

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 13 June 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Marian Humphreys (Chair)
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Barbara Brown
Councillor Brian Hammersley
Councillor Justin Kerridge
Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince
Councillor Clare Golby
Councillor Jeff Morgan
Councillor Chris Mills

Officers

Johnny Kyriacou, Assistant Director for Education Services
Dr Shade Agboola, Director of Public Health
Daniel Atkins, Technical Specialist - Children Transformation
Matthew Biggs, Strategic Lead for Education and Learning
Ross Caws, Warwickshire SEND Board Development Manager
Alison Cole, Head of Health & Wellbeing Commissioning
John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children and Families
Liz Entwistle, Commissioner (Family Wellbeing)
Becky Hale, Director of Health and Commissioning
Robert Sabin, Lead Commissioner (Family Wellbeing)
Nadja Willinger, Business Intelligence Analyst
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer

Others Present

Councillor Kam Kaur – Portfolio Holder for Education
Councillor Sue Markham – Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell and Nigel Minns.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meetings held on 26 April 2023 and 16 May 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record.

2. Public Speaking

There were no public speakers.

3. Question Time

(1) Questions to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

There were no questions to Cabinet Portfolio Holders.

(2) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant Directors

Councillor Kam Kaur told members that Johnny Kyriacou had joined the Council as Assistant Director for Education. She said Duane Chappell had recently left the Council, and the position of Head of Inclusion was in the process of being advertised. In the meantime Ross Caws had been appointed as her interim replacement.

Councillor Kam Kaur said Nigel Minns had met with Ofsted the previous day as part of the Council's Annual Conversation. She stated initial feedback from the meeting had been positive, although there was an acceptance there were some areas where more improvement work was needed.

4. Corporate Parenting Panel Update

A verbal update was provided by Councillor Sue Markham. She said the Voice influence and change team had presented their report to the most recent Corporate Parenting Panel to outline the work they had completed in the last three months. This included a fun day for siblings, as a key area of work had identified the importance in maintaining and building the relationship with siblings when they are not always living together. There would be a Refugee Celebration Event on June 19 and a care experienced and carers fun day taking place in July.

The Committee was told that Deena Moorey the Virtual School Head presented her annual report to the Panel. Evidence showed that when children enter care earlier and have stable placements and educational settings, they are more likely to achieve well. Gaps in attainment were more apparent in secondary school. It had been agreed to have an agenda item and presentation on the increase in children missing from care at the next Panel meeting.

Councillor Sue Markham said placement stability had been identified as a key area for improvement. A wrap around service supporting carers had been introduced and the number of

children in care had reduced; however there had been a recent increase in teenagers entering care and it had been acknowledged that it can be difficult to identify an appropriate placement.

Regarding long term stability, Councillor Sue Markham said fewer children had plans of adoption and there had been a significant increase in the number of Special Guardianship Orders being made with family members and foster carers. Members were told there was a need for more foster carers so the Council had the ability to match children with carers and have choice of placements.

Responding to a question from Councillor Clare Golby, John Coleman (Assistant Director, Children and Families) said there were myriad reasons for the increase in adolescents entering care. For those aged 16-17 it was mainly due to a breakdown in family relationships and the family asking them to leave home. However officers were working to encourage young people in such a situation to stay in the family setting as often this would be better for them rather than being put into care. For younger children, the reasons for being put into care were more varied. There had been an increase in mental health issues and instances of self harm. John Coleman said there were instances of children being taken into care due to being victims of exploitation outside the home environment. He said there were no real hotspots for this happening and it was a countywide issue.

5. Q4 Integrated Performance Report

The item was introduced by Becky Hale (Assistant Director, Strategy and Commissioning). She told members that of the 22 key business measures of relevance to the remit of the Committee, 16 were on track or had been completed. There were a number of positives, with the key business measures relating to the number of children subject to a child protection plan and applications for school places being highlighted as particularly good areas of performance.

There were two service areas where performance was static and four where it was declining. One of the performance areas that was not on track to be met related to the under 18 conception rate. Becky Hale said the most recent data was from December 2021 and a lot of targeted work had been taking place since then to improve the figures and understand the root cause of the current ones. One of the static performance areas related to the number of under 18s being admitted to hospital due to alcohol. Becky Hale said there had been a slight improvement but admission rates in Warwickshire were notably higher than the national average. Targeted work was taking place in the Nuneaton and Bedworth and Warwick districts due to these being particular outliers. A new liaison officer was in the process of being recruited to work with the Council's commissioning provider, Compass. This was a priority as part of the Strategic Drug and Alcohol Partnership. Instances of self harm was another area of concern where targeted action was taking place as the key business measure was not on track to be met.

John Coleman said the percentage of care leavers in education, employment or training had decreased overall during the last year. However there was an interesting trend that had emerged when the data was analysed in more detail; the percentage of 17-18 year olds in care in education, employment or training had decreased but the figure for 19-20 year olds had increased. The reasons for this trend were being investigated. The number of careers advisors in the children in care team had been increased. John Coleman said around 45 per cent of children in care were unaccompanied asylum seekers, and although they had been engaging in education courses they were not able to work. There were further concerns however as they would generally take shorter

courses; additionally there was limited availability for English as a Second Language courses. John Coleman said addressing this issue was an area of priority.

Shade Agboola (Director of Public Health) said a programme had been implemented to address declining rates of children who were receiving checks from health visitors at 6-8 weeks old. Following discussions at the Health and Wellbeing Board an action plan had been devised, whereby families who had high needs or were classified as vulnerable would be prioritised. All families would receive a health check by the age of 13 weeks. Shade Agboola said recruitment of health visitors remained a national challenge. However of the cohort of students set to graduate soon, indications showed they were likely to want to remain in Warwickshire and potentially support the workforce. Shade Agboola said parents who had been identified as being vulnerable would be entitled to receive a virtual offer of support.

Matt Biggs (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, Education and Early Years) said the Council had recently been subject of an LGA Early Years Peer Review. The results and recommendations of this were being reviewed. Matt Biggs said some of the recommendations would be easy to implement but others would need a more strategic approach. Matt Biggs drew members' attention to the uptake of nursery places for eligible two-year-olds, as this had been a particularly successful piece of work and would provide greater longer-term benefits for those children, as they would be from disadvantaged backgrounds. Work on this would continue through the revised Education Strategy, which was in the development phase. Members were told a new service lead had come into post with a view to picking up on improvements in early years.

Becky Hale drew members' attention to the summary of the Integrated Delivery Plan contained within the report. This outlined there were action plans in place to address areas that were not meeting performance targets. Becky Hale said there had been a three per cent overspend at the end of the financial year and 20 per cent underachievement in terms of savings. Additionally there were forecast delays in relation to the capital programme.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse said he had some concerns about a number of areas. He said he was worried there would be a build-up of issues regarding health visitors if the ideas were not implemented swiftly enough. He also said issues relating to self harm and conception rates had been long standing and needed addressing. Councillor Roodhouse asked if there was more the Council could do, and if the Corporate Delivery Plan needed to be re-examined or if there needed to be more direction given by Cabinet.

In relation to conception rates and hospital admissions, Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince asked what information was being given out by schools and if there was sufficient joining up between their programmes and the Council's. She also asked if this was also partly due to the fallout from Covid and children being in isolation. John Coleman said prevention strategies relating to hospital admissions due to alcohol took longer to embed and see the impact of. The Council had been investing in youth workers to help schools and the police to spread the message of the dangers of alcohol misuse and engage them with other activities. John Coleman said the Council had commissioned the educational theatre company Loudmouth to engage with young people and explain about the dangers associated with social media and keeping safe in relationships. Members were told there had been a significant increase in the number of young people who had been accessing early help support. The subject of raising awareness of exploitation was being raised in primary schools.

Councillor Clare Golby said social media use was harmful to young children, and said it had been used to circulate footage of crime taking place in Nuneaton and Bedworth district. She stated her belief that benchmarking programmes, and the feedback from them, had not been good enough. She stated her belief different things needed to be tried, particularly in relation to distraction techniques. John Coleman said distraction activities were used and work was taking place with the police and youth justice teams to try and change behaviours. He said some of the children and young people the Council were working with were being exploited and did not have comfortable home environments. The focus was moving them away from those scenarios and potential criminal behaviour. John Coleman said there had been an increase in weapons-related crime, although he reiterated that Warwickshire was a comparatively safe place to live. Responding to points raised by Councillor Clare Golby, John Coleman said the inspection report of the youth justice service had been positive and the Youth Justice Board had been pleased with its performance and level of service. There were a number of positive but challenging relationships with partner organisations.

Responding to a question from Councillor Justin Kerridge, John Coleman said there was a difference in educational attainment rates between children in care and those not in care. This was reflected nationally, although Warwickshire children in care were performing relatively well at GCSE level. Raising attainment rates amongst children in care was an area of focus.

Shade Agboola said there was a lag in the most recently available data, but said Warwickshire was performing better than its statistical neighbours. She said a working group set up to focus on self harm in 2018 had demonstrated there had been engagement with schools. A self harm guidance policy had been developed, advising how school staff could have conversations with children and young people with issues pertaining to self harm. Regarding health visitors, Shade Agboola said the Council was doing as much as it could, and emphasised that this was a national challenge and no vulnerable families were being missed. Contracts were not necessarily reflective of the current workforce. In response, Councillor Jerry Roodhouse said it was his recollection the officer coordinating the working group had left the Council and the focus of the group had thereafter moved towards suicide prevention rather than self harm.

Councillor Kam Kaur said work was being carried out and there was a commitment to tackling the issues that members had raised, but there was a possibility work was taking place in silos. She suggested members be given a briefing note to outline the work that was going on. Becky Hale indicated she was happy to provide this.

During their discussions, members had mentioned an app called Me Too and asked what had happened with its development. Becky Hale said the trials had not been successful, and during the Covid lockdown period a new app called Kooth had superseded it and this was now being used.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Children & Family Centre Updates and Strategic Direction

The item was introduced by Rob Sabin (Lead Commissioner, Family Wellbeing), who explained there were 14 children and family centres in the county; one was operated by St Michaels and the remainder by Barnardo's. An independent review of the centres had been undertaken in 2023, which concluded there was a good level of performance in relation to provision for 0-4 years; partnership working with speech and language colleagues; improved uptake in two year nursery funding for eligible families; and increased support for families experiencing hardship. However

concerns were raised over outreach delivery and service provision for 5-19 years. Since the last update to the Committee work had taken place to improve performance in these areas, but they were still not meeting their key business measure target. Rob Sabin said commissioners and early help officers had been working with the providers and had developed an action plan aimed at improving performance, with a focus on outreach work and provision for 5-19 years. He said St Michaels and Barnardo's had continued to develop partnerships with health and early help colleagues and this had helped to increase the levels of support for families in need. This included signposting guidance and advice for families, such as where funding grants could be accessed. Data showed the most common decile on the Index of Multiple Deprivation that attendees of the children and family centres came from was decile six. Data also showed there was an underrepresentation of people from rural areas using the centres, and existing community facilities were underutilised.

Responding to points raised by Councillor Justin Kerridge, Liz Entwistle (Commissioner, Family Wellbeing) said Barnardo's had increased its levels of engagement across the Stratford district with a view to improving delivery of outreach services in particular. Some of the centres now used family link workers to help provide more specific one to one work with certain users. In some cases centres had previously used volunteers to run certain services, and the possibility of using volunteers alongside Council-led services was being looked at.

Councillor Jeff Morgan noted the current contract expired at the end of August 2024 and asked if a decision had been made on what would happen in terms of provision after this date. Becky Hale said this was being considered by officers and an update would be provided in due course. Councillor Jerry Roodhouse stated his belief that a robust discussion on future provision was needed. He also noted there appeared to be an unequal distribution of service provision across the county, and said he would have liked to have seen a fuller breakdown of the family centre budget based on district/borough area. The Chair agreed and asked officers to distribute the budget figures to the members of the Committee.

Responding to questions from Councillor Brian Hammersley, Liz Entwistle said the attendance figures shown in the report showed the percentage population of a district as a whole; for example if everyone from a particular IMD was attending a centre then the figure in the report would be 100. There were different levels of deprivation across the districts and boroughs so there wasn't a standard comparable percentage figure. In areas of higher deprivation and need work was taking place to make sure centres were delivering against the specific needs of that community. How this was resourced would remain as an area of focus for the remainder of the care contract.

The Chair said she was aware of a nursery group that was run by volunteers, and asked if consideration could be given to increased use of the voluntary sector to operate some Council-led services. Matt Biggs said if a nursery was registered with Ofsted then it would continue to have support from the Council's quality and safeguarding team. Most nurseries would continue to ask for Council support, regardless of who was operating it, as they would be able to find details of further assistance that was available to them. Matt Biggs said he would discuss this with the Chair outside of the meeting.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7. OSC Customer Feedback Report 2022/2023

The item was introduced by Matt Biggs, who advised members that since the report was published, additional data quality checks had identified some small updates to the figures quoted. He said that of the 212 complaints relating to children and families that were closed during 2022/23, 140, or 66 per cent, were remedied by providing an explanation; 72, or 24 per cent were remedied by providing an apology; in 22 cases, or 10.4 per cent, a service was provided; five cases, or 2.4 per cent, were remedied by changing a process; and in two cases, or 0.9 per cent, a financial remedy was given. The Committee was also told that in 2022/2023 apologies were the most common remedy and accounted for 93, or 71 per cent, of all complaints. Providing explanations accounted for 56, or 42.7 per cent, of complaints and providing a service accounted for 13, or 9.9 per cent of complaints. One remedy each referred to changing a process and a financial remedy, which was 0.8 per cent each. Finally, in relation to Education Services, lessons learned were recorded for 44, or 33.6 per cent, of closed complaints in 2022/2023; 17, or 13 per cent related to process adjustments; nine, or 6.9 per cent, addressed lessons regarding communication; and two, or 1.5 of the total lessons learned, related to application delays.

Matt Biggs said three ways of improving complaints management had been identified. The first was to manage them more proactively. Analysis showed that, particularly in relation to complaints regarding school admissions, some complaints could have been prevented if they had been handled differently. The second point was to establish the required outcome of the complaint. The third was use of empathy, and the importance of acknowledging that a complaint being made was a reflection of a customer's frustration. This was particularly important to consider in issues where a child was involved.

Members were told a new admissions team lead had been appointed and was working to establish how complaints could be managed more effectively. It had been identified there were many part time members of staff in the admissions team, and some complaints had arisen from customers not having a named point of contact, or not being able to get in contact with the person they had made their initial enquiry with and having to repeat themselves and having the answer to their question delayed. It was highlighted that the report recorded 51 per cent of complaints relating to admissions were because of communication issues. Additionally, 46 per cent of complaints were resolved through an explanation of the problem. Matt Biggs said this demonstrated that a significant proportion of the complaints could have been prevented. To handle this officers were being given specific geographic areas to cover so their knowledge of the schools would improve, and to convey to parents when they would next be at work and therefore be in a position to answer their query. This would avoid the need for parents to have to make multiple calls to resolve an issue, and potentially avoid a complaint being made.

Some complaints to the children and families service area related to parents' concerns at quality of learning provision. In these instances parents would be advised to contact the school. However concerns regarding safeguarding and special educational needs would still be handled by the Council. Ross Caws (Acting Head of SEND and Inclusion) said the majority of complaints regarding SEND related to Education, Health and Care Plans and requests for assessments. There was significant demand for this service and there wasn't the necessary staffing capacity to handle all interactions with parents. There had been 1,300 requests for an EHCP last year, compared to 690 the year before.

Dan Atkins (Service Manager, Children and Families) told members about the complaints process and explained there was a three-stage escalation process. In the majority of cases, complaints were resolved at the first stage and often a conversation was all that was needed to settle a complaint. Dan Atkins said apologies would be used to acknowledge that something could have been done better, and officers also had the opportunity to take on board lessons learned. He added customers would also respond positively when a remedy had been made, but often these could not be formally recorded as a comment or a compliment.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince acknowledged comments made about a lack of communication or clarity. She said she had seen messages on social media that amounted to a complaint and had had to intervene on a resident's behalf before the online comments got out of hand. Councillor Jerry Roodhouse agreed, stating the majority of people would be satisfied if their situation was adequately explained to them.

Responding to a question from Councillor Barbara Brown on EHCPs and co-production, Ross Caws said the Council's SEND Member Panel was looking at how all the groups involved fitted together and what everyone's role was. The Council worked closely with the Parent Carers Forum and had updated the website relating to the Local Offer and launched an Inclusion Charter. Ross Caws said officers were due to meet with representatives from the Department for Education the following week, and was confident that demonstrable progress in relation to co-production could be shown. The number of children with an EHCP had increased from 2,700 in 2014 to 5,500. More issues were being resolved through mediation instead of having to go to a full appeal. However due to the demand for the service and staffing capacity issues, there had been complaints from parents that they had not been adequately kept up to date with the progress of their application.

Councillor Clare Golby said she was pleased a single point of contact would be given to customers in future. She noted that 140 complaints were resolved through an explanation, and queried if this meant if the information being given to parents was sufficiently clear for them to understand. She asked if the information was peer reviewed by the public. Ross Caws said members of the Parent Carer Voice forum were involved in rewriting the wording of the standard letters, and these would be reviewed every two to three years. More ways of supporting parents with better information were being identified. A recent headteachers' conference had had a focus on special educational needs and what more could be done to provide support to schools and to improve that relationship between the Council and schools. The results of the Your Say staff survey had identified officers had raised concerns over their workload.

Members noted the contents of the report.

8. Work Programme and items on the Forward Plan

Matt Biggs said an update to the Admissions Report would be made in September, giving members an update on the Improvement Plan and the transfer of pupils into primary and secondary schools. The Chair said she had met with the Chair of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to discuss work on collating information together.

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

9. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

10. Date of Next Meeting

Members noted the date of the next meeting.

The meeting rose at 12.25pm

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Chair