

Children's Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN'S SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 19 JANUARY 2022 AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman), Cllr Helen Belcher, Cllr Mary Champion, Cllr Carole King, Cllr Kathryn Macdermid, Cllr Kelvin Nash, Cllr Antonio Piazza, Cllr Mike Sankey, Cllr James Sheppard, Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cllr Jo Trigg, Cllr Mark Verbinnen and John Hawkins

Also Present:

Cllr Peter Hutton, Cllr Laura Mayes, Cllr Dominic Muns and Cllr Suzanne Wickham

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from the following Committee Members:

- Cllr Jacqui Lay
- Catriona Williamson
- Dr Mike Thompson

Apologies were also received from:

- Lesley Lowe – Head of School Effectiveness
- Tamsin Stone – Head Performance Outcomes and Quality Assurance, Children and Adult Services

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Chairman noted that on page 12 of the agenda pack, in minute 49, the Committee had asked how the Council could assure itself that the rates of Children in Need, Child Protection and Children in Care were appropriate. He reported that officers had offered to deliver an information briefing to provide this information to the Committee. Members would then have to opportunity to review how information was provided going forward.

Resolved

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 4 November 2021, were approved as a true and correct record.

Once approved, a copy of the minutes was signed by the Chairman.

3 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests.

4 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman took the opportunity to pass on the best wishes of the Committee to the Vice-Chairman, who was unwell at the time of the meeting. He then made the following announcements:

1. An Ofsted inspection, focusing on the experience of care leavers, was taking place in January and the results were due to be published on the 28th.
2. The Traded Services briefing, received on 16 December 2021, was available on the Councillor's Hub.
3. Councillors would be welcome to attend the Five-to-Thrive Programme training session at 10am on 4 February 2022.
4. Members could contact him if they had any comments on the School Capital Programme ahead of its consideration Cabinet in February, as he was due to attend a briefing on the subject on 20 January 2022.

5 **Public Participation**

No questions were submitted by the public.

6 **Regular updates**

The Chairman reminded the Committee that they had been invited to indicate in advance of the meeting if they would like further information on, or had questions about, the regular updates.

In addition to their questions relating to the reports, Members asked for further information about the impact of Covid-19 on schools and Wiltshire Council.

Helean Hughes, Director of Education and Skills, reported that Covid-19 cases in schools, unlike infection rates in the wider community, were not declining. She explained that primary schools were the worst impacted, with lower vaccination rates within the younger age groups. Overall, there were around 2,000 reported cases in schools with roughly 300 staff impacted, so she praised schools for staying open and minimising the impact on education. The Director explained that schools faced supply shortages so were using the work force more flexibly, such as headteachers spending more time in classrooms. She confirmed that CO2 monitors had been rolled out to schools and ventilation guidelines were being followed.

Lucy Townsend, Corporate Director People, reported that there had been an increase in the number of staff absences at the Council due to the increased transmissibility of the Omicron Covid-19 variant. She reassured the Committee

that contingency planning was in place. Support measures were also in place to support staff wellbeing, with individual managers being given the autonomy to arrange activities that they felt would be most appropriate for their teams. Furthermore, a principal social worker had provided feedback from staff to senior leaders to ensure that different avenues of communication were available.

In response to a question about what technology was in place to deliver online learning in special schools, the Director of Education and Skills reported that laptops had been rolled out by the Department for Education (DfE). She explained that it was also a statutory requirement for individual schools to assist families to ensure that they had appropriate access to online learning, so she encouraged individuals to contact schools directly if they had concerns.

6a Update from Wiltshire Youth Voice Representative

The Chairman praised the Youth Council elections as an exciting initiative and was pleased to report that over 90 candidates had been nominated. He passed the congratulations of the Committee to the Youth Voice team for their work and said that they would welcome a strong Youth Voice being represented at the Committee. Cllr Laura Mayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills, was pleased to report that almost every school in the county participated in the scheme. She explained that there would be an induction session in March and that a shadow cabinet would be elected, ensuring that a variety of views would be represented.

Members thanked officers for the report included in the agenda pack and asked about the geographic reach of the Young Carers Consultation and specifically whether it had covered both urban and rural areas.

6b School Ofsted Judgements

The Chairman reported that the 10 published reports showed either a similar score to previous results, or an improvement, commenting that this was a solid achievement given the impact of Covid-19 on the provision of education.

Members sought clarification about figures in the report, and it was confirmed that there were 29 secondary schools in the county.

6c DfE Changes - Update from Department for Education

Members thanked officers for including Wiltshire's position in the updates listed between pages 27 and 29 of the agenda pack. They then asked whether there were plans to establish a teaching hub in Wiltshire. The Director of Education and Skills explained that Glenmoor Teaching School Hub in Swindon was selected by the Regional Schools Commissioner at the DfE, as the site supporting Wiltshire. As both the Council and Glenmoor were represented on the Wiltshire Learning Alliance, they were working together to make sure that Wiltshire's schools benefitted from their facilities.

Changes in central government rules about the procurement of school jumpers were praised by Members. The Director reported that the policy would be enforced in academies by their governing bodies and that the Council would ensure that the policy was being adhered to by maintained schools. The Council would also distribute further information via governor briefings.

7 **Business Plan 2022-32 Update**

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills updated the Committee on the progress made towards the Business Plan, explaining that it would be considered by Cabinet on 1 February. The plan was written thematically, rather than having an individual chapter for each service, in order to reflect the Council's collaborative way of working. The Cabinet Member highlighted that there were a number of key performance indicators included in the plan and stated that she would welcome the input of the Committee to ensure that the targets outlined were the most appropriate.

During the discussion points included:

1. Members thanked the Cabinet Member for the update and welcomed the aspirations set out in the report, particularly the emphasis on early intervention.
2. When asked about the implementation of the plan through to 2032, the Cabinet Member reassured the Committee that the document would continue to evolve to reflect trends and future developments, such as schools becoming academies.
3. In response to questions about how the goals set out in the Business Plan would be achieved, the Cabinet Member reassured Members that the plan outlined objectives in a concise manner but that detailed service plans and metrics would also be provided.
4. Members welcomed further information about the service plans, as they felt that they would give them a better understanding of the targets set out in the Business Plan and to decide whether additional goals would be appropriate. Members offered to identify the metrics they felt would be the most productive, as well as to monitor the service plans on an ongoing basis. The Cabinet Member welcomed the input of the Committee.
5. Requests were made for a more detailed overview of what the Council saw, beyond its statutory obligations, as its responsibility to work with local partners and the DfE. The Cabinet Member explained that the Business Plan would consider these relationships. She noted that contracts for Children's Centres were due for renewal and explained that this would provide the opportunity to evaluate the early help given to children.
6. In response to a question about youth services, the Cabinet Member stated that these would continue to be run at a local level but stressed that a review was being undertaken of the provision within the county.

Resolved

- 1. To establish a Task Group to review the metrics of the Business Plan.**
- 2. For the findings of the Task Group to be brought to the June meeting of the Committee.**
- 3. To establish a second Task Group to review the service plans once the metrics have been confirmed.**

8 Wiltshire Council's Financial Plan Update 2022-2023 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-2027

The Chairman invited the Committee to consider the areas of the proposed budget that related to Children's Services. He explained that he would pass the Committee's comments on to the relevant meetings, including the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 25 January and Cabinet on 1 February 2022.

Laura Mayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills, stated that, despite a challenging financial environment, investment was increasing by £3.9 million in the Education and Skills and Families and Children's budgets. The Cabinet Member was pleased to announce that spending of £23 million on Education and Skills and £62 million on Families and Children were proposed in 2022/23.

The Cabinet Member then went on to highlight specific areas of investment such as Fostering Excellence and Traded Services. She explained that, given the need to make savings in the Council's overall budget, it was important to review areas, such as commissioning, in order to make the most of the available resources and to maintain services. The Cabinet Member then offered to answer questions from the Committee.

During the discussion points included:

1. Members thanked the Cabinet Member for the update and welcomed the investment in Children's Services, especially given the challenging financial situation.
2. The replacement of mobile classrooms was praised by Members and they asked how many schools were expecting to have temporary units replaced. Helean Hughes, Director of Education and Skills, explained that £3 million had been allocated to replace six mobile units. There were a total of 53 units identified in maintained schools as requiring replacement but these would be reviewed as part of the School's Place Planning Strategy.
3. In response to questions about the impact of staffing savings, Lucy Townsend, Corporate Director People, explained that the focus for savings in 2022/23 would be pausing recruitment to longstanding vacant positions, where possible, to avoid redundancies in front line roles. The situation for 2023/24 would be reviewed after Council had approved the budget.
4. When asked about the possibility of redundancies to administrative staff, the Director confirmed that the Council greatly valued staff supporting frontline practitioners. She was unable to guarantee that there would be

no redundancies across the Council but reassured Members that they were not currently looking at redundancies within Children's Services.

5. Members noted that they would be interested in receiving information about changes in the number of full-time equivalent positions to achieve the planned savings.
6. Jen Salter, Head of Service for Children's Support and Safeguarding, confirmed that most of the savings identified within Children's Services had come from her department. She explained that pay had been reviewed to better reflect the level of experience of staff. As they had a good understanding of the relative balance of experienced and newly qualified staff, they were able to realign the budget without a reduction in staff numbers.
7. When questions were raised about the long-term viability of the savings as the workforce gained experience, the Corporate Director of People explained that historic recruitment patterns had been analysed and taken into consideration when modelling costs for future years; it was anticipated that the balance of experienced and newly-qualified staff would remain.
8. The Director confirmed that Wiltshire had its lowest number of agency staff and fewer than comparable Local Authorities (LAs). She clarified that only experienced agency workers were recruited and that they helped to support newly qualified staff.
9. In response to a question about £525,000 in savings in the Fostering budget, the Director confirmed that the Fostering Excellence budget would be receiving investment. She explained that the savings had been identified from the External Placement budget and that they planned to increase the percentage of internal placements. She confirmed that the total placement budget for the financial year was just over £21 million and that in the region of £13 million went towards external providers.

The Chairman then invited Members to contact him in advance of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee should they wish him to ask further questions at that meeting.

9 Safeguarding Exception Dataset Report - Q2 - October 2021

The Head of Service for Children's Support and Safeguarding explained that the report contained a data set from the second quarter of 2021-22 for Families and Children's Services. A traffic light system (red, amber, green) was in place to help identify areas of concern. Overall, the directorate was performing very strongly, comparing favourably to most LAs on the majority of benchmarking indicators, with relatively few red cases.

The Head of Service then went on to contextualise the reasons behind some of the red indicators, highlighting the logistical difficulties created by the pandemic for example, to the number of single assessments taking place within 45 days of referral. She explained that lots of the red indicators identified in the report related to referral rates, which were lower than many LAs. However, she reassured the Committee that a comprehensive study had concluded that low

rates were an outcome of the Council's extensive work on early intervention. She then offered to share the findings of the study with the Committee.

During the discussion the following points were made:

1. Members thanked the Head of Service for the update and praised the honesty of the report. They asked if future reports could indicate whether a rise or fall in figures was a positive sign in cases where that was possible.
2. The Head of Service explained that a higher number of older children were coming into care, but this was being closely monitored.
3. In response to a question about the timescale in which a Section 47 enquiry was expected to be authorised, the Head of Service confirmed that there was no national standard, but they did have an ambitious local target of five working days. She explained that it was not always possible to meet this target due to the complexity of some cases, as well as police involvement. A joint audit had been undertaken with the police to investigate how the process could be carried out more efficiently and training was being provided to police staff to make the process better joined up.

Resolved

To note the report and thank officers for the report's level of detail, clear presentation and informative narrative on red, amber and other exceptions.

10 **Adoption**

The Chairman announced that the meeting was the first opportunity for the Committee to consider, at the same meeting, the performance for both Adoption West (as reflected in the Joint Scrutiny Panel's annual report) and the Council (as reflected in the Cabinet report) with regards to adoption.

11 **Adoption West Joint Scrutiny Panel - Annual Report - March to October 2021**

Cllr Carole King, the Wiltshire representative on the Joint Scrutiny Panel, introduced the report. She explained that they had looked at key priorities for Adoption West and were awaiting the findings of a review of the Adoption Support Fund. They had also received an overview of the adoption process and the UK Adoption Barometer. Cllr King highlighted that three of the six recommendations made in the Adoption Barometer, on page 48 of the agenda pack, were linked to issues already identified by the Scrutiny Panel. She then read out a summary of the proposals as listed on pages 49 and 50 of the pack.

During the discussion, Members thanked Cllr King for the report. Councillors that had served previously on the Joint Scrutiny Panel also discussed how valuable an experience it had been.

Resolved

1. To note the Annual Report March to October 2021 of the Scrutiny Panel.
2. To note the Forward Work Programme for the Scrutiny Panel for 2021-2022.
3. To endorse the amendments made to the Panel's Terms of Reference to promote continuity of membership.
4. To invite all Councillors to read the Adoption Barometer 2021.

12 Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2020-2021 Year End Report

Jen Salter, Head of Service for Children's Support and Safeguarding, introduced the Wiltshire Council Adoption Service report. The Head of Service explained that on the three score card measures, on page 91 of the agenda pack, Wiltshire compared favourably against both the national average and neighbouring LAs. However, she did note that the number of days taken to meet the score card measures had recently increased. It was explained that more children were subject to Special Guardianship orders. There had also been an increase in the number of older children seeking adoption and it was often more challenging to find suitable places for them than for younger children. She reassured the Committee that a study of individual cases had been undertaken which concluded that the delays were all due to external factors, so nothing further could have been done by social workers to progress children to adoption in a shorter period.

During the discussion points included:

1. Members thanked the Head of Service for the update and praised the rigorous nature of the Council's safeguarding procedures.
2. Members welcomed the emphasis in the report on keeping siblings together during the adoption process and sought further information about how decisions would be taken to adopt a child. The Head of Service explained that there would be a Care Proceedings Managed Decision and that a Together or Apart assessment would be carried out by a social worker. She explained that a detailed analysis of relationships would be undertaken, and any decision would go through court.
3. In response to a question about whether birth parents were asked to make a financial contribution towards the care of their adopted children, officers noted that many parents would not be in a position to make a financial contribution and that there would also be administrative costs to the council in pursuing payment.
4. Members requested further information on child protection, including a flowchart on the journey of the child and the adoption process. It was discussed whether a training session could be developed jointly with the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Cllr Sankey declared a non-pecuniary interest that he was in the process of obtaining a Special Guardianship order.

13 **Final report from the Rapid Scrutiny exercise on Provision of Accommodation for Young People at Transition Time - Gap Analysis**

Following on from the verbal update that she provided to the Committee, on 4 November 2021, Cllr Carole King introduced the final report. Overall, Members of the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise were reassured the Council had support mechanisms in place to allow people to have a successful transition and that there was a range of accommodation available. However, there was a recognition that there should be a greater variety of accommodation available for those with SEND needs.

Members thanked Cllr King for the report and endorsed the findings outlined on page 99 of the agenda pack. In addition to the recommendations outlined, Members also discussed whether further recommendations could be made to the Executive as the accommodation strategy was developed. It was suggested that work could be undertaken to identify the gaps in provision and to outline a series of metrics to assess how well targets were being met.

Resolved

For the Committee to note the report and endorse the three recommendations within it (on page 99 of the agenda pack) and to receive a response from the Cabinet Member at the next meeting, with the addition of the following recommendations made by the committee:

Recommendation 4 - An exercise should be undertaken to identify the gaps / needs of Wiltshire care leavers so that any strategy developed can be targeted and include metrics to allow measurement of performance.

Recommendation 5 - The Accommodation Strategy in development should reflect the challenges identified through undertaking Recommendation 4 and identify how these challenges will be addressed.

14 **Findings of the Standing Task Group on Traded Services**

The Chairman invited the Committee to consider the finding of its Standing Task Group on Traded Services, as detailed in the attached notes of the meeting held on 4 January 2022. He noted that Officers had already indicated their intention to integrate the changes proposed in the third recommendation for future reports. The first two recommendations would be referred to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills.

Resolved

For the Committee to note the report and endorse the recommendations within it (on page 104 of the agenda pack) and to receive a response from the Cabinet Member at the next meeting.

15 **Task Group and Board Representative Updates**

The Chairman reported that the Fostering Excellence Task Group had its scoping meeting on 18 January and would meet formally on 3 February. An update and the Task Group's terms of reference would be provided to the Committee at its next meeting on 15 March.

Cllr Jo Trigg provided a quick update on the Disadvantaged Learners Task Group, stating that they had had their first meeting just prior to Christmas and were due to meet the lead officer supporting Vulnerable Learners on 20 January to discuss their terms of reference.

Cllr Belcher left the meeting at 12:38pm.

Resolved

To note the updates provided at the meeting.

16 **Forward Work Programme**

The Chairman referred the committee to the Forward Work Programme outlined in the agenda pack and invited Members to speak if they had any additional items that they wanted to be included.

Resolved

To note the Forward Work Programme.

17 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next ordinary meeting was confirmed as Tuesday 15 March 2022 at 10:30am.

18 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am - 12.45 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Matt Hitch
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