

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 5 November 2019.

PRESENT

Mrs B. Seaton CC (in the Chair)

Mr. D. C. Bill MBE CC
Dr. R. K. A. Feltham CC
Mrs. C. Lewis
Mr. W. Liquorish JP CC
Mrs. R. Page CC

Mr T. Parton CC
Mr. S. D. Sheahan CC
Mr. G. Welsh CC
Mrs. A. Wright CC

In Attendance.

Mr. I. D. Ould OBE CC – Lead Member for Children and Families
Mrs. D. Taylor CC – Cabinet Support Member.

32. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2019 were taken as read, confirmed and signed, subject to the following amendment:

Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers (Minute 27 refers) – The final paragraph should be amended to read "...He also commented on the success of the *social work conference* in Melton".

33. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 35.

34. 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).

35. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

36. 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.

No declarations were made.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

38. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

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

39. Adverse Childhood Experiences.

The Committee received a presentation from the Director of Children and Family Services on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). This explained what ACEs were, what caused them and the consequences for people who experienced four or more ACEs during childhood.

The Director advised that the County Council was undertaking a range of work to help prevent ACEs in future generations, including a renewed focus on the first 1001 critical days of a child's life to help baby brain development.

Members noted that the Children and Family Wellbeing Service had developed evidence based approaches to parenting to help reduce parental conflict, and the Children and Families Partnership had recently held a multi-agency workshop event to develop the work being undertaken around ACEs.

The Committee was shown a short video which was one person's story of how ACEs had affected their life. The Director undertook to share the link to this video with members of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted.

40. Progress Report: Ofsted Recommendations as Part of the Ofsted Continuous Improvement Action Plan 2017-2020 - The Road to Excellence.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which highlighted the progress made against the Ofsted Continuous Improvement Action Plan (OCIAP) in responding to the Single Inspection of Children's Social Care in November 2016. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

Prior to consideration of the report, the Director provided an update on the outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection which had taken place in September and October 2019. Members noted that the inspection had looked at four areas:

- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families (rated good)
- The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection (rated as requires improvement)
- The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers (rated good)
- Overall effectiveness (rated as requires improvement)

The following points were highlighted:

- i) Ofsted had been clear that progress had been made since its last inspection in 2016. It acknowledged that significant improvements had been made across all areas and identified positive impacts for children in some service areas. However, whilst services for children in care and overall leadership were good, they were not experiencing consistently good practice enough across all services. Also, the extent of the changes still needed meant that their overall judgement had been one of 'requires improvement'.
- ii) A number of strengths had been identified, including a clear commitment from elected members and effective work by staff and senior managers which had led to improved responses to the needs of children and families in many areas. Ofsted found that most children in care were settled and were making good progress and the majority of care leavers were living in suitable accommodation and participating in education, employment or training. The inspection also identified that there was now a more timely response to children when they first became involved with the service, that the quality of assessments had improved, and praise was given to the fostering and adoption services. As a result, Ofsted had confirmed that children in Leicestershire were experiencing better outcomes.
- iii) Key issues identified included that the quality of social work practice was too variable and core areas needed to be improved. There also needed to be improvements around management oversight and it was recommended that the service be more explicit regarding specific timescales in plans. Ofsted identified a lack of consistency in relation to permanence planning for those children who were not going down the route of being adopted and said there needed to be more high quality supervision for social workers.
- iv) Six recommendations had been set out in the report and the Department would need to submit an action plan to Ofsted by 10 February 2020. A full report, along with the action plan, would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.
- v) In response to a query regarding Ofsted's comments around a lack of consistent and sustained improvements in front line practice, the Director advised that the Department had made significant improvements but was currently in the third year of its four year improvement action plan which had been introduced after its last inspection in 2016. Ofsted had acknowledged this, the work undertaken and that which was still in progress, and specifically the range of actions around quality supervision. However, the impact of changes made could not be seen sufficiently enough at this time. This had been an issue made clear throughout the inspection and was recognised by the Department. Assurance had been given by Ofsted that the Department was in a much better position than in 2016 as a result of the actions taken so far. These changes had taken significant effort and the Department was clear about what it needed to do next.
- vi) The Director stated that nothing raised by Ofsted had been unexpected and it was felt that the report provided a balanced view of the where the Department was at the current time, taking account of the fact that progress was still being made. The Lead Member for Children and Families concurred that the comments made by Ofsted were fair and he praised the work undertaken by officers.

In terms of progress with the current OCIAP, an update was provided on the two amber rated actions - management oversight of practice and consistency in social work assessments. The key activities being undertaken around these recommendations were summarised, along with planned work to take place.

Members noted that this included work to help embed the refreshed supervision policy and to look at the quality of supervision to reflect robust management oversight and that cases and plans for children were driven. These had been identified by Ofsted as the key issues to work on. Further case file audits had been completed and the completion rates for assessments within 45 days had continued to improve. The case file audits had identified that the quality of assessments were improving. Work needed to continue on the issues surrounding assessments and to ensure that actions had clear timescales. A campaign was due to commence around planning and supervision.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) In response to a query as to whether the two amber actions referred to above should have been rated as red, the Director stated that the OCIAP was a four year plan and it had been necessary to make some fundamental changes to address the outstanding actions. A clear timescale had been set to make the changes for the longer term and as such the Department had given itself longer to complete the two outstanding actions. In relation to management oversight, Ofsted had not said in its recent inspection that this was not evident, but that it was inconsistent. It was therefore felt that the amber rating was correct.
- ii) The Road to Excellence Plan highlighted the four key aims of the OCIAP. It had been agreed that the Plan wouldn't simply reflect the Ofsted recommendations but would show how the Department would embed real change. The four key aims were areas under which lots of activity was already being undertaken as part of the OCIAP. These were fundamental areas that needed to be achieved in order to ensure that children and young people in Leicestershire got a consistently good service, particularly around supervision and planning. Significant progress had been made but outstanding work now needed to be embedded.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the report be noted;
- b) That a further report and action plan be presented to the meeting of the Committee on 21 January 2020.

41. Overview of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Improvements.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided a summary of the national and local context relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) along with an overview of the plans to continuously develop and improve services to support children and families who were experiencing SEND. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) The increase in the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) appeared to be continuing. Work had been undertaken to look at the reasons for this and a number of factors had been identified. One was where a child's needs had potentially not been met within a school setting and had escalated. Consideration was being given to building the SEND offer within schools to ensure that children were having their needs met in a mainstream setting where appropriate, albeit with additional support. In response to a query, the Director said it was difficult to say generically whether an EHCP better met the health and care needs of children as this was dependent on a number of factors. However, lots of work was taking place to improve cross working with social care and there was now a greater contribution for health partners so where a good EHCP was in place, it would meet the needs of the child.
- ii) A Parliamentary Review of SEND reforms was currently being undertaken. Given the increase in the number of EHCPs over the last five years, and the resulting pressures on the system, this review was welcomed.
- iii) Concern was raised by a member that individual children were falling through the cracks and were not receiving an EHCP in a timely manner. Assurance was sought that the improvements detailed in the report would prevent this from happening. The Director outlined work being undertaken to ensure this did not happen, such as the Department's more proactive response to children who were out of education to ensure their needs were still being met. Whilst it was acknowledged that there were families in Leicestershire who were struggling, the Department's ambition was to move services around to ensure that it could best respond to individual children's needs who were out of education.
- iv) In response to a query, the Director confirmed that parents/carers, children and young people should always be involved in the development of an EHCP and the annual reviews of EHCPs. There were also other things that the Parent Carer Forum were now involved in, such as the co-production of the Leicestershire SEND newsletter, although there was recognition that this could be improved.
- v) Members noted it was the intention that the development of the Oakfield site would allay any uncertainty around the delivery of the 50 place SEMH school. This would hopefully be in place by September 2020.
- vi) Consultation had taken place with schools on the Council's proposal to transfer funding between the School's Block and High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. A meeting was due to take place with the School's Forum on 6 November to seek approval for this, but early indications were that schools were not supportive of the transfer. If the School's Forum did not approve the proposal, agreement from the Secretary of State would need to be sought.
- vii) It was highlighted that the cumulative deficit on the High Needs Block was forecast to peak at around £13.5m in 2021/22 before it recovered through the work being delivered in the High Needs Development Plan. If the County Council took no action, the trajectory of spend on the high needs block would be unsustainable.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

42. Corporate Parenting Strategy.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services presenting the draft Corporate Parenting Strategy for comment as part of the consultation process. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) The Committee welcomed the draft Strategy.
- ii) Clarification was sought as to the understanding of elected members around their responsibility as a corporate parent. Members noted this was both an individual and collective responsibility and the role and expectations of Councillors had been detailed in the Strategy through seven key principles. It was hoped that elected members would think about opportunities for children individually but then scrutinise these collectively to challenge the delivery. It was agreed that it would be important that all elected members bought in to the Strategy and the Department would work with them to develop their role as corporate parents. It was suggested that the Children in Care Panel, which included members from this Committee, would be a good forum for holding members to account and to consider the development of a framework for members to follow.
- iii) A query was raised around the ongoing support for care leavers and how effective this was. In response, it was stated that this was part of the work being undertaken around the core offer for care leavers. Consideration was currently being given to the financial support and package provided to those young people up to the age of 25. This included the support that was currently given to those who chose to go to university or higher education and the support the Department would want to offer. Currently, support was provided for accommodation for young people coming home from university, and consideration had been given to the provision of 52 weeks free accommodation for care leavers by some universities. Work had previously taken place with the DfE around this offer, and a further meeting was due to be held with the advisor to discuss progress.
- iv) During the consultation period, work was taking place with children and young people to ensure their voice would be reflected in the Strategy. It was the intention to produce a child friendly version of the Strategy for all children and young people in the care of the local authority or care leavers.
- v) Earlier in the year, a Scrutiny Review Panel had considered the role of elected members as corporate parents, and one of the recommendations arising from this had been the introduction of three member champions in the specific areas of education, training and work, housing and accommodation, and health. The three members had now been identified and the terms of reference for the roles agreed. A meeting would shortly be arranged to discuss the role further.
- vi) The Lead Member for Children and Families agreed that the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Review Panel had ensured that positive progress had

been made and had brought the role of elected members as corporate parents to the fore as there had traditionally been a lack of awareness regarding their responsibility towards children in care. Mr Ould felt that it was essential that the voice of young people was listened to and this was being achieved through various forums, such as the Corporate Parenting Board being co-chaired by a young person, young people presenting items at the Children and Families Partnership, and the Children in Care Councils, which were ran by young people.

- vii) Members noted that the success of the Scrutiny Review Panel had been reinforced through the agreement reached with district/borough councils to remove the paying of council tax for care leavers up to the age of 25.

The outcome of the consultation and the final draft Strategy was due to be presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 17 December 2019.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

43. Leicestershire Fostering Agency Statutory Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services providing an overview of the activity of the Leicestershire County Council Fostering Agency for the period 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) Lots of work had been undertaken to recruit and retain foster carers, and the Recruitment and Retention strategies had had an impact. To date this year, the service had lost only three foster carers against a projection of 20. In October, a specialist foster carer recruitment campaign had been launched and four initial visits were being progressed. The success of the Independent Visitor scheme was highlighted, and there were now 38 on roll. The target was to increase this number to 70 over the next two years. This was ambitious, but a retention package was being offered which included bespoke training, the support of an Independent Visitor Co-ordinator and also peer support.
- ii) Details were provided of the introduction of a foster carer's portal, where important information could be shared, and the virtual memory box for children in foster care – this allowed them to store information and memories virtually to access at any time. Both of these initiatives had been well received and highlighted the work of the Fostering Agency to promote the 'we are family' approach.
- iii) The service currently had three specialist one-to-one carers and two pathway carers, who were able to foster more than one child at a time. These were meant to be time limited carers, but the Committee was informed of a child who had stepped down from residential care and was currently going through a Special Guardianship Order to live permanently with their pathway carer. Although this meant that there would be a reduction in the number of pathway

carers, this was seen as a successful outcome for the child and three further pathway carers were currently being assessed.

- iv) There had been a reduction in the number of children placed in residential care. However, it was sometimes necessary for children to be placed in these settings due to them having complex behaviours and high needs, which could only be met by residential care.
- v) A member commented on a recent national news story whereby children had been placed in unsuitable accommodation such as holiday caravans. It was reported that Leicestershire did occasionally place children in such provision but these were monitored very closely and were time limited. An example was given of where this had occurred. Where this was the case, it was classed as an unregulated placement.
- vi) Currently within Leicestershire, there were 133 foster carer households which provided 191 placements. There were 70 connected carers for 120 children. In addition, there were 180 children placed in external fostering agency placements – the majority of these were within Leicestershire but the County Council had commissioned the places from the Independent Fostering Agency market.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

44. Leicestershire Adoption Agency Statutory Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the activity of the Leicestershire and Rutland Adoption Agency for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 13' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) Last year, 34 households were approved as adopters, but over 60 were in assessment currently. It was hoped that the majority of these would be approved by March 2020. The service was being ambitious around placing older children and those with physical disabilities and although this had so far been successful, it was acknowledged that there was a higher risk of disruption, which placed greater work on the team to provide the most vulnerable adopter families with the support they required.
- ii) Details were provided of the birth record counselling service, operated by the Adoption Team. This service also provided reunification where requested. Unlike many other local authorities, Leicestershire did not have a waiting list for this service.
- iii) A Permanence Team pilot had been undertaken – this team carried out a lot of the work traditionally undertaken by Child Protection Teams around profiling the child to find a match. The success of this had not been anticipated in terms of the take up from birth families for support. Out of the 7 children worked with during the pilot, 6 birth families had accepted support from the adoption team

and work continued with these families. As a result of feedback, peer to peer support was now also available.

The Lead Member for Children and Families praised the success of the Adoption Agency, in particular the joint work that was now taking place with Leicester City and Lincolnshire County Councils to match children to the most appropriate families from across the region. As a result of this change in practice, 12 children had been placed.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

45. Annual Complaints and Compliments Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided a summary of the Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints and Compliments Annual Report for 2018/19. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 14' is filed with these minutes.

It was noted that there had been an increase in the number of complaints during 2018/19. However, during the first half of 2019/20, there had been 47 complaints and it was therefore anticipated that the number would reduce this year. Despite the increase in complaints, fewer had escalated beyond Stage 1. A theme for complaints had been delay – this was primarily driven by capacity issues. One locality had been more affected by this than others and an action plan had been put in place to address this. The results from this were beginning to be seen.

A comment was made that poor recording appeared to be a common feature across a number of the reports that the Committee had considered at this meeting. Assurance was given that work was taking place around ensuring that the recording systems supported practice more effectively.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

46. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 21 January 2020 at 2.00pm.