

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 7 November 2023.

PRESENT

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

Mr. M. Frisby CC

Mr. Max Hunt CC

Mr. L. Hadji-Nikolaou CC

Mrs B. Seaton CC

Webcast.

A webcast of the meeting can be viewed [here](#).

29. Minutes of the meeting held on 5 September 2023.

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 September 2023 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

30. Question Time.

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

31. 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).

32. To advise of any other items which the Chairman has decided to take as urgent elsewhere on the agenda.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

33. Declarations of interest in respect of items on the agenda.

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.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

35. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

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

36. Leicestershire's Response to Tackling Children Criminal Exploitation.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which presented an overview of the work and progress of the Child Exploitation, Missing and Modern Slavery Hub. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 8' is filed with these minutes.

Members noted that the Violence Reduction Network (VRN) was led by an officer connected to the Police, who worked across the partnership to identify youth violence and criminal exploitation. The Council worked with the VRN on analysing data to identify emerging themes and to form work in response. This work was replicated across sub-regional networks but also at a local level. The Director agreed to present a report on the work of the VRN at a future meeting of the Committee. The Director of the VRN be invited to attend the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the overview of the work and progress of the Child Exploitation, Missing and Modern Slavery Hub, be noted.
- b) That the Director be requested to present a report on the Violence Reduction Network (VRN) at a future meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and that the Director of the VRN would be invited to attend the meeting.

37. Update on Admissions Service.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on the School Admissions Service's performance for Autumn 2023. The report also provided an overview of recent service improvements and outlined a consultation on its admissions policy and associated arrangements which aimed to improve the admissions process and the parent journey. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- i. In response to a question regarding the proposal to increase the number of school preferences from three to five on the Leicestershire school application form, Members noted that parents would continue to be reminded to make the maximum number of preferences on the form. The Department had run a media campaign regarding this and would continue to issue communications through schools as a reminder for parents. The application form contained instructions for completing it correctly and the Service would continue to monitor where parents had not filled it in correctly.
- ii. In response to concern that some children had been placed in schools which were a significant distance from their home, the Director acknowledged that this had been the case for some children. However, this would usually have been the case where a mid-term application had been received and there was a lack of availability within the closest school. Any application received after 31 October

would be treated as a mid-term application; this included when families moved into the County. In these cases, the Department would allocate a child with a place at the closest school with available places, and in some cases, this school could be some distance from the child's home. Members noted that the Council had a statutory obligation to ensure that children in Leicestershire had access to education and members were assured that it had enough places to facilitate this. The Council could provide transport assistance to support children travelling more than two miles to a primary school or more than three miles to a secondary school, subject to an eligibility assessment. Members were assured that the Service worked closely with schools on admissions and negotiated with academies on school places. However, it was acknowledged academies were responsible for deciding their own number of places.

- iii. Members noted that parents could contact the Council's School Admissions Service which could provide advice on waiting list options for phased rounds, support with the right to appeal, and discuss the option for elective home education. The Department would continue to advise parents to apply for a school place for their child. If a parent decided to electively home educate their child, the Department would support the parent with this discussion, but no resources would be made available.
- iv. The Council had a positive relationship with Admissions Service at Leicester City Council. Members noted that there were popular schools in the County which attracted applications from families who lived in the city area. Where a child was allocated with a place at a county school, the child's siblings would then also be likely to be offered a place at that school, as sibling groups were a high criterion within admissions criteria. The Council was prohibited from discriminating or prejudicing children from outside of catchment areas and would continue to deal with applications on a case by case basis.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the update on the admissions service, including a full performance breakdown of the year's outcomes, service improvements and a consultation on the Council's Admissions Policy, be noted.
- b) That the views expressed by Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be reported to Cabinet on 28 February 2024.

38. Quarter 2 2023/24 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 July to September 2023 (quarter 2). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were raised:

- i. In response to a question regarding the percentage of pupils educated in Good or Outstanding schools, members noted that some inspections had been delayed over the Covid pandemic, meaning that some Outstanding schools did not receive an inspection some time. There had also been a change to inspection processes.

The Director assured members that the management team would continue to closely monitor this data.

- ii. Members noted that the 101.2 percent increase in the number of three-year-olds who took up their Funded Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) in the previous term, as cited in the report, reflected an oversubscription for FEEE compared to the number of children that the Department had expected to take up the offer.
- iii. In response to concern regarding the number of children who were Electively Home Educated (EHE), members noted that this group included those children where EHE had been a choice rather than those where there was a medical reason. The Director acknowledged that the increase was a concern, and that EHE primary students are likely to be EHE during secondary years also, potentially meaning that they could never have access to school. The Department would continue to engage with parents on the decision to EHE children.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period July to September 2023 (quarter 2), be noted.

39. The Role of the Local Authority Regarding Multi Academy Trusts.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the legislative role of local authorities in education, specifically with Academies. The report set out how these duties are discharged by the Children and Family Services Department. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

In introducing the report, the Director stated that although the report had not overtly amplified the role of the Leicester Diocesan Board of Education in Church of England schools, their role was embedded within the detail of the report. The Department would continue to work with the Leicester Diocesan Board of Education on planning, commissioning and quality assurance; in challenging schools and, where appropriate, in commissioning support and, if necessary, to intervene in management and governance. If the Department had a concern about a school's performance, standards, management or governance, safety, or a safeguarding concern, it would raise them directly with the Leicester Diocesan Board of Education. At the request of the Chairman, the Director agreed to present a report outlining the relationship between Leicestershire County Council and the Leicester Diocesan Board of Education, in relation to education, at a future meeting.

A member raised concern with academy trusts in relation to land ownership, catchment area, and admissions. The Lead Member for Children and Families highlighted that it was possible to demonstrate some positives of academisation, as they could often offer students a different level of variety than the local authority could.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the overview of the legislative role of local authorities in education, specifically with regard to academies, and how these duties are discharged by the Children and Family Services Department, be noted.

- b) That the Director be requested to present a report outlining the relationship between the Leicestershire County Council and the Leicester Diocesan Board of Education, in relation to education, at a future meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

40. Leicestershire Fostering Agency Statutory Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which presented an overview of the activity of the Fostering Service for the period 2022 -2023. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

Members noted that the Service would continue to target individuals from all backgrounds to match the needs of children and welcomed all applications.

The Lead Member for Children and Families praised the Service and highlighted that carers were provided with a good level of training and support. Those interested in fostering were encouraged to contact the Service and to attend a fostering event. The Director agreed circulate the Annual Report, and additional information on the Service, to all Elected Members.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the overview of the activity of the Fostering Service for the period 2022 - 2023, be noted.
- b) That the Director agreed to circulate the Leicestershire Fostering Service Annual Report 2022-2023 to all Elected Members.

41. 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 Adoption Agency from March 2022 to March 2023. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 13' is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families praised the work of the Service and the key achievements it had made. The Director agreed circulate the Annual Report to all Elected Members.

RESOLVED:

- c) That the overview of the activity of the Adoption Agency for the period March 2022 – March 2023, be noted.
- d) That the Director agreed to circulate the Leicestershire Adoption Service Annual Report 2022-2023 to all Elected Members.

42. Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2022/23.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which presented the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer with regard to children in care. The report evaluated the extent to which Leicestershire County Council had fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 13' is filed with these minutes.

In response to a question regarding the number of looked after children and the sufficiency of homes available, the Director advised that it had sometimes been challenging to find the correct home and carer to meet the complex needs of some children. Members were assured that the Children's Innovation Partnership, in conjunction with Barnardo's, as well as work to recruit and retain foster carers, would aim to improve this position.

The Lead Member for Children and Families highlighted the important work carried out by the Independent Reviewing Officers in ensuring that children were provided with a good level of support.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer with regard to children in care, and the extent to which Leicestershire County Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023, be noted.

43. Annual Report of the Virtual School 2022/23.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Families which provided an overview of work and data of the Virtual School for the academic year 2022-2023. This report is statutory and requires publishing on the County Council's website. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 15' is filed with these minutes.

The Lead Member for Children and Families highlighted that the virtual school continued to deliver the Service well, alongside a limited budget and a small team, to support looked after children in Leicestershire.

RESOLVED:

That the overview of work and data of the Virtual School for the academic year 2022-2023, be noted.

44. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Tuesday 23 January at 14:00.