

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 8 March 2022.

PRESENT

Mr. C. A. Smith CC (in the Chair)

Mr. M. Frisby CC

Mr. L. Hadji-Nikolaou CC

Mr. N. Lockyer

Mr. R. Martin

Ms. Betty Newton CC

Mrs. R. Page CC

In Attendance

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

55. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2022 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

56. Question Time.

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

Question asked by Mrs Sue Whiting

“Could the Chair please state:

- a) if the Director/Heads of individual services within the Children's Services department/officers of individual services within the Children's Services will be attending the next meeting of the Leicestershire Dyslexia Association on 16th March at Stoneygate Baptist Church 315 London Road LE5 6GG as the Meeting is entitled Dyslexia and Me with a variety of invited guests who will be sharing their Experiences?
- b) if the Director/Heads of individual services within the Children's Services Department/Officers of individual services within the Children's services department will be attending the Dyslexia Show at the NEC Birmingham on 25th/26th March 2022 where there will be many exhibitors with resources and many Seminars on a variety of topics which are included in Neurodiversity?”

Reply by the Chairman

- a) No, however we shared the details of the event with SENCOs across Leicestershire. Members of the Department do engage with and attend events run by the LDA.

- b) No, however we have committed to other events which we feel are very specific to the projects we are working on presently such as the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) virtual Literacy Conference on Thursday 17th March and we have had recent sessions with relevant commercial exhibitors who attend NEC shows to understand more about services and resources to support our work.

Supplementary Question:

Mrs Whiting asked as supplementary questions on the response to her original question, how the event of Leicestershire Dyslexia Association (LDA) on 16 March had been shared with SENCOs and who had attended events at the LDA since September 2021, who had signed up to attend the BDA virtual Literacy Conference on Thursday 17th March (including which parts of the day) and with which Commercial exhibitors that attend NEC shows had the Department held sessions with?

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services responded that information regarding the LDA event had been sent out to SENCo's directly. Members of the Specialists Teaching Service had attended LDA events and signed up to attend the BDA virtual literacy conference next week, attending for the whole day.

The Director further confirmed that Members of the Specialist Teaching Service met with a range of exhibitors who attended the NEC show, as well as meeting with other providers throughout the course of the year, to explore a wide range of products and resources that could support children across Leicestershire.

57. 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).

58. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

59. 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 at this point.

During the meeting, Mrs. Betty Newton CC declared a Non-Registerable Interest in agenda item 9: Young Carers (minute 63 refers), as she was a previous member of Loughborough Young Carers Research Group.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

61. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

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

62. Quarter 3 2021/22 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a joint 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 to December 2021 (Quarter 3). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 8' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following comments were raised:

- i. Members raised concerns about the number of children becoming subject to a Child Protection Plan for a second or subsequent time. The Director provided some reassurance that there were usually gaps between plans of two years or more, indicating that there are periods of improvement and stability. However, factors such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental health problems meant that there could be setbacks in such periods of stability. This had been made worse during the pandemic when some universal services that would have otherwise provided support to such children and their families had not been accessible or put under additional pressure.
- ii. In response to questions raised the Director advised that pre-Covid, for outstanding Shires, the rate of repeat child protection plans was approximately 23%. The Service was seeking to achieve similar rates, but this would likely take time as Covid impacts were still being managed.
- iii. The Service had provided support to partner agencies to help strengthen their processes around decision making and to ensure that when a child ceased to be on a child protection plan, arrangements for ongoing support were sustainable, reducing the risk of a repeat plan. To strengthen work within the Service, training workshops for staff had also been provided. These centred around early intervention and the de-escalation of risks to children by addressing issues such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental mental health. Cross agency working with the Police, health, schools and other partner organisations had also been strengthened to ensure risk factors were properly alerted and shared, something that had been affected by the Pandemic.
- iv. It was recognised that circumstances around a child on a child protection plan were often complex and that usually both they and their family required support. By way of example, members welcomed the joint work of the Children and Family Wellbeing Service and Community Safety Team that helped families to understand the impact of domestic abuse on all family members. Members noted that a pilot had been undertaken to work with perpetrators of domestic abuse and this had shown positive results both in improving individuals' home situations and deescalating the need for child protection plans.
- v. A member raised a question regarding the percentage difference in the number of primary schools and secondary schools rated as being Good or Outstanding, primary schools often achieving outstanding. It was noted that generally performance remained lower in secondary schools and that a contributing factor was that almost all Leicestershire secondary schools were now academies. Admissions performance was also lower in secondary schools, however, the Service would work on improving processes to ensure that children could access one of three preferred schools.

RESOLVED:

That the report on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period to December 2021 (Quarter 3) and further information now provided be noted.

63. Young Carers.

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children and Family Services on Young Carers which outlined the work taking place to identify, assess and support young carers across Leicestershire. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

At this point of the meeting, Mrs. M. E. Newton CC declared a non-registerable interest in this item as she had historically been a member of the Loughborough Young Carers Research Group.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were made:

- i. A member raised concerns about the impact of caring for a family member on a young person's health and, in particular, their mental health. A member sought reassurance that the Service was confident it was doing enough to support them and to encourage them to come forward. Members agreed that young carers were often the hidden face of community care and that the pandemic had made the position more difficult. The Director assured members that good support was provided to those known to the Service. However, it was recognised that many remained unidentified and there were some who did not wish to be identified.
- ii. The Service relied on schools to report early indications that a young person might be caring for a family member. Members were pleased to hear that schools were proactive in making referrals, and that each school across Leicestershire had a Young Carers Champion.
- iii. It was suggested that young carers often did not consider themselves to be a 'young carer', or they or their family may be apprehensive of assessment and unsure of the support available. The Lead Member said it was well recognised within the Service that young carers were often anxious and sometimes scared that they might be taken into care if they came forward. A whole family approach was therefore critical. The Director emphasised that there were a range of support options that could be delivered but a key role of the Service was to help young people understand their position and identify what their needs might be.
- iv. Encouraging unknown carers to come forward was a challenge. However, the Director explained that work was being undertaken with the Council's communications team to target young people to make themselves known to the Service or in school, for example. It would also continue to work closely with schools, partners and the community.
- v. A member suggested that further consideration should be given to how the Council might better incentivise young people to engage with the Service. Members noted that respite services were offered to young carers whereby they could engage with one another and take part in enjoyable activities outside of the home. Some young carers within the Youth and Justice Service had assisted in recruitment panels to contribute their influence in the Service and had helped them to gain skills from preparing questions and activities for the panel. The Director undertook to consider

how these and other incentives could be promoted and the benefits of the support packages available for young carers that came forward.

- vi. It was noted that young carers would be supported through the Children and Family Wellbeing Service which would carry out an initial assessment to produce a support package which addressed the specific needs of the young person and their family, subject to any safeguarding issues being identified. A Section 20 agreement, whereby a child would be brought into Local Authority care, would only be considered if it was deemed necessary for the welfare of the child. Usually, a family centred approach would be used. However, a group work offer would be considered and could include access to other universal services.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report and details of the work taking place to identify, assess and support young carers across Leicestershire be noted and welcomed.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to consider how the Service might better incentivise currently unidentified young carers to come forward, engage with the Service and make use of the support available to them.

64. Written Statement of Action.

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on progress being made against the Written Statement of Action and set out the findings of the Leicestershire local area SEND Peer Challenge. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

The Director advised the Committee that since the circulation of the report:

- To address weaknesses in the quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) further support had been secured so the Service would now be able to audit and provide greater assurance on the quality of those plans going forward.
- All vacancies within the Service had now been filled following a recent restructure. This would be critical in improving the support that could be provided.
- Additional resources had been secured to clear the backlog of work which had resulted from those vacancies. Caseloads were identified as an issue, but these were now much smaller and manageable. It was hoped this would improve the recruitment and retention of staff in this field.
- A new case system had been introduced which had gone live the previous day. This would make recording and managing case records easier and more efficient.

In response to a question from a member, the Director confirmed that around 80% of actions set out in the inspection report had been completed and that the Service would be on track to meet all targets in time for its next inspection which was expected imminently. All areas would continue to be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure the Service was fully supporting children and young people with special educational needs.

RESOLVED:

That the update now provided on progress against the Written Statement of Action be noted.

65. Report on the Outcome of the Ofsted Focused Visit January 2022.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which outlined the outcome of the recent Ofsted Focused Visit. A copy of the Ofsted report had been circulated to all Members by way of a supplementary paper. A copy of the report and supplementary report marked 'Agenda Item 11' are filed with these minutes.

Members noted and welcomed the positive feedback received following the focussed visit. Members noted the two areas for improvement which were already being addressed as detailed in the update on progress against the Written Statement of Actions. The Director thanked staff within the Department for their unwavering focus on children and their steady drive for improvement over the last two years. The Committee also expressed its thanks to the Director and her team.

The Cabinet Lead Member for Children and Family Services praised strong leadership within the department and also thanked staff for their hard work, notably during the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESOLVED:

That the Ofsted report following its focused visit to Leicestershire County Council Children's Services be noted and welcomed.

66. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Commission would be held on 7 June 2022 at 2.00pm.

2.00 - 2.55 pm
08 March 2022

CHAIRMAN