that moving forward the performance information included a breakdown across the districts and boroughs. The report shows the performance across the county and how Warwickshire is performing alongside statistical neighbours but not how each district and borough is performing within the county. It was confirmed that during the pandemic, it hadn't been possible to get a full data breakdown due to the nature of reporting but that officers are hopeful that the Department for Education will provide the required level of data.

Resolved

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider progress on the delivery of the Council Plan 2020 - 2025 for the period as contained in the report.

5. Progress of Integrated Front Door (MASH)

George Shipman (Service Manager, Initial Response, MASH) introduced this item.

Warwickshire's Safeguarding Partnership established the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) in 2016. These were structures designed to facilitate information-sharing and decision-making on a multi-agency basis through co-locating staff from the local authority, health agencies, the police, and other partners.

Since that time, there had been changes to legislation, guidance and organisational constructs across the partner agencies. In addition, Warwickshire Children and Families Service (WCFS) was part way through an Ofsted Inspection abandoned due to the Covid pandemic. At the time Ofsted had raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of the MASH. It was agreed to undertake a joint review of the MASH in October 2020, in consultation with a number of teams and agencies. The purpose of the review was to look at the current structure, operating model and delivery of services to children and families to establish if they were safe, efficient, robust and whether they offered best value in terms of resource allocation.

In December 2020 a new permanent Service Manager overseeing the MASH, Initial Response Team, Emergency Duty Team and Family Information Service commenced employment and following this, a new Operations Manager was appointed in February 2021.

The outcome of the review was the development of an Integrated Front Door, which was agreed by partners and its development a major priority within the Service, with the new model officially launching in September 2021. The new service has changed the dynamic around which services can be put in place and how parents/families can be involved.

A key area of note has been the introduction of a triage system; where referrals are screened and initial decisions about referral paths are made. This new initial conversation has led to a significant improvement in the service offered. The Committee noted that a number of additional partners are now in place at the triage stage which has led to another significant improvement.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse asked if the data collected at the point of triage contact was shared; and if trends are looked at and the information shared with partners. George Shipman confirmed that the sources of referrals (GP, schools, ambulance service) has allowed officers to create the right path for each case; for example, a new domestic abuse pathway has been introduced and earlier support identified.

Nigel Minns, Strategic Director - People Directorate, confirmed that there is a comprehension quality assurance programme in place and that the data is reviewed regularly to identify patterns/changes and the causes. A routine case audit process is completed every 4-6 weeks by the manager to identify trends in individual and overall cases. Briefing notes are then shared with all partners.

The Ofsted Report published in February 2022 highlighted the progress made in the Front Door, noting this was an area of focus for Senior Managers, the benefits of the new structure, quality of management oversight and strong partnership relationships as some of its strengths. Ofsted did highlight a couple of examples where it felt a strategy discussion should have taken place. It noted however it was unlikely the outcomes would have changed in the examples they reviewed.

In summary, there had been a significant amount of development over the last eighteen months which would continue to further strengthen arrangements including the learning from the one area noted in the Ofsted Report. The next nine months would see the introduction of a portal to support web based referring to the Front Door. This would improve both information security and assist with the quality of information completed when safeguarding concerns were raised by professionals.

Resolved

That the Committee notes the update detailing the changes and progress made to the Children and Families Front Door, formally the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub.

6. Child Protection Performance

Calvin Smith (Service Manager, Safeguarding & Support) introduced this item reporting on findings from the OFSTED inspection. These were a positive acknowledgement of endeavours to improve the County's child in need & child protection services. However, the recent widely reported deaths of children provided a reminder of the need to seek ongoing improvement in services. Reference to the challenges from the Covid pandemic but the service had continued with staff visiting households throughout it, often the only professionals that were able to visit and supported all families not just the vulnerable.

Over the last four years, a series of themed audits had been undertaken aimed at improving the child protection performance and services. Other mechanisms were in place, including the Child Protection Escalation Panel to ensure a robust challenge to both the council and its partners. Audits were undertaken by key decision makers within Warwickshire's child protection services. The audit process changed in the pandemic from a face-to-face, to a Microsoft Teams process. It was planned to return to the face-to-face process to enhance the action learning cycle. After each audit, the learning was shared in workshops with the teams who complete the child protection investigations and when appropriate, key partners. They provided a continuous cycle of improvement with key benefits being reported.

This process sought to improve the rates for key indicators reported annually in the Department for Education Child in Need return. The audits also aimed to monitor and improve factors impacting the experience families. Over the past four years child protection processes had become more robust and restorative. The learning from the OFSTED inspection would be adopted and the cycle of continuous improvement would be maintained.

Following a question from the Chair in relation to the retention of staff, it was confirmed that the professional life of a social worker is averagely seven and half years. However, Warwickshire's turnover of staff is currently not unacceptable. For two years, there were no agency staff at Warwickshire County Council. We are putting in place support for career pathways and aim to

keep experienced staff in post. In comparison with our statistical neighbours, we are doing well. During their first year with the council there is a scheme in place to protect the workload along with additional training from the academy that has been set up, that newly qualified social workers must pass to move forward. We will try and avoid giving child protection cases during the first year – they may co-work a case with another social worker.

Following a question from Councillor Brian Hammersley, Calvin Smith confirmed that if a child is at risk, the child protection process would be implemented but the assumption that parents are the problem was not always the case; so, child protection processes were not always the answer. The team needs to be able to work with the parents, and other partners to protect the child. Often, parents have done everything they possibly can to protect their child. Recently social workers worked with the British Transport Police; there is a range of partners we can work with. Judgements and decisions are never made alone. There is always a team of professionals involved, a multi-agency decision. We will always question “did we get it right this time?”.

Following a question from Councillor Brett Beetham in relation to district and borough performance data being added to the report, it was confirmed that officers do have access to this information, and it was used in making the decision to launch The Warwickshire Family Safeguarding Project pilot in Nuneaton and Bedworth as that was the area with the highest levels of demand.

The Committee wished their gratitude for the work done by Calvin and all of his team to be noted in the minutes; with thanks for all that they did during the pandemic

Resolved

1. That the Committee notes the updated report detailing Child Protection Performance in Warwickshire.
2. That the Children and Families team continue their programme of themed audits, focusing upon areas of practice where performance is below statistical neighbours or are identified for review. The next audit to focus on strategy discussion thresholds, given the recommended action in the recent OFSTED inspection

7. Work Programme

The Committee noted and agreed the work programme as attached.

The Chair confirmed that following the recent survey sent to the Committee in relation to priority topics they would like to see presented at future meetings that work is still in progress to put a programme together.

8. Any Other Business

None.

9. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting has been scheduled for 11 April 2022 @ 10am

The meeting will be held at Shire Hall, Warwick.

Meetings for 2022/2023 have been scheduled as follows –

- 14 June 2022 @ 10am
- 27 September 2022 @ 10am
- 8 November 2022 @ 10am
- 14 February 2023 @ 10am
- 11 April 2023 @ 10am

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Chair