

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 19 September 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Marian Humphreys (Chair)
Councillor Justin Kerridge
Councillor Clare Golby
Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell
Councillor Jeff Morgan
Councillor Chris Mills
Councillor Bill Gifford
Councillor Tim Sinclair

Mr Michael Cowland, CEO of The Diocese of Coventry MAT (Co-opted)
Mr Phil Johnson Chair of Stockingford local governing body (Co-opted)

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Matthew Biggs, Strategic Lead for Education and Learning
Louise Church, Customer Relations Team Lead
John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children and Families
Andy Danks, Delivery Lead Attendance Service
Johnny Kyriacou, Assistant Director for Education Services
Nici Scott-Moylan, Team Lead Attendance
Steve Smith, Director of Commissioning Support Unit
Sarah Tregaskis, Service Manager - Education Service Delivery

Others Present

Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education
Councillor Sue Markham, Portfolio Holder for Children & Families

1. General

The Chair welcomed two new Co-Optee members –

- Mr Michael Cowland, CEO of The Diocese of Coventry MAT
- Mr Phil Johnson Chair of Stockingford local governing body.

The committee is looking for two more representatives. If anyone knows of anybody who would be interested in the role, could they please contact Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

- Two parent governors and two church governors are invited to the committee.
- Their terms of office and appointment are governed by statutory requirements.
- They may speak on children's matters but may only vote on matters relating to education.

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Barbara Brown, Councillor Brian Hammersley, Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince and Councillor Jerry Roodhouse.

Councillor Bill Gifford was present as a substitute for Councillor Roodhouse and Councillor Tim Sinclair was present as a substitute for Councillor Simpson-Vince.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on the 13th June 2023 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

Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education confirmed that following a period of change within the education service, the team is working well together and working on project including SEND. This Committee was reminded that they are able to ask for any updates or information relating to the remit of the committee that they would like.

4. Corporate Parenting Panel Update

Councillor Sue Markham, Portfolio Holder for Children & Families confirmed that a comprehensive report had been presented at the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting which was held on the 18th September 2023. A copy of the report was circulated to members of the Committee ahead of the meeting but the following points were highlighted –

- A paediatric first aid course was held with support from the Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service to provide first aid training for care experienced young parents.
- National Siblings Day was celebrated on the 6th of April. Over 50 brothers and sisters attended an event at Myton which had been transformed into a fair ground for the day.
- There has been an increase in events aimed at brothers and sisters and following National Siblings Day, there was a trip to Legoland so that siblings who perhaps don't live together were able to spend time together.
- As part of Refugee Celebration Week, Warwickshire hosted a celebration for all young unaccompanied asylum seekers on the evening of 19th June. Over 60 young people attended and the evening included an awards ceremony to recognise educational and personal achievements and acts of kindness.

The Corporate Parenting Panel also received a report in relation to Missing Episodes for Children in Care. The Panel found this incredibly useful and gained a better understanding of the reasons behind missing episodes and what is being done by the teams to support children and reduce occurrences.

Councillor Bill Gifford thanked Councillor Markham for the report, saying that the publicity of the work done by the officers and their teams was excellent and that allowing everyone to see just what good work is being done should continue.

The Committee thanked Councillor Markham for her update and confirmed that they are looking forward to receiving updates at all future meetings.

5. Quarter 1 Integrated Performance Report

The report was introduced by Johnny Kyriacou – Director of Education, and confirmation was given that overall the performance within education services is on track with the exception of In Year School Place Applications. Item 7 will cover this in more detail.

Johnny Kyriacou provided an update in relation to the work underway on SEND. It was noted that there has been a lot of change recently and officers are working on bringing it all together. Work includes reviewing what has happened previously and how officers can use lessons learnt to move forward more efficiently. It was agreed that a member development session in relation to SEND and the current change programme be arranged and offered to all members, not just those on this committee.

John Coleman – Director for Children and Families highlighted that the performance in relation to Child Protection Plans remains stable; it has risen slightly but is still within target.

Regarding referrals to the Front Door service, the Panel noted that there had been an increase over the summer but that this is a normal trend and expected.

It was confirmed that the performance in relation to the number of Children in Care was currently not on track but that the figure is coming down. It is an area of focus for the team, and it was noted that the number has been affected by the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) taken in by Warwickshire.

Following a question from Councillor Justin Kerridge, John Coleman confirmed that the risk register for children's service will always include a consideration of significant injuries or death. It was noted that this was the same for the adult service risk register. Officers do need to be aware that situations could arise that result in injury or death, especially within the children and adult services.

Following a discussion in relation to the service overspend, it was noted that this was predominately in relation to the cost of residential placements which has increased recently by 23%. The Warwickshire County Council regional framework is predicting another increase of 10%. This isn't unusual across children's services in England's local authorities.

The demand for emergency placements has also increased and is often offered at a high cost to the council. Work is underway for council owned children's homes which mean that by the end of this financial year the council will have 13 residential places resulting in a large saving across the board.

Councillor Clare Golby requested further information in relation to the high cost related to children in care, asking if it was in relation to specific care needs. Councillor Golby also raised concerns that behavioural issues in council run homes, within the county, could cause issues within the communities they are based in. John Coleman stated that the placement market for children in care is broken and that providers are seeking "easier children" to look after and will not take those with higher needs. There are complex needs with some of the children in Warwickshire care at the moment. Regarding Councillor Golby's concerns about the impact on communities, John Coleman confirmed this would be minimal. Specialist provision will not be provided in the homes within communities and there will be no issues for the communities. In addition, OFSTED measures will review the impact of the homes on the communities. Officers are currently and continually working with the local communities to ensure that there are no negative impacts.

It was agreed that John Coleman will ask Dr Shade Agboola, Director of Public Health to provide further information to the Committee in relation to the public health matters such as self-harm and alcohol abuse. The performance figures currently available are annual and the Committee would like more up to date information. It was highlighted to members of the Committee that live data is available on the BI dashboard, and there has been an improvement since the report was published.

In relation to an increase in payments to families in emergency situations, the Committee noted that in one case, a payment was made to a family who were facing eviction for non-payment of

rent. While officers agreed that this was an unusual case, and not something that they would do regularly, making the payment for rent was much cheaper than the option of taking the children into care after the eviction. Officers are working with the family to avoid the same situation arising again.

Following a question from Councillor Bill Gifford in relation to the forecasted overspend for the provision of SEND services, and the fact that one of the providers for this service was forecasting large profits, John Coleman confirmed that this is an issue and that the current review of the placement for children market confirmed the issues. The consultation on the government's response is looking at pulling together regional care collaboratives to manage some of the issues and Warwickshire is very much involved in that conversation. There is a regional framework in place and providers are reluctant to join this. The council has rejected offers for placements due to the high price asked for.

It was agreed that a member development session will be arranged for all members to give a better understanding in relation to placements, costs and providers. Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer, will work with John Coleman to arrange this.

Resolved

The Committee considers and comments on Quarter 1 2023/24 organisational performance and progress against the Integrated Delivery Plan, management of finances and risk.

6. School Attendance update

Sarah Tregaskis, Head of School Services & Post-16 Education, present the report to the committee which contained further analysis following the report presented in April 2023. Andy Danks, Delivery Lead - Attendance Service, continued by confirming that the report contained key elements of the service and gave an overview with the following points highlighted -

- The national figure in relation to school absence is increasing, but Warwickshire is narrowing that gap with a slower increase.
- There has been a significant increase in the figures for absence within Warwickshire, and it is important to note that absence from school is often a symptom of other issues, such as self-harm, the cost-of-living crisis or family illness.
- The Committee noted that there is a new delivery model in place for monitoring school absence but at the moment, real time data is not available. When that is in place, officers will have a much clearer idea of the number of absences.
- Some schools within Warwickshire have not yet signed up to the new delivery model but officers from the council are working with them to get them on board.
- Part of the new direction is an understanding that absence and attendance is something that everyone should be working on. Support from appropriate, multi agencies can make a real difference.

Following a question from Councillor Bill Gifford in relation to the link between absence and other issues, and how officers identify which comes first, John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service confirmed that there is a strong link between the attendance team and children's services and that officers have a clear objective to support children to attend school. The early help team are also working closely with the attendance team to ensure support is available.

Clarification was given that the figures reflect a small number of children not attending school more frequently, rather than more children generally not attending. It was reiterated that often there is another, significant issue that is preventing attendance and that it is often much more than truancy. The Committee noted that schools and officers do a lot of work with the families as well, not just the child/ren.

Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell asked for confirmation in relation to how many schools have taken up the new delivery model and if there was a difference between the number of the absence reported by families and the number of absences reported by schools? It was confirmed that there are just over 80 schools within Warwickshire that have yet to sign up and that are being offered support to get them on board. There are 69 schools that have not yet been contacted.

In relation to the question about how absences are reported by families in comparison to how they are reported by schools, the Committee was referred to the coding definitions in the report. It was acknowledged that these codes do not always show the full picture and that they can be open to interpretation.

Councillor Clare Golby asked how absence was recorded when it was a result of children being asked *not* to go into school with certain illnesses. Councillor Golby also requested a further breakdown of the data to reflect age groups/year groups as well as information on how children who simply refuse to go to school are measured. It was confirmed that the previous report presented in April 2023 held a lot of the information and that it is only recently that real time data has been available to officers. The Committee noted that in some cases, there were IT issues preventing schools from signing up to the new model and that the Department of Education (DfE) is supporting Warwickshire County Council with this. The DfE is also provided support in encouraging schools to join that have previously stated that they do not want to. The Committee noted that there had been some schools reluctant to join to do GDPR concerns, but that these concerns have all been resolved and those schools have since signed up.

Andy Danks confirmed that in relation to children that just won't attend school, legal processes have often been exhausted. It is a national concern and there are discussions ongoing. For the most part, all options will be considered and multi-agency work undertaken.

The Chair asked for information about emotional based school avoidance (EBSA) absences and noted from the response that it is a broad spectrum to cover. It was confirmed that work is underway on ways to measure EBSA. There is often a lot of safeguarding work is involved in EBSA cases and there is no further breakdown for this currently, but it is an area of focus for officers.

Resolved

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on the information provided in the report.

7. School Admissions Service Progress Report

Matt Biggs, Head of Access to Education introduced the report which focuses significant improvement work which was undertaken following a robust review. The focus was on stabilising the service following the well documented issues of the last 12 months.

Louise Church Delivery Lead - Admissions highlighted the fundamental and statutory requirements to the Committee. Confirmation was given in relation to “in year” admissions which relates to children moving into or around Warwickshire during the school year.

The Committee notes that the report includes a lot of information about the role of the school admissions team including helping families applying for free school meals and school transport.

In relation to the overall improvement plan and the themes identified in order to improve the service, it was noted that this will be an ongoing project until March 2024. The Committee noted that 77% of actions have been completed.

Louise Church confirmed that ‘in-year’ allocations is now within target and that there has been a big reduction in waiting times for families. The statutory requirement is 15 working days. There will always be a small number that don’t meet the target – and this can include children who have been previously excluded.

The Offer days, which were held in March and April 2023 were very successful. All information was sent out in a timely fashion and in two ways to ensure that no one was missed out. Confirmation was given that officer felt the needs and expectations of Warwickshire families were met.

The Committee was pleased to learn that there has been a 72% reduction in complaints. Officers will continue to work so that there is a further reduction in complaints.

The Committee learnt that the service has received approximately 40,000. emails since January 2023. Officers are focused on maintaining a service that can offer the best to the families.

The discussion moved to the current concerns which include the significant rise in families moving to the area including Ukrainian families. Council officers are working with internal and external teams to support these families. This has led to an increase in school appeals but with an increase in staff these are being worked through. The Committee was invited to go and meet the team and see the work that they are doing.

Councillor Bill Gifford congratulated the team on the reduction in complaints stating that it shows that there has been a real change for the better.

Councillor Tim Sinclair agreed that there has been a significant improvement in performance in a short space of time and that officers aren't reasting on their laurels – well done!

Councillor Sinclair continued and asked where improvements could be made in the number of appeals in view of the fact that the number of successful appeals is rising. Louise Church confirmed that there is a lot of work underway with the schools on the best way to avoid appeals as they shouldn't be happening, officers should be getting admissions right the first time. Louise Church added that not all of the information relating to successful appeals was included in the report, but that she would come to a future meeting with additional information.

Matt Biggs confirmed that there are some considerable place pressures which need urgently addressing, for the majority, these are for in year moves as families move into Warwickshire. The pressure is likely to continue so the council is working with the schools to manage them. It is likely that the number of appeals will continue to increase as parents/children don't get the place they want.

It was noted that work is already underway to secure the 3000 places that will be needed in the next 12 months, but that this figure does not give any allowance to the 'in-year' moves. It was confirmed that the Fair Access Protocol is currently under review and that as soon as it has been finalised, it will be presented to this committee.

Mr Phil Johnson, Chair of Stockingford local governing body, stated that in his experience with 'in-year' a lot of districts make allowances for potential over subscriptions. In addition, as part of the appeals panel Mr Johnson has found there have been issues with the quality of information and the accuracy of the reports presented. Louise Church thanked Mr Johnson for the feedback, confirming that they were aware of the issues and have been working on them.

Councillor Clare Golby raised concerns that the housing growth within the county often involves a delay getting schools built and that this impacts on not just home to school transport but the transport infrastructure in general. Councillor Golby asked if there is a joined-up approach to making sure that there are places ready for when and where they are needed. Matt Biggs confirmed that there has been improvement in this area but that there is a lot more work being done with property services. The council is managing a lot of significant growth within the authority. There is a lot more visibility to all the projects in the pipeline and there are regular meetings to ensure milestones are being met and highways, planning and land officers are keeping us updated with issues that crop up once a project has started – e.g. badger relocation. All these factors will impact on the timely delivery of school places.

Resolved

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on the content of the report.

8. Draft Final Sustainable Futures Strategy

Steve Smith, Director of Commissioning Support Unit, introduced the report and the history behind it. A Climate change emergency was declared by the council in 2019 with the first draft of the strategy presented to Cabinet in October 2022. The current stage of the strategy is being presented at all the Overview and Scrutiny Committees to provide an updated on the

current situation, where projects are currently and what the next steps are. It is worth noting that the strategy will continually develop; more will be coming on board. The report comments on funding and where financial opportunities can be found to help with the affordability of the strategy.

Mr Phil Johnson, Chair of Stockingford local governing body thanked officers for the interesting read and comprehensive report. Mr Johnson asked how the council is supporting schools – for example with solar panels? Steve Smith confirmed that ensuring that school roofs are suitable would be the first step and that officers are working with the property team who deal with enquiries about this. It was confirmed that improved insulation is often required first and that this can be costly. It was agreed that further Information can be supplied to the Committee on the current situation relating to support for schools.

Councillor Clare Golby asked for information on how the strategy will prevent the work negatively impacting the less well off. In her experience it has been a struggle to get people to do the work, and to find the materials that are required. Steve Smith confirmed that the council is working with the district and borough councils within Warwickshire as well as partners within the industry. Steve Smith added that there aren't always easy solutions but that is why there are regular partnership workshops. Work will continue with other agencies and partners to ensure that the council is always working intelligently.

It was confirmed that there are a lot of new industry standard targets and as the work continues to progress, the performance information will be made available to this committee and all elected members.

Following a question from Councillor Tim Sinclair in relation to the development of new schools, and how they fit in to the strategy, Steve Smith confirmed that there are a number of ways to mitigate additional emissions with each new development. These include renewable energy sources, discussion with planners and insulation. A lot is governed by planning policy and there are different methods from building research policies. Each new investment will have their own targets but ultimately, the benefit will need to be to the bill payers at the school.

Mr Michael Cowland, CEO of The Diocese of Coventry MAT asked for clarification in relation to the lack of reference to schools in the report. Mr Cowland asked if there is there a relationship between education services and the Commissioning Support Unit? There are a lot of schools in the county who are doing a lot of work on sustainability and who want to do more.

Steve Smith thanked Mr. Cowland, stating that he made a fair point and that he will take that feedback back to his team; adding that the relationships with schools could be strengthened. It was confirmed that all schools were surveyed in relation to the strategy just after the pandemic and about half responded and are actively involved with the work being done to improve the renewable opportunities.

Resolved

The Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments upon the Sustainable Futures Strategy and supporting action plan attached at Appendix 1 and 2, prior to final consideration by Cabinet in November 2023.

9. Work Programme and items on the Forward Plan

The Committee noted and agreed that updated work programme and items on the Forward Plan relevant to the remit of the Committee.

The Chair asked that if members of the Committee had any requests for topics to be added to the work programme for future meetings, they should contact Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

10. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

11. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 14th November 2023 at 10am.

The meeting will be held in Committee Room 2, Shire Hall, Warwick.

The meeting rose at 12.27

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Chair