

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 7 September 2021.

PRESENT

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

Mr. M. Frisby CC

Mr. L. Hadji-Nikolaou CC

Mr. R. Hills CC

Mr. N. Lockyer

Ms. Betty Newton CC

Mr. C. A. Smith CC

In Attendance.

Mrs. D. Taylor CC – Lead Member for Children and Families

Mrs. B. Seaton CC – Cabinet Support Member

15. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 June 2021 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

16. Question Time.

The following question, received under Standing Order 34, was put to the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Mrs Sue Whiting asked the following question of the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Could the Chair please confirm that there will be Dyslexia Awareness Events planned for the International Dyslexia Awareness Month in October according to the three year cycle that has happened previously, with the last Dyslexia Awareness Event for Children and Families being held in 2018 at County Hall?

Mrs H Fryer CC replied as follows:

The department plans to write a 'Dyslexia Awareness' briefing that will be sent out using various methods during International Dyslexia Awareness Month in October (this will include SEND news, the Headteachers briefing and governors newsletter).

Unfortunately, many planned face to face events have been delayed due to Covid restrictions, although the department is planning to start up the Local Offer Roadshows in the near future in line with guidance; these will have information about Dyslexia and Support available at them.

Unrelated to the awareness month, the department launched a virtual training and learning platform in August which schools can sign up to; this includes Dyslexia Awareness training designed at a universal level and signposts to the Learning Support team for more information. It is hoped that this tool will make this training easier to access for more staff working in Leicestershire Schools.

Supplementary Question:

Mrs Whiting asked a supplementary question which asked for the following information:

- An outline of exactly what will be included in the Dyslexia Awareness Briefing
- The approximate number of families who will be reached by the SEND news and whether this correlates with the latest figure from the Government Statistics of children identified in Leicestershire with specific learning difficulties
- For Councillors to also receive the briefing as Dyslexia is life long and affects adults as well as children
- What is included in the 'Dyslexia Awareness training designed at a universal level'
- Whether schools have to pay for the information from the Learning Support Team
- Whether parents have any direct access to the information provided by the Learning Support Team.

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services replied to the effect that work was still taking place on developing the Dyslexia Awareness briefing. In relation to the number of families reached by SEND news, the Director reported that a new sign up process had recently been created to ensure that this was in line with GDPR and to date, approximately 400 individuals had signed up. Many of these were SENCOs within schools so the reach was not currently measurable. The information was shared on Facebook and internally within the County Council, so after an addition was published, it was possible to look at the data on how many views there had been.

The Director stated that it would be possible to consider sharing the briefing with Councillors. In terms of the information in the training, the Director reported that rather than just focussing on difficulties with reading and writing, the presentation looked at the bigger picture of dyslexia, considered the Rose definition of dyslexia and what were considered to be the defining, underlying characteristics of dyslexia and the impact of these on the learner. The training notes took around 15 minutes to watch although there were slides available afterwards and it was also possible to provide a transcript of the training.

The Director reported that the support from the Learning Support Team was free to Leicestershire schools and that parents did not currently have direct access to information from the Learning Support Team. The service provided by the Learning Support Team was provided directly to schools. However, there was a range of information on the Local Offer website which parents could access and this included a list of resources.

17. 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).

18. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

19. 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.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

21. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

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

22. Children's Innovation Partnership.

The Committee received a presentation from the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the work of the Children's Innovation Partnership. A copy of the presentation is filed with these minutes.

Part of the presentation related to the Residential Design brief that had been developed. The Residential Design Brief had three elements – the Assessment and Resource Team (ART) and Hub, Assessment beds, two residential homes and a parent-child assessment home. The properties had been purchased and were owned by the County Council and the service was delivered through Barnardo's.

The Director reported that the ART was already working with 13 children and the aim was to support their transition from a residential placement to long term foster care. To date, there had been a number of positive outcomes.

In terms of the financial benefit, it was noted that the total investment would be £2.9m but this would generate approximately £0.75m annualised benefits and assets would be retained with an estimated value of over £2m. Benefits were expected in reduced placement costs and social worker time and travel to out of county placements. The estimated benefits exceeded the MTFs target but this would be dependent on children's needs and property utilisation.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were raised:

- i) A query was raised around the impact on children who had been placed in a residential home for a long time and the care that was given to them during the transition period. In response, the Director reported that an approach was being cemented for all children in care to have a trajectory to ensure that their needs were being met, including their care needs and assessment needs. Where it was difficult to meet the necessary timescale, the child's case was reviewed by the Head of Service. However, assurance was given that there was a process in place to monitor each individual child specifically to their needs.
- ii) A member raised a concern that a number of children did not have a proper care plan in place. However, the Director gave assurance that every child in care had a care plan and a trajectory plan to help them get to their permanent home. This statement related to the sign off of permanency plans, which could sometimes be delayed.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted.

23. Quarter 1 2021/22 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive and Director of Children and Family Services which presented an update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period April to June 2021 (Quarter 1). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

From the 24 measures that had been reported, three had improved, five showed no significant change and five had declined. In addition, nine indicators provided information only and two had temporarily been suspended. From the 14 measures that had a national benchmark, four were in the top quartile, six were in the second quartile, three were in the third and one was in the fourth quartile.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) In response to a query around whether there were any common trends with the NEET increase, it was noted that over the last year there had been less contact with young people as a result of Covid-19. Evidence was currently being gathered in relation to the challenges being faced, but it was acknowledged that this was a national issue. It was known that Covid-19 had had a disproportionate impact on young people but assurance was given that appropriate provision and support was available for young people. A further update would be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.
- ii) A member raised the issue that the percentage of children in care who had had a dental check was 35.1%. It was stated that routine dental checks had been limited during Covid-19 lockdown and figures were now beginning to increase. The Director reported that the department took the general health of all its children in care seriously and encouraged visits to the dentist. Post lockdown, the department was working closely with health partners to improve access to dental treatment and was also working with carers to encourage good dental hygiene.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the report be noted;
- b) That a report be presented to the next meeting of the Committee around Young People who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

24. 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. The report evaluated the extent to which the County Council had fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021, including its corporate parenting function. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) It was noted that the number of looked after children per 10,000 population had increased over the period, although this number had now decreased and stabilised. The Director stated that the increase had been forecasted as work had been undertaken around key groups of children who had not previously been in care but who the department felt should be supported, for example 16/17 year olds. It was felt that this had been positive in stabilising children. It was also reported that the department was now supporting more older young people who had very complex needs such as those who had been victims of Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation. However, despite the increase, the number in Leicestershire was still lower than that of its statistical neighbours. It was agreed that the higher number had been as a result of greater accessibility to and awareness of provision and a greater understanding of the older age group.
- ii) It was highlighted that children struggled mentally, not only due to Covid-19, but also physically and the Corporate Parenting Team had worked hard to ensure participation in a number of activities during the lockdown period. A question was raised around what provision was in place in terms of fitness and nutrition, which could directly impact on children's mental health. In relation to older young people, who were living in more independent supported accommodation, the department worked with Personal Assistants around the whole child and this included consideration of diet, cooking skills and how to look after themselves. A Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire was completed with all young people in care and their carers; this looked at emotional wellbeing and general health. Dedicated looked after children Health staff within the Health Service focussed their attention on the whole wellbeing of children and this included medicals when a child came into care and review medicals. The department also engaged children to participate in all activities, including those within school and the Virtual School worked hard to ensure that physical and educational activities took place. Through communication with foster carers, the department promoted physical activity and the service would have promoted the online resources available during lockdown. Encouraging physical activity was considered to be a key focus and there was also a scheme whereby children could access funding to join a gym.
- iii) The role of young carers was highlighted and it was agreed that a report be presented to a future meeting of the Committee around the work the department undertook with young carers.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the report be noted;
- b) That a report be presented to a future meeting of the Committee around the work undertaken with Young Carers.

25. Leicestershire Children and Families Partnership Plan: Progress Update.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided a progress update on the Children and Families Partnership Plan for the period 2021-2023. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

It was reported that priority leads had continued to work with partners and other key stakeholders to deliver the current action plans. The pace of delivery and progress of actions had been affected by Covid-19 but the key progress across the five priorities was highlighted along with work proposed over the next six months.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

26. Leicestershire and Rutland Local Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2020/21.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which presented the draft Annual Report of the Leicestershire and Rutland Safeguarding Children Partnership for 2020-2021. The Committee was asked to make any comments or proposed additions to the report prior to the final version being published. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i) It was noted that there had been an increase in the number of domestic violence incidents during the lockdown period and it was questioned what was being undertaken to reduce this. The Director reported that the Domestic Abuse Strategy Group had led on developing a service delivery plan to work with families who had experienced domestic abuse more creatively. Over the last two years, the department had established a team which worked alongside the Police at Wigston to ensure that any referrals into the Police were being received to enable the service to offer support to the families involved. Part of this service included Operation Encompass, which was a notification to schools of children who it was known had been involved in a domestic abuse incident, allowing the schools to support those children. It was noted that this project had been extended and a member of staff from the Children and Family Wellbeing Service now sat within this service.
- ii) The number of cases during the pandemic being subject to the Children and Family Wellbeing Service had increased significantly and the majority had been where domestic abuse had been a factor. A Head of Service and Service Manager had been enabled to take part in national research around domestic abuse and some key learning had been taken from this; as part of the Defining Children and Family Services work, this had enabled the service to consider different ways of engaging with families. The department had worked very closely with Doncaster, who had received government funding, to develop a response to domestic abuse and to learn from the findings of the work undertaken. A domestic abuse toolkit had been developed, which was being launched on 13 September, and this would support staff in their work with children and families and would provide a more consistent approach. This also included work with Public Health around how services were commissioned, for example working with perpetrators. In addition, new legislation around domestic abuse had been developed and work was taking place to complete a needs assessment; part of the work was how the service had engaged with members of the public where domestic abuse was a factor.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

27. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 2 November 2021 at 2.00pm.

2.00 – 3.21pm
07 September 2021

CHAIRMAN