

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 25 January 2024

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, Director for Education Services
Nigel Minns, Executive Director for Children and Young People
Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Leah Adams, Head of Early Years and School Effectiveness
John Coleman, Director - Children and Families
Sophie Thompson, Intervention Data and Project Management Officer
Lauren Sime, Business Improvement Officer

Others Present

Andy Mitchell, Local Democracy Reporter

1. General

The Chair was unavoidably delayed and was not present at the start of the meeting. It was agreed that Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Service Officer would start the meeting, covering apologies, disclosures of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests, the minutes of the previous meeting and public speaking.

It was agreed that Councillor Jerry Roodhouse, Vice-Chair, would chair the meeting, starting at Item 3 until Councillor Marian Humphreys arrived.

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell and Phil Johnson (Co-optee and Chair of Stockingford Local Governing Body). Apologies were also received from Uju Okereke, Public Health Consultant.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Clare Golby confirmed that she had submitted updated disclosure forms to the legal team but that they did not affect any items on the agenda for the meeting.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on the 19th September 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 Directors

Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education confirmed that, in relation to early year entitlement and provider rates, work is progressing well and there are plans for a briefing note to be circulated as soon as ready. It was confirmed that the fair access protocol launched was last week and has been well received by head teachers and further amendments will be taken forward. Councillor Kaur asked that her thanks to the teams across the council who had been involved were noted.

Councillor Sue Markham, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families, confirmed that the council's bid to become a sector led improvement partner (commissioned by the Department for Education) had been successful. This means that the service will be able to support other authorities to improve and is a great indication of the confidence in Warwickshire's children's services. There are details to finalise, but this is a great news story.

Councillor Jeff Morgan asked if there would be any link between being a sector led improvement partner and future gradings from OFSTED inspections. John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service confirmed that there would not be a direct link other than to be a sign to OFSTED of the confidence in Warwickshire.

In relation to Warwickshire children's homes, it was confirmed that four have now been completed, with the second home due to open in April 2024. There is another home that the council is hoping to acquire.

Councillor Markham confirmed that she had visited a Loudmouth session – a programme with the aim of preventing the exploitation of children in Warwickshire. The Committee noted that sessions run for a range of ages and if any member would like to join future sessions, to contact John Coleman.

4. Corporate Parenting Panel Update

Councillor Sue Markham, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families presented a brief overview of the reports that were included in the agenda pack for today's meeting. Points from the report such as the introduction of mental health boxes, consultation with young people in relation to the redesign of the access to records process and recent Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) training for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) were highlighted to the Committee.

In relation to the RSE training, the Committee noted that sessions had been very well attended and were a good introduction to cultural differences related to this topic.

Following a question from Councillor Clare Golby in relation to the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children in Warwickshire, it was confirmed that there is a mandatory national scheme in place which requires all local authorities to support a number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children equivalent to 0.1% of their overall 0 – 18 population. For Warwickshire, this equates to 119 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. It was noted that 40% of all of Warwickshire Care Leavers are Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and that funding is received for each placement.

Councillor Golby asked a follow up question in relation to the placement of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children out of the county. John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service agreed to provide further information in relation to Councillor Golby's question. In addition, Councillor Golby asked for further information in relation to the pathways taken by Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children once they arrive in Warwickshire, including (age) verification processes. It was agreed that this information would be shared with the Committee.

Councillor Jeff Morgan requested feedback from users of council run schemes, such as grandmentors. It was agreed that this information would be circulated to the committee.

5. Quarter 2 Integrated Performance Report

John Coleman, Director of Children & Families Service gave an overview of the slides as a summary of the performance which is further covered in the report.

The Committee was pleased to note that the majority of performance related to this committee is on track. The following points were highlighted –

- In relation to Education, the majority of measures are on track and performing well. There has been an increase in good/outstanding performance in primary schools.
- The number of nursery school places being taken is improving, although still not yet at target. Work is underway to promote free nursery places and make sure that people know that they are there to be taken up.

- It was confirmed that 94.9% of care leavers are now in education, employment, or training.
- Health Care Plan performance remains static and is approximately 8% below the national average. Officers acknowledged that this is an area with work to focus on. This will be covered in Item 6 – SEND Analysis.
- It was confirmed that the Children in Care numbers are not on track. Consideration is being given to a potential review of the target to see if it remains realistic.
- In relation to some targets showing red, it was confirmed that some data is only provided annually so will not be 100% accurate at certain points throughout the year.

Following a question from Councillor Barbara Brown in relation to the low number of child protection plans in place, and a concern that could potentially mean that some children at risk have not been identified, John Coleman confirmed that the Warwickshire system is extremely robust. There are quarterly thematic reviews undertaken with outside agencies such as the police to ensure that the system remains robust.

Councillor Sue Markham, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families, asked if Warwickshire's performance was better than some other authorities because of the decision taken to keep early help and intervention in place. It was confirmed that other authorities have had to make the difficult decision to stop early help and intervention programmes; mainly due to budget/funding pressures. Warwickshire has been able to maintain a high level of investment.

Following a question from Councillor Justin Kerridge in relation to staffing issues, John Coleman confirmed that there is a national issue concerning social worker recruitment. There is a new strategy underway relating to recruitment and retention. The Committee noted that Warwickshire County Council has its own programme for recruitment including graduate and apprenticeship placements. In addition, there is a wellbeing policy and counselling support for all social workers. It was confirmed that a new campaign is ready to launch, and a briefing will be circulated to members in the next few weeks.

It was confirmed that of the £15m overspend in the children and families service, £6m is attributed to an overspend in staffing. The Committee noted that the need to employ agency social workers had contributed to the overspend. The investment in Warwickshire children's homes will ease some of the financial pressures.

Nigel Minns, Executive Director for Children and Young People confirmed that the pressure on the SEND budget is significant. The budget given to the authority has increased over the last five years by about 53%. However, the demand on the service has also increased over the same period, by about 50%, so that cost per placement for a SEND child has not actually increased and additional costs have to be covered by the council.

Resolved

That the Committee considers and comments on Quarter 2 2023/24 organisational performance and progress against the Integrated Delivery Plan, management of finances and risk.

The Chair, Councillor Marion Humphreys entered the meeting and, after thanking Councillor Jerry Roodhouse for chairing during her absence, took the chair for the remainder of the meeting.

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6. SEND Analysis

Ross Caws introduced the report which highlighted the developments over the last year. The following points were highlighted –

- The report outlines the outcomes across the SEND population – broadly positive in attainment and progress. There are issues around attendance and exclusions as highlighted in the report.
- In relation to the Delivering Better Value Programme, it was confirmed that Warwickshire County Council was asked to be part of the programme along with 55 other authorities. Each authority had an overspend on the High Needs Block. The programme has been a positive experience for gathering evidence in a consistent way, across local authorities, for the reasons for the overspend. In addition, the programme has provided a five-year forecast for future spend.
- The Committee noted that significant increases were forecast, not just in case loads but also with the associated costs for different placements; for example, cost for state school placement vs independent specialist educational provision where costs can be double. This information will be reported back to the DfE.
- The following four projects were submitted for grant applications - inclusion framework; development of the workforce within mainstream schools; accelerating resource provision; and digital infrastructure.
- Training for staff in schools has been picked up as a key area for focus. Investment in mainstream schools and staff is a key part of the Delivering Better Value Programme.
- In relation to the Written Statement of Action following the OFSTED inspection in 2021, it was confirmed that five areas for progression were identified. Good progress has been made across these areas, but they are unable to be signed off until the next OFSTED inspection. There is a new inspection framework in place and Warwickshire County Council's next inspection will be some time in the next five years. This is down to OFSTED and not the DfE or the council.

Following a question from Councillor Justin Kerridge, it was confirmed that resource provision is an area the council must continue to support and invest in. In addition, the need for specialist provision is increasing and likely to continue to increase. Warwickshire County Council's aim is to ensure that all children are placed in appropriate settings as part of the programme.

Councillor Brian Hammersley raised a question in relation to the figures presented in the report and asked if there was any known reason for the increase over the last 5 years in the numbers of people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) SEND diagnosis and why this was increasing so rapidly. Councillor Hammersley questioned why so many people now seemed to have such needs compared to when he was at school. He expressed concern at the budget overspend this created which was not affordable to the Council or other Councils, with Councils continuing to expend money and having no control over costs. Cllr Hammersley questioned whether we should go back to the source of the problem to address the spend pressures. In response, Ross Caws confirmed that not all SEND resources are required to be funded by the council, some are funded by the schools. The increase in diagnosis across SEND can be attributed to increased need and increased understanding of needs. Early diagnosis, including identifying conditions at birth, has also increased. A programme of early identification and intervention means that more children with support needs are being identified. Ross Caws commented that the Audit and Standards Committee had considered SEND and the progress against the written statement of action as well as understanding the different elements of SEND funding.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse raised a question in relation to ensuring that the corporate narrative from the service is reaching the right people and ensuring that families understand the terminology that is being used. Nigel Minns, Executive Director for Children and Young People confirmed that there is a SEND partnership board in place, across the local authority and health and it brings together all the key players and identifies each area's responsibility. This continued partnership working means that all the right people are in the right room at the right time; and that for each child an agreed and shared action plan will be put in place.

It was confirmed that funding is only available for those projects forming part of the action plan under the Delivering Better Value Programme for one year. The challenge will be ongoing support and change in mainstream school. The challenge for expanding resourced provision is capital funding. Early intervention will continue to be key and will be a single element of performance metrics moving forward. It was noted the Warwickshire performance in early identification exceeds many other authorities and the council is ahead of the national target.

Councillor Roodhouse raised concerns that absences and exclusions have increased over the last twelve months. Ross Caws acknowledged that this was not just in relation to SEND children or those with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. There will be a review of absences and exclusions as part of the wider education review.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince said that we are better at identifying SEND now in children. We need to be better at explaining what identification of SEND means for parents. Councillor Simpson-Vince commented on the resourced provision in Rugby that she was involved in and is very proud of. She encouraged other schools to host a resourced provision.

Councillor Jeff Morgan expressed worry that the threshold for judging intervention and identifying the need for additional support continues to reduce. He questioned the proposition that increasing demand correlates to increasing need and suggested that a more rigorous approach which involved not automatically accepting requests for additional support, when the issue could be

poor behaviour, could be considered. Councillor Morgan continued that there should be checks and balances in place as the system seems to continually reduce the threshold.

Nigel Minns confirmed that special education needs has only existed as a concept since 1981; prior to this, children would be diagnosed as having disorders of the body or the mind; they were 'medicalised' and would often be deemed to be unsuitable for education. He disagreed that the threshold has reduced since it was introduced. In 1981 the estimate was that 20% of children attending a school would have SEND. In Warwickshire, it is currently 17%. Identifying who they are, what their needs are and how we support them has become much more sophisticated.

Lauren Sime, Strategy and Development Officer responded to the comments made by Councillor Hammersley and Morgan, stating that families put their trust in the services provided by the council and their partnership organisations and voluntary services. The community and family support is not necessarily available as it was and that there is an element of change required.

Cllr Hammersley questioned whether the approaches employed when he was younger should be reintroduced. He reinforced the monetary challenges and suggested that money would be better spent on early intervention and finding the cause of the need.

Councillor Kerridge requested an explanation of resource provision be given to the Committee so that members had a full understanding. It was agreed that an updated Written Statement of Action along with information regarding resource provision would be shared with the Committee.

Councillor Kerridge asked for additional information in relation to reducing the number of EHC plans. Ross Caws confirmed that there is currently a focus on reducing the number but that there is still a need to ensure that needs are appropriately and properly met. Nigel Minns confirmed that supporting children with additional support needs, in a mainstream school and without an EHC plan is the ideal. The Committee noted that the aim is to reduce the need for an EHC plan rather than reducing the number of EHC plans. There may be alternative support options available and appropriate.

Councillor Barbara Brown asked if it would be advisable to extend the membership of the SEND Partnership Board to voluntary and community organisations as well as the Parent Carer Forum. Ross Caws confirmed that a more holistic approach was under consideration and that he would consider that suggestion.

Councillor Barbara Brown asked a question in relation to attainment (e.g., exam results) vs achievement (individual ability), adding that some children may not get good exam results but may have achieved more than results yet still be considered a failure. It was agreed that a better understanding of the difference is needed. In addition, it was confirmed that outcomes in EHC plans are reviewed every year, but this information is held in Word documents and therefore the non-academic outcomes are not easily aggregated. It was noted that this is a topic that could be explored further by the Committee.

Councillor Clare Golby requested that more plain English be used when discussing topics such as resource provision to ensure that everyone can understand what was being said and to make it more accessible for people who may have SEND requirements. Ross Caws confirmed that there would be a review of the terminology used in the council's communication in relation to SEND.

Following on from earlier comments from Councillors Hammersley and Morgan, Councillor Golby suggested that one question to pose is what comes down to parenting and what comes down to SEND issues, how that was identified and what pathways are available for people who do not have a SEND need but do have parenting skills shortages.

In addition, Councillor Golby asked if the rise in the number of children with SEND could be attributed to the rise in social media use by families and the sharing of information about how to get a diagnosis on social media sites, which could be increasing the number of requests for diagnosis. Councillor Golby requested further information on the percentage of assessments that lead to a full diagnosis and how many cases do not get a diagnosis after assessment. She also questioned whether there were any causal effects or trend data which could be broken down further, and whether particular communities or schools were generating proportionately more or less requests for assessment. In response to an earlier contribution, Councillor Golby went on to comment on the connectivity between councillors and their local communities in which they are embedded and requested that the information requested be provided.

Ross Caws confirmed that 50% of requests for assessment have been refused recently and 2% of those assessed do not receive a SEND diagnosis/EHC plan. In the last few months, 75% of requests have continued to assessment.

It was also confirmed that there are national reports and research available relating to potential trends and that this information will be shared with the Committee. The Committee was reminded that there was a lot of data included in the report's appendices that may answer some of the questions raised today.

The Chair thanked the officers for the presentation.

Resolved

That Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny committee:

1. Notes the update on the current financial position of the High Needs Block and the future demand and expenditure forecast from the High Needs Block for children and young people with SEND.
2. Endorses the four projects proposed in the Delivering Better Value grant application attached at Appendix 1
3. Considers and comments on developments since the public consultation on the local SEND Offer

7. Achievement of Warwickshire Children and Young People in Statutory Assessments 2023

Leah Adams, Head of Early Years and School Effectiveness presented an overview of the report and presentation.

The changes to how statutory assessments have been undertaken are fully explained in the report, but to summarise, the aim was to stabilise and get back to normal after the disruption of covid.

The following points were made to outline the work undertaken by the education team.

- Education Strategy is currently under development. It was confirmed that part of that work includes a review of the school effectiveness strategy which is due to be launched in September 2024.
- The school effectiveness team will focus on the performance in each of the districts and boroughs in Warwickshire and as a result will be able to provide the committee with performance at a district level rather than a county level.
- In relation to the new school model, it was confirmed that education teams and children & family teams will work collaboratively to ensure the best results. The work will focus not just on schools but will also include nurseries. The virtual school is included in the work being undertaken.
- The Committee noted that the complexity of needs within early years is widening. There is an ambitious delivery plan underway. The focus is at the stage before school starts; to ensure that any support needed is already in place.
- Overall, early years children are performing well but with the incredibly ambitious plan, there is always room for the performance to be better.
- The Committee noted that external factors can influence the performance, including managed moves. Officers are looking at how exclusions can be prevented and are attending network meetings.
- In relation to disadvantaged children, the Committee's attention was drawn to the gap between National non disadvantaged and Warwickshire Disadvantaged children. Moving forward, this will be an opportunity for the team to use the information from top performing districts and apply it to better support the disadvantaged children.
- Confirmation was given in relation to the Warwickshire Educational Board and that the right partners are all part of the board. Nigel Minns added that the Board acts as a single method of engagement and that Directors and Executive Directors are also part of it. It was agreed that the Board is a step in the right direction for improving the issue of communication. The aim is that the Board will help to break down any remaining barriers and that key partners can all work together.
- Councillor Brian Hammersley asked if the lack of retention of head teachers is having an impact on what officers were trying to achieve. Leah Adams confirmed

that some head teachers are leaving to support education in other areas but that it should be noted that some multi academy trusts can offer greater opportunities. The job of a head teacher is challenging and getting more so.

- It was confirmed that there is a pastoral and support offer made to all head teachers within Warwickshire and that overall, head teachers seem to be feeling supported at this point in time, and as a result, more positive about staying in post. The Committee noted that part of the current work is to ensure that everyone, including head teachers, feel involved and included.

Resolved

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider and comment on the performance of children and young people in Warwickshire's state-funded schools in statutory national tests.

8. 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.

9. Any Other Business

None

10. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on the 27th February 2024.

The meeting will be held at Shire Hall, Warwick

The meeting rose at 12:50

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Chair