

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Monday, 13 June 2016.

PRESENT

Mr. S. L. Bray CC  
Ms. K. J. Knaggs CC  
Mrs. C. Lewis  
Mr. L. J. P. O'Shea CC  
Mr. A. E. Pearson CC  
Mr. T. J. Pendleton CC

Mr. J. Perry  
Mrs. C. M. Radford CC  
Mr. E. D. Snartt CC  
Mr. L. Spence CC  
Mr. G. Welsh CC

1. Appointment of Chairman.

That Mr. L. Spence CC be appointed Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the period ending with the date of the Annual Meeting of the County Council in 2017.

Mr. L. Spence CC – in the Chair

2. Election of Deputy Chairman.

That Mrs. C. M. Radford CC be elected Deputy Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the period ending with the date of the Annual Meeting of the County Council in 2017.

3. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 April 2016 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

4. Question Time.

The following questions were put to the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**Questions by Miss Karen O'Reardon, resident:**

Could the Chairman please advise:-

- (a) What standard procedures are in place within children's social care for children and teenagers with mental health problems who are unmanageable at home in a crisis on a weekend or after 5pm;
- (b) Is there a clear defined link on the website for families, professionals, schools or other care givers to access a crisis team which includes mental health trained social workers?

- (c) How many mental health trained social workers work within children's social care?
- (d) What respite care is provided for children and teenagers with mental health problems within Leicestershire?
- (e) What out of hours services and support is available for a child on a child protection plan?
- (f) Are parents still penalised for poor attendance if a child or teenager displaying mental health issues misses school because of anxiety or depression?

**Reply by the Chairman:**

- (a) Children's Social Care provides an out of hour's service covering key out of normal office hours: after 5pm during the week and all day at weekends. The on call social worker provides a proportionate response to emergency situations that require Social Worker involvement that cannot wait until the daytime service is next available.

If the Out of Hours Service is contacted, in the circumstances outlined in the question above, it will assess from the information shared what action needs to be taken to ensure that the young person and their family have any immediate support in place. This will include liaison with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) on call officers where appropriate. A Social Worker may contact the family over the phone or complete a home visit. Depending upon the assessed circumstances the Out of Hours Social Worker will consider with the young person, the family and, if appropriate, CAMHS what support needs to be in place.

- (b) Better Care Together, the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland wide five year plan to transform health and care services, is currently working on strengthening the offer to young people with mental health issues and their families. The contact point for any young person with mental health issues is via their GP or the Children's Emergency Department. They will assess the young person's mental health and refer the young person to the appropriate service.

The Young Minds website provides supportive guides to both child and parents. Immediate online counselling is available through kooth.com.

- (c) All children's social workers are trained to assess and provide direct work with young people and families dealing with a number of challenging circumstances including mental/emotional wellbeing.

Leicestershire Children's Social Care currently commissions Leicester City Social Care to provide Approved Mental Health Social Workers to complete the Mental Health Assessments Out of Hours. During office hours, Approved Mental Health Social Workers are provided by the County's Adult Social Care Service. Leicestershire Children's Social Care Service will ensure appropriate information is shared with the social worker completing the assessment. All assessments of a child/young person's mental health are completed by appropriately qualified staff- the assessment is undertaken by the Approved Mental Health Social Worker and qualified medical staff.

- (d) The circumstances of each individual child/young person referred to Children's Social Care are carefully considered and a decision made whether they require an assessment from Children's Social Care or whether their needs can best be met by another service.

If it is determined that the child/young person requires an assessment of their needs, this is completed in conjunction with the child, their family and other significant family members and professionals. The assessment will consider what, if any, ongoing support package is required and the level of intervention.

Resources, including any respite arrangements are always based on the assessed needs of the young person. The primary aim is to always to meet a child/young person's needs within their family and community network but if this cannot be achieved then the Local Authority will seek to secure appropriate resources to provide respite.

- (e) When a child/young person becomes subject to a child protection plan a core group of professionals, who will work with the child and family to reduce the assessed risks is established. This group will work together to agree the contents of the child protection plan and will agree the frequency of visits/ contact with the family by all involved.

Support identified as the result of a Child Protection Plan would be provided on a planned basis, although depending on the level and nature of the risks to the child this can include unannounced visits.

Out of Hours is an emergency service which deals with crisis at the time of the call: telephone support is available for a child/young person or family of children subject to a child protection plan and the nature of the call will determine the course of action taken by the Out of Hours Service. If there is an immediate or significant risk to a child this would be actioned accordingly whether or not the child was subject to a Child Protection Plan. A Social Worker may complete a visit to the child/family on their own, or with the assistance of the police or the police may visit on their own. Therefore they would only visit a child subject to a plan if particular circumstances required a "safe and well" visit to be completed outside of the agreed child protection plan.

- (f) The decision about prosecution rests initially with the school. The school refers cases to the Local Authority. Where a parent or carer is able to provide sufficient proof and supporting evidence that there is medical/mental health need the case will always be assessed before the County Council proceeds to prosecution. In order to have a level of consistency officers would need at the very least a GP's letter supporting the parent's case or better still a range of lead professionals' evidence supporting the case.

Often there is also significant dialogue with the school in order to establish what package of support has already been put in and whether additional support is/will be put in before the Local Authority decides to consider prosecuting.

#### 5. Questions asked by members under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

6. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

7. Declarations of interest.

The Chairman invited members who wished to do so to declare any interest in respect of items on the agenda for the meeting.

Mr D Snartt CC declared a personal interest in all items on the agenda as two members of his family were teachers.

Mr A E Pearson CC declared a personal interest in all items on the agenda as he managed a company which provided physical activity services to schools in Leicestershire. He was also a Governor of Leicester College.

Mr L Spence CC indicated that, whilst this did not amount to an interest to be declared at this meeting, he felt it relevant to report that he sometimes worked for an academy within the County.

8. Declarations of the Party Whip in accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 16.

There were no declarations of the party whip.

9. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 36.

10. Quarter 4 2015/16 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive and Director of Children and Family Services which presented an update of the Children and Families performance at the end of quarter four of 2015/16. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion the following points were raised:-

- (i) Concern was expressed that the percentage of children becoming subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time had increased. The Committee was assured that this was an area of concern for the Department, which had already identified that there had been a period when child protection plans might have been ended too early. As child protection plans were multi-agency, joint cases audits were currently being carried out by the Safeguarding Board to understand the causes of poor performance, although it was not thought that any children had been at risk during this period. Work was also being undertaken with adult social services to embed the changes and the recovery action plan had been reviewed. It was expected that it would take time for the changes to take effect and demonstrate improved performance. The Child Protection Panel, which had already considered this issue in detail, would continue to monitor performance.

- (ii) The Department had early learning and childcare advisors who worked with childminders to ensure that they provided a good quality service. The advisors targeted their support to those childminders who were not rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted to help them to improve. If this was not possible the childminder would be deregistered.
- (iii) Members highlighted the importance of physical literacy to the wellbeing of children, including ensuring that they got a good start in life. It was noted that the County Sports Partnership had an early years physical literacy programme which worked with relevant service providers including childminders. The Ofsted good practice guide for school readiness included requirements related to physical development; officers undertook to share this with the Committee.
- (iv) Concern was expressed that the educational attainment of looked after children could be affected by a high number of placements. The Committee was advised that the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Adoption had undertaken some research which had identified that placement instability had a negative effect on emotional health and wellbeing and ability to learn. The County Council had participated in the research and the Head of the Virtual School was involved in national work in this area and had reported to the Children in Care Panel. However, it was also important to be aware that a child could not be kept in a placement that was not right for them.
- (v) Both academies and maintained schools had responsibility for the educational progress of their pupils. The County Council supported schools through the Leicestershire Education Excellence Partnership (LEEP) which identified areas of underperformance and targeted resources accordingly. Last year, the focus had been on maths and on reading and writing for boys during key stages one and two. This work was starting to have a positive effect on performance. The County Council, like the diocese, also had an overview of performance across schools and could share examples of good practice.
- (vi) It was noted that Supporting Leicestershire Families Programme reported progress to the Health and Wellbeing Board and that a new subgroup was being established to provide more robust governance arrangements for this piece of work. Officers undertook to circulate the Annual Report of the Programme to the Committee for information.
- (vii) The removal of levels by which performance at key stage two could be measured had resulted in the need to develop a formula so that comparisons could be made with performance in previous years. It was expected that the lack of nationally defined levels would result in some difficulty in comparing performance with other local authorities.
- (viii) Ofsted had recently written an open letter regarding the state of education in the East Midlands. The Committee was pleased to note that the letter, which had been critical, had not referred to Leicestershire County Council.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the performance of the Children and Families Service at the end of the fourth quarter of 2015/16 be noted;

- (b) That officers be requested to circulate the research paper by the Rees Centre for Research into Fostering and Education on the links between placement stability and the educational attainment of looked after children;
- (c) That officers be requested to include details of the indicator testing readiness for school, including physical literacy requirements, in the performance report to the next meeting of the Committee.

11. Leicestershire and Rutland Adoption Agency Performance Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on the activity and performance of the adoption agency. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion the following points were raised:-

- (i) Concern was expressed that, during the last half of 2015, the Post Adoption Support Offer had not delivered the quality or level of service required. The Committee was advised that this was due to the service being moved in-house at a time when a national campaign to remind adopters of their right to be assessed for support was launched. This had resulted in the service being overwhelmed. In response, an additional member of staff had been appointed to manage the provision of post adoption support. There was confidence now that the right systems were in place to enable continued improvement in the service.
- (ii) All adopters approved during 2015/16 were white British. It was acknowledged that this was not representative of the Leicestershire population, however despite targeted advertising no suitable prospective adopters from black and minority ethnic backgrounds had applied. This contrasted with LGBT adopters where a good level of representation had been achieved. There was no longer a requirement for adopters and the children they adopted to be the same ethnicity. The most important requirement was for children to be matched with adopters who could best meet their needs. This meant that the process sometimes took longer than the national target, especially with the more difficult to place children.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the activity and performance of the adoption agency be noted.

12. Leicestershire Fostering Agency Performance Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on the activity and performance of the Fostering Agency. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion the following points were raised:-

- (i) The deregistration of foster carers was an intensive process, involving the Fostering Panel and the Agency Decision Maker. The information was kept on file but there was no national checking system for foster carers. Serious concerns could be reported to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). The County Council would only inform an Independent Fostering Agency of its decision if it was approached for a reference. However, the database would identify if a

deregistered foster carer was put forward by an Agency to foster a Leicestershire child. It was noted that deregistered foster carers could be reassessed and found suitable in the future; it did not constitute a lifetime ban.

- (ii) Concern was expressed that one third of foster carers were over the age of 61. The Committee was assured that these foster carers had discussed their five year plans with officers so that the department was aware of future risks. These foster carers were also subject to strict criteria including tests of fitness and for early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.
- (iii) Two level six foster carers had been recruited to cater for difficult to place children. It was intended that there would be four of these foster carers by the end of the year and that a further eight would be recruited during the next five years so that the programme could be expanded and rolled out to more children.
- (iv) It was confirmed that the County Council always met its sufficiency duty for foster carers. The Leicestershire 'brand' was strong and it was hoped that this would help keep reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies to a minimum. Plans were currently being developed to reduce the gap between allowances paid by Independent Fostering Agencies and the County Council following analysis of the internal costs of fostering placement. This would require a cost benefit analysis to enable investment to increase the number of in-house foster carers. However, there would always be a need for Independent Fostering Agencies to provide specialist care.
- (v) Embedding the Signs of Safety methodology into the Fostering Service was a work in progress. Not all parts of the methodology were suitable, due to the prescriptive nature of the service. Parts of the methodology which the service could benefit from, including the mapping of risk, were being introduced. A review would be undertaken in six months' time to ensure that these changes were effective.
- (vi) Regular audits were undertaken to ensure that the level of provision was right for children placed in independent children's homes. It was hoped that the recruitment of level six foster carers would reduce the County Council's reliance on children's homes for some of the difficult to place children.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the activity and performance of the Fostering Agency be noted.

### 13. Regional Adoption Agencies.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided information about national changes to local authority adoption arrangements, in particular the introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies, and the implications for Leicestershire's current practice.

Mr G A Hart CC, Cabinet Support Member, confirmed that the Cabinet Lead Member was involved in discussions regarding the development of a Regional Adoption Agency and was clear that, for Leicestershire County Council to be involved, the service would need to be cost effective and meet the Council's outcomes.

In response to a query, officers confirmed that the centralisation of practice could have benefits in terms of developing centres of excellence, for example having a single court making Adoption Orders for the East Midlands. However, there were concerns regarding the fast pace of change in this area.

It was hoped that an agreement could be reached across the East Midlands. However, the arrangements must also be right for the children waiting to be adopted to ensure that they were matched with adopters who could meet their needs. Members and officers from the County Council were involved in discussions at various levels about the development of a Regional Development Agency and it was hoped that they could have some influence in this regard.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the national changes to local authority adoption arrangements, in particular the introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies, and the implications for current practice in Leicestershire be noted;
- (b) That a further report on the introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies be submitted to the Committee at its meeting in November 2016.

14. Date of next meeting.

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 5 September 2016 at 1.30pm.

1.30pm - 3.20 pm  
13 June 2016

CHAIRMAN