

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 7 June 2022.

PRESENT

Mr. M. Frisby CC
Mrs. H. J. Fryer CC
Mr. R. Hills CC
Mr. Max Hunt CC

Mr. N. Lockyer
Mr. R. Martin
Mr. C. A. Smith CC
Mr. G. Welsh CC

1. Appointment of Chairman.

RESOLVED:

That Mrs. H. Fryer CC be appointed Chairman for the period ending with the date of the Annual Meeting of the County Council in 2023.

Mrs. H. Fryer CC – in the Chair

2. Election of Deputy Chairman.

RESOLVED:

That Mr. C. Smith CC be elected Deputy Chairman for the period ending with the date of the Annual Meeting of the County Council in 2023.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2022 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

4. 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:-

Now that Covid restrictions are more relaxed could the Chair please inform me what plans are being made for the Local Offer Roadshows before the Summer holidays and the next academic year and will those plans also include voluntary groups including parent led groups and LEICESTERSHIRE MUSIC?”

Reply by the Chairman

The Department are currently developing a draft plan for the next round of roadshows which will commence from September 2022. A [survey](#) remains open for families to help the Department to shape how they will look, including aspects such as timings, the format, and types of stands.

Two focus groups with parents have also been held to help shape the draft plan. All Roadshow information will be available in the [SEND News](#), on [Facebook](#), on the [Council's Website](#) and also for anyone who is signed up to receive Local Offer updates. The Roadshows are open to any groups or organisations who wish to take part. The Department encourages a broad range, where both the venue and the organisations capacity permits. Groups and organisations can contact Karen Hall, SEND Family Information Worker, directly to be kept informed of the Roadshows and for booking information (Karen.Hall@leics.gov.uk).

Supplementary question

“Thank you Chair for the answer that Roadshows are being planned and for the links embedded in the answer.

Could you explain which two focus groups with parents have been held as there are many different groups of parents within the SEND provision and Parents/Carers can belong to many different groups depending on the needs of different children whether with entirely Specific Education needs or Health needs?”

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services responded that both focus groups had been open to all parents and carers and had been advertised via the Local Offer Facebook page, the parent carer forum and the Leicestershire SEND HUB. A survey had also been created for parents and carers as another avenue to share their views with the Department.

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

The following questions, received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5) were put to the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Question asked by Mr Max Hunt CC

- “1. Is the County Council broadly in support of Josh McAllister’s Independent Review of Children’s Services (May 2022) and will we be writing to MPs and Ministers urging the implementation of its major recommendations.
2. Some of the recommendations from Josh McAllister’s Independent Review of Children’s Services are or could be instigated independently of Government and, for example, the Report says that local authorities “need help to take back control of this system through establishing new Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs)”. Is this something we could consider?
3. Would it be helpful or unhelpful to raise a windfall tax on the county council’s providers, as the Independent Review of Children’s Services Report suggests?
4. Was the County Council invited to give evidence to the Review and if so can this be made available for committee members?

5. The Review identifies a rising number of Looked After Children from 2011 to date and projected to rise to nearly 100,00 in the next ten years if the reforms are not implemented. What are the equivalent annual figures for this period in Leicestershire?"

Reply by the Chairman:

1. The Children and Family Services department welcomes the publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care's final report. The report has a welcomed emphasis on children's rights and outcomes, on social justice and on relationships and doesn't shy away from the big challenges children, families, public services and society faces, in particular the report highlights the need for significant investment in rebalancing the social care system towards early family support.

The Department are looking at the review and its recommendations and are keen to work with MPs and Ministers over the next few months to further understand what it will mean for Leicestershire. It is likely that government funding will be required to make significant changes to how services operate.

2. The Department are looking carefully at the review in order to understand what can be instigated independently of government. No decisions have yet been made around what this could look like.
3. The windfall tax is one of the recommendations in the review that government will comment on. It is too early for the County Council to make a comment on how helpful this would be.
4. Staff across the Department were involved in an engagement event as part of the review. A summary of the review's workforce engagement (that includes input from Leicestershire) can be found here [Workforce Engagement Summary](#).
5. In Leicestershire, the Department has done a five year projection of the number of children in the care of the Local Authority based on a 4% increase each year which will see the number of children in care in Leicestershire rise from 690 in 2022 to 840 in 2027.

Mr Hunt thanked the Chairman and officers for an informative response to his questions.

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.

No declarations were made.

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 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 March 2022 (Quarter 4). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

In presenting the report, the Director advised of an error in paragraph nine which referred to 'Intensive Referral Order' but should read 'Independent Reviewing Officer'.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- i. Members raised concerns about the delays in Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan assessments for those children transitioning to junior or secondary school in September 2022. It was noted that these should have been completed by mid February, but a number still remained outstanding. A member commented that this could be worrying for families, particularly given the level of vulnerability of those children affected.

The Director provided assurances regarding the Departments intention to work through the backlog by the end of June and confirmed the issue was being monitored on a weekly basis and that discussions with schools and parents were ongoing to ensure they were kept informed of progress.

Members noted that the Department had seen an unprecedented increase in the number of requests for EHC plans, particularly this year, which had contributed to the delays in meeting the statutory assessment deadlines. However, whilst acknowledging staff and demand pressures faced by the Department, having regard to the impact such delays had on families, the Committee requested more detailed information on the current number of assessments outstanding and details of how this was being managed.

- ii. Members noted the Department's plans to resolve significant staffing issues within Social Care though the implementation of a detailed recruitment and retention strategy. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified social workers had been a national issue and the Director confirmed that the Department would work to address this locally by reviewing pay scales, reconsidering caseloads, and adapting working environments. Members were pleased to hear about a social work apprenticeship scheme for employees of the Children's Social Care and Children and Family Wellbeing Service noting that the first cohort of apprentices would qualify in autumn 2022. Members were assured that a review of capacity within the Departments business support service had taken place to ensure that performance, in terms of case review meetings being conducted on time, could be improved.

- iii. The Director reported that the percentage of children becoming subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPPS) for a second or subsequent time continued to be a significant area of focus for the Department. Performance had declined in this area for a number of reasons, but most significantly as a result of Covid and the lack of external support (including access to health services and schools) for children and families during that period. Despite the increase in repeat plans, Members noted that a review by the Department had shown that in the majority of cases, the timescales between plans were in excess of two years.
- iv. In response to questions raised, the Director advised that regular audits were being conducted to understand themes around the circumstances leading to repeat CPPs and these had so far shown that substance abuse, parental mental health problems and domestic abuse remained key factors. Members were pleased to hear that the Department had provided additional training to staff around these issues. The Director also reported that the implementation of the new Domestic Abuse toolkit would aim to strengthen exit arrangements from CPPs, thus reducing the risk of repeat plans, where domestic abuse was a factor.
- v. In response to a question raised, it was noted that the refreshed High Needs Development Plan aimed to ensure that the best services were being made available to children and that individual SEND needs were being met. It was not yet known what affect this might have on wider performance targets, but some impact was expected (for example, the Plan may reduce EHC plan numbers if some children's needs could be appropriately met without such a plan having to be put in place).
- vi. Members noted that a detailed report would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting in September on SEND and this would include an update on the Department's High Needs Development Plan, progress towards SEND system improvements, and an overview of how the financial challenges in this area were being addressed.

Mr. M. Hunt CC commended the work of the Department and thanked the Director of Children and Family Services for facilitating a visit to the Loughborough Early Years Centre.

RESOLVED

- (a) That the update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period to March 2022 (Quarter 4) be noted.
- (b) That the Director of Children and Family Services be requested to provide Members of the Committee with details of the current number of outstanding assessments for EHC Plans for those children transitioning to junior or secondary school in September 2022.
- (c) That it be noted that a report would be presented at the next meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September on SEND and this would include an update on the Department's High Needs Development Plan, progress towards SEND system improvements, and an overview of how the financial challenges in this area were being addressed.

11. Impact of Covid-19.

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children and Family Services on the Impact of Covid-19 with an overview of how the pandemic had and continued to impact key aspects of service delivery across the Children and Family Services Department. 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 response to a question regarding the long lasting effects of Covid-19, members noted that the pandemic had posed unprecedented pressures and challenges upon the Department and the children and families it supported. Despite this, all services had continued to operate throughout the period with processes having been quickly adapted to reflect the changing circumstances, guidance and restrictions imposed nationally and locally. The Director reported that the Department had learnt a number of key lessons including the use of technology to enable remote working, the ability to work virtually with families, and improved engagement with young people, parents and carers. The Department would aim to continue to develop services whilst recovering from the effects of Covid-19 recognising that the experience had given rise to some opportunities and improvements for future working practices.
- ii. Members were concerned to note the increase in the number of children representing with more complex needs and the number of older young people coming into care as families struggled to cope and relationships broke down.
- iii. The Department had compared the most recent performance data to that from before the pandemic. Members noted that whilst the number of children requiring support had not increased, there had been an increase in the number of children of all ages presenting with more complex challenges. There had also been an increase in the number of requests for older children to move into social care. It was understood that this had largely been due to challenging relationships at home during periods of lockdown, as well as complex mental health needs. It was recognised that during the pandemic, access to health services and schools had been reduced and also had an effect. The position was being monitored by the Department and its partners.
- iv. There had been difficulties in recruiting foster carers during periods of Covid-19 restrictions. However, members were pleased to note that this had improved in the three months leading up to this report. In response to a question raised, Members noted that there had been no evidence to suggest that the Homes for Ukrainian Refugees scheme had contributed to a decline in applications from potential foster carers. Initial conversations would always be had with members of the public interested in foster caring to ensure this was the best option for them. If not, they would be signposted to another service if another option was deemed to be more appropriate.
- v. Members raised concerns about the number of children with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan who had been adversely affected through discontinuity of support during the pandemic. Members were reassured that the Department had been working with health colleagues to address this as a key priority. Members noted that a quality assurance framework within the EHC process had been introduced and discussions had taken place within parent and carer forums to

ensure that the holistic needs of children were being met and captured in EHC plans or through education settings.

- vi. In response to a questions regarding what would be done to address the widening gap in attainment between disadvantaged and other children in education, Members noted that the Leicestershire Education Excellence Partnership (LEEP) had engaged with schools, the early years sector and government throughout the pandemic to implement priority actions on addressing disadvantage and inequality of opportunity. The Director confirmed that schools were working hard to identify the impact of Covid on each child and offer programmes such as targeted classes, as appropriate, to increase attainment and address specific learning requirements. Supporting the most vulnerable learners and continuing to deliver education and learning interventions to narrow identified gaps in attainment arising from Covid would remain a focus for the Department and schools for some time.

The Director expressed their thanks to all staff within the Department for continuing to deliver services during what had been a very difficult time. They also recognised the strength and resilience of children during the pandemic. The Committee thanked officers for all their hard work throughout the pandemic.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the overview of how COVID-19 had impacted and continued to impact key aspects of service delivery across the Children and Family Services Department be noted.
- (b) That the Committee's thanks be passed on to officers within the Department for all their hard work throughout the pandemic.

12. Leicestershire Music Service.

The Committee considered a presentation of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the work of the Leicester Music service. A copy of the presentation slides is filed with these minutes.

Members welcomed the presentation and were pleased to note the achievements of the children involved.

Arising from the presentation, Members noted the following:

- i. The Leicestershire Music Service offered activities for pupils aged 3-18.
- ii. The Service had re-joined the Department in 2022 after having previously been part of the Council's Traded Services.
- iii. Children could engage with all types of music, including learning to DJ and use SoundCloud, and would have the opportunity to perform within orchestras and bands.
- iv. The key objectives for the Service would be primarily about growth and increasing engagement with both schools and pupils across all activities.

- v. By 2026 the service aimed to increase participation of young people from Leicester and Leicestershire in activities funded by Leicestershire Music to 20%, of which 25% should be from disadvantaged backgrounds. The offer to disadvantaged families and children provided a clear pathway for their involvement with the Leicestershire Music Service and this had been clearly communicated across schools and the wider community. Since the easing of Covid-19 restrictions, the 'Big Band' had performed a concert at Wigston Academy with full support of parents and Leicestershire Music staff. Bands and orchestras had also performed at Holy Trinity Church and would be preparing for the Leicestershire Music Summer festival at De Montfort Hall in June 2022.

The Chairman requested that the presentation provided be circulated to all members of the Council for information and that they be notified of the opportunity to purchase tickets for the Leicestershire Music Summer Festival.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the contents of the presentation on the Leicestershire Music Service be noted and welcomed.
- (b) That a copy of the presentation provided be circulated to all members for information and that they be notified of the opportunity to purchase tickets for the Leicestershire Music Summer Festival.

13. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 6 September 2022 at 2:00 pm.

2.00 - 3.24 pm
07 June 2022

CHAIRMAN