

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 17 November 2020

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Yousef Dahmash (Chair)
Councillor Pam Williams (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Margaret Bell
Councillor Jonathan Chilvers
Councillor Corinne Davies
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Daniel Gissane
Councillor Howard Roberts
Councillor Dominic Skinner
Sean Taylor
Councillor Colin Hayfield
Councillor Jeff Morgan

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Peter Berridge, Delivery Lead Social Work Operations Manager
Margot Brown, School Improvement Lead Commissioner
Annie Cairns, House Project Support Worker
John Cole, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children and Families
Carl Hipkiss Development and Analysis Team Manager,
Dawn Mardle, Civic Services Officer
Nigel Minns, Strategic Director for People
Matt Smith, Targeted Support Youth Worker
Sophie Thompson, Intervention Data and Project Management Officer

Others Present

Amarni Carnworth, House Project Cohort 1 (item 4)
Elizabeth Carter, House Project Cohort 2 (item 4)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Chris Williams.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on the 26 October 2020 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

There were no matters arising.

2. Public Speaking

None.

3. Question Time

None.

(1) Question to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

None.

(2) Updates from Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Assistant

Councillor Jeff Morgan, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, confirmed there had been a significant increase in demand for Children's Services since September 2020 and a further increase since the second national lockdown began on 5 November 2020, as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

The Committee noted that as a result in the increase in demand, an additional 12 Social Workers have been employed by Warwickshire County Council.

Concerns were raised following the confirmation that there were still delays in Court proceedings relating to Children in Care. It was noted that there was no increase in children coming into care but the main area for delays at the Courts was children leaving care. This is a result of the Courts having to close due to the pandemic. It was noted that the Courts have not had to close during the current, second national lockdown. It was confirmed that the current situation is difficult but manageable.

John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children & Families confirmed that officers have regular meetings with the Department for Education (DfE) and the Local Government Association (LGA) and the issue of the delays within the Court system is something that is constantly raised. The DfE and LGA both recognised that this is a national issue and are working with the Justice System to reduce the back log as soon as possible.

It was noted that officers are working to prioritise cases and identify those most in need of a Court hearing; Judges are supportive of this measure.

It was noted by the Committee that while there is a National Recovery Plan in place following the pandemic, officers at Warwickshire County Council feel that a local recovery plan would be more beneficial and that local, multi-agency working would make the recovery much more efficient.

4. The Housing Project - an update and proposals for a second project.

Matt Smith, Team Leader (Children in Care - The House Project) introduced the report to the Committee and thanked members for the opportunity to present the update.

A brief background was given to the Housing Project confirming that it is a growing national project that supports young people who are leaving care and moving into their own property. The project helps them to prepare for independence while providing a community of support which continues to be available after they have moved.

Annie Cairns, House Project Support Worker introduced two young people who have been part of the House Project; Amarni Carnworth from House Project Cohort 1 & Elizabeth Carter from House Project Cohort 2. During a short presentation the following points were confirmed –

- Cohort 1 – 100% success rate in maintaining and sustaining tenancies. All young people have settled in very well. Officers have received very positive feedback from everyone in cohort 1.
- Cohort 2- young people are currently going through the process and are at various stages from just starting the project to waiting to move into a property within the next few weeks. All feel fully prepared for their next steps.
- Cohort 3 – Recruitment process will start from January 2021
- It was confirmed to the Committee that the House Project is currently looking for another base in the south of Warwickshire.

Elizabeth Carter from cohort 2 stated that the project was an amazing opportunity for care leavers and that her experience was positive and that she had received a lot of help – she then thanked officers involved for all their help.

Following a question from the Chair, it was confirmed that nothing from the process had failed to meet the expectations of Amarni and Elizabeth; but both felt that more work could be done with local landlords to explain the project to them and give them a better understanding of the tenants.

Councillor Jeff Morgan, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services gave his full support for the project confirming that it would be good to be able to extend it as much as possible. Some funding is available from the Government for the project but Warwickshire County Council is now building the project in to their budget and is no longer just relying on Government funding.

Sharon Shaw, Service Manager - Corporate Parenting noted that care leavers often live independently much earlier than others. The key is to ensure that young people are prepared to live independently and that they have a support network. The House Project has worked well in the support function. Officers are looking to expand the project across the county; and will need more support from District and Borough Councils. It was confirmed that the support is in place as long as it is needed.

Following a question from Councillor Corrine Davies, it was confirmed that places on the project are not offered to all care leavers. Peter Berridge, Social Work Operations Manager confirmed that young people are assessed by officers, social workers and youth workers to identify who would benefit from a place on the project, including young people who are facing challenges. Officers ensure that everyone has an equal chance.

Following a question from Councillor Margaret Bell in relation to working with the district and borough councils and the type of properties the project was looking for, it was confirmed that Nuneaton, North Warwickshire and Rugby councils are very supportive and have provided some properties. Initial conversations are underway with Stratford-upon-Avon and Warwick councils but there is no presence there yet.

John Coleman confirmed that there is an issue with the supply of one-bedroom properties. The House project requires properties to have their own front door and separate bedroom (not a shared house or a bedsit). Following a question from Councillor Jonathan Chilvers, it was confirmed that each young person received a Home Furnishing Grant of £2,600 which is made up of allocations for different needs. Warwickshire County Council Officers support each young person in using the grant.

Matt Smith confirmed that as part of his role, he visits each property to ensure that it is suitable. He will also have conversations with landlords to give them an understanding of who they are accepting into their property and that it may be challenging.

Following a question from Councillor Pam Williams, it was confirmed that the project is considered a family and that there is peer mentor support; each cohort will support the next one. The family will continue to grow and support each other.

Resolved

That the Committee notes that content of the report.

5. Nuneaton Education Strategy Update

Margot Brown, Senior School Improvement Advisor confirmed that Cabinet had endorsed the strategy in March 2020 and that there was a list of partners who are supporting the strategy in Appendix One of the report. It was noted by the Committee that meetings had continued throughout the lockdown period and things had continued to move forward. The following points were highlighted –

- 1) Best Possible Start – a list of 50 things to do before you are 5; The programme of activities has been impacted by the pandemic but alternatives have been provided.
- 2) Empowering Schools – the Nuneaton Education Alliance has now been established where all Nuneaton schools share good practice, CPD, common purpose and support development in SEND training. The Committee noted that the programme is being driven by Head Teachers.
- 3) Ready for Work and Life – Natalie Williams, Advanced Practitioner Enhanced has recently joined the team at Warwickshire. Natalie's role will include the development of skills passports and working with young people who are NEET.

Councillor Colin Hayfield, Portfolio Holder for Education confirmed that he has been involved with the Nuneaton Education Strategy since the beginning. It was noted that the strategy involves all schools in Nuneaton from those who are outstanding to those who are less than outstanding. The Committee was pleased to hear that there is widespread support for the project not only from those in education but also the wider school community. Following a question from Councillor Margaret Bell, the Committee agreed that it would be good to set some targets so that progress could be tracked by the Committee. It was noted that some OFSTED judgements could be used but the inspections had stopped due to the pandemic and it was currently unclear when they would restart.

Councillor Corinne Davies stated that teacher assessments could be used as a guide for results but that some outcomes could only be checked after external examinations are bought back – hopefully in 2021 following the impact of Coronavirus.

Sophie Thompson, Intervention Data and Project Management Officer confirmed that Coventry University and Warwick University are both supporting the programme. For example, graduate ambassadors are helping in homework clubs.

Councillor Pete Gilbert stated that he was pleased with the report and the positive signs it was showing. He noted that it would be vital for Warwickshire County Council to keep delivering the project.

The Chair agreed with Councillor Gilbert, stating that it would be good to see the building blocks currently in place continue to develop. It was agreed by the Committee that an additional recommendation be added to the report for a further update to be presented to the Committee in six months' time.

Resolved

That the Committee notes the progress that has been made since the strategy was endorsed by Cabinet on 19th March 2020.

That a further update is presented to the Committee in six months' time.

6. Warwickshire Challenge

Sophie Thompson, Intervention Data and Project Management Officer presented the report to committee confirming that Warwickshire County Council is committed to supporting all young people to overcome the impact of the pandemic. The programme has been designed with disadvantaged young people in mind but will be offered to all Key Stage 3 pupils.

Warwickshire Challenge links with Warwickshire's Closing the Gap Strategy whose objective is 'to ensure support for disadvantaged pupils remains a key priority and has a high profile across the work of the County Council'.

The programme will promote the opportunities on offer beyond school that will help pupils develop confidence and self-belief underpinned by knowledge, skills and experience that comes from all aspects of their lives

The programme consists of over 50 suggested activities for Key Stage 3 pupils to complete, with bronze, silver and gold levels. Mentors will be established to support and encourage young people taking part and work will be undertaken with local businesses to raise awareness and ask them to offer volunteering opportunities.

It was confirmed that the pilot programme will be started in the summer term 2021. Members noted that this should have been sooner but has been impacted by the pandemic. The programme will cover five key areas as follows –

- Enterprise
- Emotional wellbeing
- Engagement
- Enjoyment
- Energy

The range of activities will include the following –

- Open a savings account
- Go to the theatre
- Build a flat pack piece of furniture
- Learn about democracy
- Watch a classic movie

Following concerns raised by the Committee that there may be issues engaging with some young people from more disadvantaged areas it was confirmed that the list of activities had not yet been finalised and is still a work in progress. Members raised concern that the

programme of activities will need support from parents and carers and that this again may be an issue in some areas.

Officers confirmed that the support from mentors would help young people to achieve some items on the list and that the pilot programme will help to shape the final design of the project.

It was agreed that the following words would be removed from the recommendation as funding is not a decision that can be taken by a Scrutiny Committee –

“..commits to future continuous funding..”

Following further discussion, the recommendation was amended and agreed as follows –

Resolved

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of this report and encourage officers to

(a) be more proactive in their efforts to encourage schools located in areas of deprivation, or with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, to embrace the initiative

(b) ensure work is carried out collaboratively as part of the Nuneaton Education Strategy.

7. Information Circulated Before the Meeting

Briefing notes in were circulated to members of the Committee ahead of the meeting on the following subjects –

- Early Help – One Year On
- Youth Service Offer
- Development of the PEARS site
- Self-Harm Task & Finish Group – Interim Report

Questions in relation to this information have been submitted to the relevant officers where appropriate.

The following update was provided in relation to the Self-Harm Task & Finish Group – Interim Report.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse, Chair of the Task & Finish group introduced the report and confirmed that the issue of self-harming is increasing, especially with young people. It is predicted that the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic will result in further increases.

The Committee noted that the Task & Finish Group had continued working throughout the lockdown period and that the focus was now on setting up focus groups and evidence gathering; all via virtual meetings.

It was noted that recommendations continued to be made despite the impact of the pandemic and further recommendations will be made as the project progresses, especially working with schools. The Committee noted the next steps as highlighted in the report.

Following a question from the Chair, it was confirmed that the impact of social media had been looked at as part of the group. Councillor Roodhouse acknowledged that the experiences of young people and social media needs to be investigated further.

Nigel Minns, Strategic Director – People Directorate confirmed that the Council's Covid recovery plan and the new Health and Wellbeing strategy have mental health, and children's mental health as fundamental elements. A range of activities that will be presented at cabinet in the near future will support some recommendations in the report.

8. Council Plan 2020 – 2025 Quarterly Progress Report

John Coleman, Assistant Director - Children & Families Service presented the report to the Committee and reminded Members of the link in the report to the Power BI performance tool.

The Committee noted that there were areas of performance that have been impacted by the pandemic.

With reference to children remaining in care it was acknowledged that due to the closure of Family Courts during the first national lockdown there was still a backlog that was being worked through.

There has also been an increase in the number of young people who are NEET. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has impacted industries such as travel and hospitality which impacts a high number of young people.

It was noted that performance is now starting to move back in the right direction but that a full recovery will take time. Young people will need support; Warwickshire County Council has just employed an additional support officer.

John Coleman confirmed that Health Visitors focus was reprioritised as a result of the pandemic but that the 6-8-week health checks were continuing for young people. Clear support is still available for parents, especially new parents. However, data reporting was suspending in order to free up staff resource for the front-line response.

9. Work Programme

The Committee noted and agreed the work programme as attached. Future items for the work programme will be discussed at the next Chair and Group Spokes Meeting on 26 January 2021 at 10am. The meeting will be held virtually via Microsoft Teams.

10. Date of the Next Meeting

The next meeting has been scheduled for 23 February 2021 at 10am.
The meeting will be held virtually via Microsoft Teams.

Meetings for 2021/2022 have been scheduled as follows –

- 20 April 2021
- 15 June 2021
- 28 September 2021
- 16 November 2021
- 8 February 2022
- 11 April 2022

The meeting rose at 12:21

.....
Chair