

Children's Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN'S SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 4 NOVEMBER 2021 AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman), Cllr Jacqui Lay (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Helen Belcher, Cllr Mary Champion, Cllr Carole King, Cllr Kathryn Macdermid, Cllr Antonio Piazza, Cllr James Sheppard, Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cllr Jo Trigg, Cllr Mark Verbinnen, Dr Mike Thompson and John Hawkins

Also Present:

Cllr Peter Hutton, Cllr Suzanne Wickham and Cllr Laura Mayes

42 **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from:

Cllr Mike Sankey
Cllr Kelvin Nash
Catriona Williamson

43 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 7 September 2021 were approved as a true and correct record.

44 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests.

45 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman informed the committee that the meeting was being webcast live [it should be noted that there were issues with the audio quality, so the recording of the meeting is no longer available on the council's website].

It was announced that the annual report of the Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership was now available on its website, a web link to which is available [here](#).

The Chairman referred the committee to recent reports of PGL Centre Liddington being suspended by Ofsted, due to safeguarding concerns, but clarified that the facility did not come under the jurisdiction of Wiltshire Council.

46 **Public Participation**

No questions were submitted by the public.

47 **Regular Updates**

The Chairman explained that written updates were available in the agenda pack and reminded members that they were welcome to submit questions in advance of the meeting.

47a Update from Wiltshire Youth Voice Representative

Martin Davis, Director of Families and Children's Services, reported that agreement would be sought from the young people at the Meet the Leader session, on 5 November, to bring a Mental Health Action Plan to the committee.

Congratulations were offered by the committee given the success of the Mind of My Own app, as well as the new podcast launched by the Youth Voice team. In response to a question about the promotion of the app, the director noted that it was designed specifically for Children in Care, so not intended for wider circulation.

Cllr Laura Mayes, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills, explained that information had gone out to secondary schools before half term encouraging them to participate in the Wiltshire Youth Council. The Chairman then encouraged members to promote the scheme to secondary schools in their area.

47b School Ofsted Judgements

In response to a question about what the Local Authority (LA) could do to support schools, Helean Hughes, Director of Education and Skills, encouraged members to join boards as school governors. The director also raised concerns about the potential withdrawal of the School Improvement Grant. The Chairman offered to write a letter on behalf of the committee. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills stated that she would welcome the input of scrutiny on the issue. The committee signalled that they were happy for the Chairman to write the letter and there were no objections.

Officers noted that Ofsted judgements that had been published too late to be included at a meeting could be brought to future meetings to ensure that all results were considered by the committee.

47c DfE Changes - Update from Department for Education

It was reported that the new National Tutoring Programme would offer a different approach to previous programmes and an evaluation was underway to access how take-up could be improved.

Given the rural nature of the county, concerns were raised about children missing out learning delivered through super-fast broadband if they had a restricted internet connection. Similar concerns were expressed about limited transport connectivity impacting the transition of year 11 students to further education, employment or training. Officers offered to provide further information about the broadband quality as well as specific guidance for rural areas in helping post-16 transition.

It was noted that a number of schools had taken advantage of grant funding allowing senior school leaders to learn more about how to support health and wellbeing. The Director of Education and Skills noted that this was a useful step but needed to be supported by a range of other measures.

48 **Business Plan 2022-32 Update**

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills confirmed that she would review opportunities for further scrutiny before the document was brought to Full Council.

49 **Covid-19 Impact Update**

Martin Davis, Director of Families and Children's Services, provided an update about the impact of the pandemic on his department. Points made included:

- On a national level LAs had seen a significant increase in the number of referrals, but this had not been replicated in Wiltshire, or other good or outstanding LAs.
- The director emphasised the importance of winter planning as latent demand was coming through more slowly than expected, with the number of referrals rising slowly.
- Cases were on average more complex than those received pre-pandemic, with children subject to a Child Protection Plan being on them for longer than was previously the case.
- The number of individual referrals had increased and there was greater workload for drug and alcohol services.
- It was noted that recruitment and retention remained a focus and that there were relatively high vacancy rates in certain teams. Wiltshire was in competition with other LAs for experienced staff, but a recruitment programme was in place.
- The director reported that fostering placements had been successful, but the limited number of local places had meant that children had to be placed further from home, which, in turn, increased pressure on budgets.

During the discussion, the points made included:

- Lucy Townsend, Corporate Director of People, reported that Wiltshire had led the South West in its bid for Build Back Better Funding. Wiltshire was also

working alongside other LAs in the region on child sexual exploitation, safeguarding and the lessons learned from the pandemic.

- It was reported that staff were working from home unless it was deemed essential for them to be in the office.
- Members raised concern about the reasons behind the low numbers of referrals and asked why latent demand was not coming through as predicted. Martin Davis, Director of Families and Children's Services, explained that the number of referrals had fallen as low as 270 in November 2020, so the Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership had conducted a review. He reassured members that a large amount of work had gone into early intervention to ensure that cases did not escalate to a more serious level and that Wiltshire's figures were similar to other good and outstanding LAs.
- In response to a question about the trend over the most recent quarterly figures, the director explained that there was a seasonal variation in figures. He then offered to provide statistics showing the performance of Wiltshire when compared to other good and outstanding authorities and that these would be included in the fortnightly updates.
- Analysis had shown that the key drivers of referrals were similar to those before the pandemic, including mental health, drug and alcohol related issues.
- The Director of Education and Skills confirmed that Covid-19 rates in Wiltshire were above the English average. It was reported that Public Health had risk assessed 189 settings and that plans were in place to complete the vaccination roll out in schools by the end of November. Other measures had also been taken to reduce mixing between students, such as a halt to school assemblies.
- It was reported that there had been a significant rise in the number of referrals relating to home schooling last year, with number of children being home schooled in Wiltshire peaking at 779, but numbers had since reduced to 740.
- In response to a question about the roll out of CO2 monitors it was explained that the roll out to special schools had gone well and it was expected that delivery to mainstream schools would start later in the month.
- Members were reassured that the Medical Needs Education and Reintegration Service were on hand to support pupils suffering from long Covid.

Resolved

- 1. To thank officers for the update provided and ask for a similar update at the January meeting, if still relevant at that time.**
- 2. For social care figures and current case rates to be included in the next agenda if possible.**
- 3. For officers to include the percentage of Child Protection plans for good and outstanding authorities in the performance monitoring report to be presented at the January 2022 meeting (as this are the figures that provide reassurance that Wiltshire's Child Protection numbers are not worryingly low, despite being lower than statistical neighbours and national average).**

Martin Davis, Director of Families and Children's Services referred the committee to the report starting on page 31 of the agenda pack. The report contained the findings of the 2019 Ofsted inspection of Children's Social Care Services, which found the LA to be good in all areas. The director then provided further details about the progress made towards meeting the five key recommendations identified to make Wiltshire an outstanding LA, one of which was to raise community awareness of private fostering arrangements. Examples of the steps taken towards meeting this goal included benchmarking community and fostering arrangements against other LAs, as well as greater emphasis on working with partners, such as schools, sports clubs and the military.

Referencing page 41 of the agenda pack, the director highlighted the improvements made between 2018/19 and the first quarter of 2021. He explained that extensive auditing had been carried out. Nominated practice leaders were sitting alongside social workers to learn at source. The level of audit activity had not only helped to provide reassurance about the quality of service being delivered but had also given the opportunity to embed the lessons learnt and identified those areas in need of further development. Areas of continued development included working with younger fathers, in particular those with care experience, to ensure that they receive additional support.

During the discussion points made included:

- Members thanked the director for his update and commended his passion for supporting families. They also took the opportunity to praise social workers at the council and to recognise the improvement to the service since 2012.
- It was noted that Wiltshire was the only LA allowed to introduce a fifth category of abuse in Contextual Safeguarding. Wiltshire's Contextual Safeguarding pilot had run for three months from August and there was a possibility that it could be extended.

Resolved

- 1. To thank the director for the update.**
- 2. To receive an update on the progress made at a future meeting.**
- 3. To hold a briefing before the meeting to allow an in depth look at the topic.**

Cllr Caroline Thomas joined the meeting at 12:26pm.

51 Corporate Parenting Panel - Annual Report

The Chairman, in his capacity as Chair of the Children's Select Committee's standing task group, presented the task group's findings following its consideration of the draft annual report of the Corporate Parenting Panel. It was reported that 13 out of 16 of the task group's recommendations were implemented and, as a result, amendments made to the report before it was presented to Full Council. The committee was then invited to note the finalised

Corporate Parenting Panel report as considered by Council on 19 October 2021.

Cllr Peter Hutton, Chairman of the Corporate Parenting Panel, thanked members for acknowledgement of the report at Full Council. He endorsed the four conclusions of the task group's report and emphasised the importance of providing stable placements for children.

Resolved

To note the report of the Corporate Parenting Panel and the findings of the standing task group.

52 **Traded Services**

Head of Traded Services, Paul Redford, explained that, due to the commercially sensitive information included in the full Traded Services Report 2020-21, an edited version was being presented to the committee. He noted that the pandemic had presented a unique challenge over the last year. Services were now being delivered in ways that had not been possible a few years ago and, as a result, they were able to reach a wider audience. In order to meet changing needs, they were in the process of redesigning the service to better align it to the available trading opportunities. The Head of Traded Services welcomed further engagement with scrutiny and suggested that the full report be brought to the standing task group of the committee so that confidential information could be considered.

During the discussion the following points were made:

- Members welcomed the report and praised it as a forward-looking document.
- In response to questions about funding arrangements for both LA and non-LA schools, the Head of Traded Services noted that they had a fixed pricing structure, but they were able to adapt to support struggling schools. He reassured members that any income raised was reinvested back into services.
- When asked about the key challenges facing the service the officer explained that both schools and the council faced budgetary pressures, so it was important for Traded Services to provide a quality and cost-effective service. It was noted that the service faced market competition but that they were well regarded and had managed to tempt back schools previously using commercial alternatives.
- Questions were asked about how the expansion of the service in areas with poorer internet connectivity. The Head of Traded Services reported that over 1,200 digital devices were distributed throughout Wiltshire in 2020-21 in addition to the Digital Drive campaign. It was explained that Wi-Fi dongles were available to help homes with poor internet connectivity but that take up had been limited.
- The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills, stated that she valued the service as it maintained strong links between all schools and the LA. Members echoed these comments, praising the service for retaining skills within the authority.

Resolved

- 1. For the full Traded Services report to be presented to the standing task group as soon as feasible.**
- 2. For the findings of the standing task group to be presented to the committee at its next available meeting.**
- 3. For a briefing to be presented to the committee on Traded Services outlining the services included and how councillors can make sure schools (and businesses) aware of it and of Right Choice.**

53 Task Group and Board Representative Updates

Cllr Carole King provided a verbal update about the findings of a rapid scrutiny exercise looking at the provision of accommodation for young people during their transition from childhood to adulthood. She reported that the group had met senior officers and executive members to discuss the issue on 27 October 2021. Overall, the group were reassured the council has 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 more and more varied accommodation for those with SEND needs. As such, the group welcomed that SEND housing needs would be included as part of the council's wider accommodation strategy.

Cllr King detailed the group's provisional recommendations that the Children's Select Committee:

- Receives the relevant parts of the draft accommodation strategy for consideration at the appropriate time.
- Subsequently receives updates on progress if appropriate.
- Continues to monitor the data on care leaver accommodation provided in the Corporate Parenting annual report.

During the discussion the points made included:

- Members thanked Cllr Carole King, lead member of the rapid scrutiny exercise, for the update and praised the scope of the work carried out.
- It was noted that the formal report would come to the next meeting and recommendations would be sent to the relevant cabinet member.
- Members stated that they would welcome further statistics about the unmet need for SEND accommodation ahead of consideration of the formal report.
- The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills, stated that she was grateful for the work carried out by the rapid scrutiny. She reassured members that council staff worked hard to find a placement that was right for each individual and emphasised that the findings showed that there could be no such thing as a one size fits all approach.

Resolved

To note the interim findings of the rapid scrutiny exercise.

The Chairman then outlined further details of planned scrutiny activity. He reported that the Disadvantaged Learners Task Group planned to hold its scoping meeting on 30 November. The Fostering Excellence Task Group also had a full membership, and a date was being sought for its scoping meeting. Furthermore, he explained that work was ongoing to set the forward work programme for the Standing Task Group.

54 **Forward Work Programme**

The Chairman referred the committee to pages 123-138 of the agenda pack showing the relevant items from the overview and scrutiny forward work programme. It was explained that the work of the standing task group would be shown more prominently in the programme. He then invited members to suggest any additions they would like to see.

55 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next ordinary meeting of the committee was confirmed as Wednesday 19 January 2022 at 10:30am.

56 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am - 1.20 pm)

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