

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Wednesday, 18 November 2020.

PRESENT

Mrs. H. J. Fryer CC (in the Chair)

Mr. I. E. G. Bentley CC  
Dr. R. K. A. Feltham CC  
Mr. J. Kaufman CC  
Mr T. Parton CC

Mr. S. D. Sheahan CC  
Mr. G. Welsh CC  
Mrs. M. Wright CC

19. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 September 2020 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

20. Question Time.

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

21. 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).

22. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

23. 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.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

25. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

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

26. Defining Children and Family Services for the Future.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the outcome of a diagnostic assessment of the Department and outlined the plans to take forward work to develop the department to improve outcomes for children. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 8' is filed with these minutes.

The Children and Family Services Department faced significant challenges due to increased growth and demand on its services and the County Council was also facing additional financial pressures as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This had increased the challenge to the Children and Family Services Department of ensuring continued delivery of effective outcomes for children, young people and families in a financially sustainable way. It was proposed that the diagnostic assessment would help to inform the next steps in the ongoing development of the Department.

The diagnostic assessment had identified several areas for consideration; these were subject to further validation and had been considered through a series of engagement with staff and a gateway review. The opportunities assessed had been broadly categorised into four themes – Children's Pathways, Timeliness of Interventions, Settings and Children with Disabilities. The opportunities identified were a combination of potential service user benefits, improved productivity and processes and a savings contribution which would be reflected in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). It was proposed that the cost of the programme would be commensurate and in line with the expected return on the investment.

Further work would be undertaken over the next five – six months to develop the themes and opportunities in partnership with staff across the Department, officers from the Transformation Unit and colleagues from Newton Europe.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) It was apparent that Newton Europe had effected significant reductions within Children and Family Services in other authorities and a query was raised as to whether this would be seen by Leicestershire County Council. In response, it was stated that the average figures reported by Newton Europe related to previous work undertaken in other local authorities. Newton Europe had proven in-depth experience of working with public service organisations and it was the intention that Leicestershire would work with them to ensure the best possible outcomes for the department.
- ii) A report was being presented to the Cabinet on 20 November 2020 to seek approval to move to the next stage of work, based on the outcome of the diagnostic assessment. This was the design phase and would outline a comprehensive plan for delivery. It was the intention to present a further report to this Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting in January which would give much more detail of the findings of the diagnostic assessment and the anticipated savings that would be achieved. In response to a query, it was reported that the work was not motivated purely by the need to make savings. The financial challenge was a key focus but the department also wanted to ensure that services could continue to deliver positive outcomes for children in the most cost effective way. Assurance was given that the focus of the work was on improving outcomes for children and families and service improvements.

- iii) The Lead Member for Children and Family Services reiterated the pressures being faced by the department and explained that this work would provide an opportunity for a total refresh of the service whilst ensuring the best outcomes for children and families were achieved.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the report be noted;
- b) That a further report be presented to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 19 January 2021;
- c) That the Cabinet be advised of the comments made by the Committee.

27. 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 provided an update of progress made against the Ofsted Continuous Improvement Action Plan (OCIAP) in responding to the Single Inspection of Children's Social Care in November 2016 and the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in September 2019. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

Following the inspection in September 2019, the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) had been updated to reflect the recommendations made by Ofsted. Previous areas that were continuing to be monitored through the CIP at the time of the most recent inspection but had made significant progress would now be monitored via Delivery Plans. The department had continued to embed progress against the 15 green recommendations and drive change against the two remaining amber actions; these had now been embedded in the six recommendations from the 2019 Ofsted inspection. Work would continue in the revised Road to Excellence Plan 2021-2023 with the ambition to have all recommendations embedded in practice by the time of the next full inspection in 2022.

It was reported that progress was continuing against all six recommendations; in some areas, progress had been impacted by Covid-19 and although work had continued, the timeliness of some actions had been slower than planned. Details were also provided of the key areas of work being undertaken in the amber areas and the challenges to progress.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were raised:

- i) Good progress had been made with recruitment and retention, although it remained a continuing challenge and of the current 52 vacancies, 40 had been recruited to with the remaining 12 out for recruitment. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, there had been continued improvements in recruitment and retention. It was noted that a large number of recruits were newly qualified social workers who had to have a lower caseload and more support during their first year in practice. A proportion of this additional support was provided by agency staff, of which there were 46 currently in the department. The department provided a range of strong support and initiatives to encourage greater recruitment and positive feedback had been received.

- ii) In response to a query around the First Response service, it was stated that this was considered to be the front door for children and family wellbeing and children's social care. Progress had been made in terms of the Children and Family Wellbeing Service triage and these were now being worked in live time and were using the same three day timescale to monitor performance as First Response Children's duty. Work had been completed to consider an integrated approach to the screening process across the Children and Family Wellbeing Service and First Response and a proposal had been agreed to mirror the First Response screening process and provide closer oversight of Children and Family Wellbeing Service screening. The impact for children would be early and coordinated responses to align service provision and timely decision making so that children had the right outcomes at the right time. It was reported that there had been a reduction in waiting times and it was the intention to retest the model in place as referrals were beginning to increase once more.
- iii) Members were informed that the Inspection Framework differed in 2019 to that in 2016. However, Ofsted would always make recommendations as part of the continuous learning process. Two recommendations from 2016 had been incorporated into the 2019 recommendations and these related to consistency of practice across the whole service and consistency in management oversight.
- iv) Updates on improvements across the service took place every three months. A specific audit had been undertaken to consider the quality of the updates and the findings from this would be presented to a future meeting.
- v) A review of the Children's Decision Making Panel had been undertaken to redesign the process and improve consistency. The revisions were due to be presented to SMT on 30 November.
- vi) A member raised the issue of staff burn out and how this could be prevented. The welfare of staff was monitored closely and regular staff supervision took place. The Recruitment and Retention Strategy now included work around the provision of support for staff. During the lockdown period, support for staff was shared and it was ensured that the department continued to celebrate the success of its staff.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

28. Leicestershire Fostering Agency Statutory Report.

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Children and Family Services which presented the activity of the Leicestershire Fostering Agency during the period March 2019 – March 2020. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were raised:

- i) It was reported that in 2019/20, the service had received and processed 499 fostering enquiries and undertaken 90 initial visits with 54 progressing to Stage 1 of assessment. There was some concern that those progressing was a small

proportion of the initial enquiries and it was queried whether the advertising being used was appropriate. The Director stated that the service was continually looking to improve but it did have national minimum standards to meet to ensure that the foster carer was appropriate. However, consideration would be given as to whether these standards were being interpreted too narrowly by the service, although it was necessary to ensure that the foster carer was the right fit for a child. It was possible from the enquiries that someone was looking to foster in the future and was seeking information in advance or that the person discovered that adoption was their preferred route. There had also been a number of families who had dropped out of the process at the second stage. A further stage in the assessment process had now been introduced whereby a manager visited prospective foster carers to assess whether they were appropriate. The process would be considered in the Defining Children and Family Services for the Future programme and it was hoped that areas for improvement would be identified.

- ii) During the period, eight Private Fostering approvals had been granted, but concern was raised that there could be a greater number. Nationally, there was concern that families had made private arrangements for children and these were unreported. The criteria for it not to be a Private Fostering arrangement was quite tight and it was acknowledged that many families were not aware that this arrangement existed. The department had previously undertaken lots of advertising around what Private Fostering arrangements were. In relation to the eight approvals, these had been referred to the service and would each have individual circumstances. Upon referral, an assessment was undertaken to ensure that this was the most appropriate type of placement; consideration would also be given as to whether the child was a child in need.
- iii) A mentoring scheme had been developed whereby new foster carers received mentoring and support from existing foster carers for a six month period. During supervision and review, consideration was then given to the possibility of new foster carers becoming mentors. More were now being encouraged to take on this role.

#### RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

#### 29. Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which presented the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) with regard to children in care and those subject to child protection planning. The report evaluated the extent to which Leicestershire County Council had fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were raised:

- i) In relation to Child Protection Plans lasting more than 18 months, it was queried whether it was possible to no longer have these in place. In response, it was stated that the length of a Child Protection Plan was very much dependent on

individual cases. If it was felt that a child still required a Plan after 18 months, this would continue. The timescale of a Plan was somewhat immaterial; what was key was that there was an improving picture for the child.

- ii) It was reported that QA alerts would be moved into the Mosaic system; this would formalise within case workflow and would create a tableau performance report so that case level detail could be used to measure impact and underpin consistent challenge. The intention was that the information would be sent to Service Managers and that this would be a more effective process.
- iii) Out of 877 Child Protection Conferences, 116 had had to go out of date or be stood down on the day and rearranged; this was raised as an area of concern by a member. It was stressed that not holding a Conference was avoided wherever possible but there had been incidents where it had been necessary to cancel due to unforeseen circumstances. When this occurred, learning was considered and avoidable issues were taken up by the Service. There was now an improving picture and there had been an increase in the number of IROs and Conference Clerks. A further two IROs were due to commence with the Service later in the month.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

30. Quarter 2 2020/21 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a joint report of the Chief Executive and Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update of the Children and Family Service Department's performance for the period July to September 2020 (Quarter 2). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

A member raised the issue that there were a number of parents who were unwilling to send their children back to school due to there being vulnerable people in their household. In response to a query, the authority could try to capture the number of children with concerned parents, although it was stressed that all cases were being dealt with on an individual basis.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

31. Dates of Future Meetings.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 19 January 2021 at 2.00 pm.

Future meetings of the Committee would be held on the following dates:

9 March 2021  
1 June 2021  
7 September 2021

2 November 2021.

9.30am – 12.12pm  
18 November 2020

CHAIRMAN