

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

17 January 2024 – At a meeting of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held at 10.30 am at County Hall, Chichester, PO19 1RQ.

Present: Cllr Linehan (Chairman)

Cllr Baldwin	Cllr Evans	Mr Cristin
Cllr Burgess	Cllr McGregor	Mr Lloyd
Cllr Cherry	Cllr Mercer	Mrs Coles, joined 11am
Cllr Cornell	Cllr Smith	
Cllr Dabell	Cllr Sparkes	

Apologies were received from Cllr Hall and Mrs Oldroyd

Also in attendance: Cllr Russell

33. Declarations of Interests

33.1 In accordance with the County council's code of conduct the following declarations were made:

33.2 Cllr Burgess declared a personal interest as a member of Crawley Borough Council, under agenda item no 6.

33.3 Cllr Cherry declared a personal interest as being a Governor at the Burgess Hill Academy, and also a leader of Burgess Hill Town Council, under agenda item no 6.

33.4 Cllr Cornell declared a personal interest as governor at Manor Green College in Crawley, under agenda item no 6.

33.5 Cllr Dabell declared a personal interest as his daughter is the headteacher of Baldwins Hill Primary School in East Grinstead, under agenda item no 6.

33.6 Cllr Mercer declared a personal interest as a governor of St Andrews, Nuthurst, and the chair of the Orchard Hill College Academy Trust, which has Brantridge School in West Sussex, and as Cabinet Member for Horsham District Council under agenda item no 6.

33.7 Cllr Sparkes declared a personal interest as member of Worthing Borough Council, under agenda item no 6.

34. Urgent Matters

34.1 No urgent matters were raised.

35. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee

35.1 A member said that whilst the minutes were accurate they did not reflect the robust debate on the issue of SEND. The Chairman agreed that some wording be added to this effect.

35.2 Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2023 be approved as a correct record with the above amendment, and that they be signed by the Chairman.

36. Responses to Recommendations

36.1 Resolved – That the Committee notes the responses to the recommendations provided from recent meetings but asked that:

36.2 The first full item on page 14 be dealt with as two distinct items.

36.3 The survey shared by the Parent Carer's Forum be reviewed by the Business Planning Group for consideration as to whether it should be part of the scrutiny of the SEND Improvement Plan.

36.4 The Committee be reassured that lobbying of Government on funding continues and that they be kept updated.

36.5 An update be provided to the Committee on support for young carers.

37. Children's Social Care Quality Assurance

37.1 The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Learning and Skills, Cllr Russell, introduced the report highlighting that it was the latest report to focus on actions since the full Ofsted inspection and it outlined the commitment, focus and drive to get the service on to a good grading and then, in time, outstanding, through the implementation of the Continuous Practice Improvement Plan.

37.2 The members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

37.3 Officers agreed to reflect the work by the scrutiny committee in the governance process in future reports. It was highlighted that the work was also externally scrutinised by the Department for Education (DfE) who ask very similar questions to the Committee.

37.4 Consistency is the biggest challenge around compliance and the service provided. A key area for focus is increasing the voice of the child and the family, moving towards family feedback. Feedback from the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leaver's Advisory Board (CLAB) had led to a change in the language used and would feed into future quality assurance audit activity.

37.5 Initially the audits looked at compliance and have now moved on to looking at the quality of assessments, with the number of audits increased to 50 randomly selected cases a month. The Ofsted framework tool is used for gradings. The results are reviewed by the Performance and Assurance Action Board, team meetings, directorate leadership meetings

and key themes are shared with stakeholders at multi-agency meetings. Any audit graded as Inadequate is moderated by a head of service and a reflective conversation takes place with teams within five working days. The case will be re-audited after six weeks (previously 12 weeks) to ensure purposeful change is happening. The auditor reviews the statutory documentation, additional information collected on a child's record, the journey over the last six months, as well as a framework of questions and other tools, such as the Bright Spots survey, to gather information.

37.6 The most common theme amongst **complaints** received was communication with families. This was being worked on to ensure that families have contact details for social workers and embedded co-ordinators. Customers can often be happy that work is progressing, but the system shows a case as overdue because the final response letter has not been sent. Overdue responses are escalated to the heads of service to understand why there has been a delay or support a response being sent.

37.7 Whilst previously audits had been regarded with some suspicion by staff, a culture change within the service had meant they were now regarded as a positive process and that was helping with staff recruitment and retention, slowing down turnover in front facing social worker teams and had become part of the package to staff.

37.8 Children are prepared for the Bright Spots Survey through information shared by schools, social workers and PAs. Support from an independent person can be given to children who need it to complete the survey. The survey also offers children the opportunity to speak to someone in the Voice and Participation team. Responses to the Bright Spot surveys are improving with the recent survey for Care Leavers reaching a response rate of over 50%. Responses are reviewed within 24 hours and if there are causes of concern they are actioned according to normal processes and procedures.

37.9 Children whose cases progress to Child Protection Conferences are made aware that they have the option to have an advocate with them by the service. To date every child who had asked for an advocate had received one. Regular communication exists with the advocacy team, with quarterly meetings taking place to work on improving the uptake of advocates.

37.10 Some members questioned whether the report was balanced enough to really allow the Committee to identify where issues were occurring. Officers responded that it was a full report with positives and negatives, and transparency about areas of continued work.

37.11 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Welcomes the quality assurance process and how this is embedded within the service as it moves from compliance to quality.
2. Asks that reference is made to member scrutiny as part of the quality assurance process and that this is included in future reports.

3. Recognises the continued progress to increase the number of audit outcomes rated as good and outstanding, and that this is an ongoing process and key part of the continued practice improvement.
4. Notes the positive response to the Care Leavers Bright Spots survey and the work with the advocacy service to capture the voice of children, young people and families to make improvements to our quality of practice.
5. Welcomes the increase in complaint response times at the end of Quarter 4.
6. Notes the comments made around the balance of scrutiny reports to ensure both successes and areas of development are clearly set out.

38. School Place Planning across West Sussex

38.1 The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Learning and Skills, Cllr Russell, introduced the report highlighting the challenges in forecasting requirement for sufficient school places impacted by fluctuating birth rates, shifts in parental preference, academy schools setting their admissions levels, new housing developments moving areas of habitation, migration and delays in the building of new schools.

38.2 The members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

38.3 The impact of previous reviews of school provision had not been assessed although they were overseen by Ofsted and there had been no indication that arrangements had been inappropriate. A member was concerned that the qualitative outcomes of organisational changes, in terms of the experience of children and attainment, is not looked at.

38.4 Committee members asked officers to ensure there were clear, widely promoted, communications for parents and pupils included in the Planning School Places document and on the County Council website, particularly for areas where it was known there was pressure on school places and pupils might not get any of their preferred options, including clear information around the transport implications of attending a school further away. The challenges in Southwater area last year and the increase in a preference for co-educational places was acknowledged. Schools and the County Council have encouraged parents and carers to visit a wider number of schools to see what they could offer their child.

38.5 Committee members also felt that local county councillors should be informed of any areas where high numbers of parental preferences were not met before school places were issued. They felt briefings by district and borough areas would be useful. Officers advised that there had been briefings to the County Local Committees in previous years and officers would be happy to provide briefings at meetings of a similar format.

Members also wanted to be more involved at an earlier stage of the Planning School Places process so that they could feed in local knowledge.

38.6 Members felt that those who had not received any of their preference school places should be given the priority for an independent appeal of the decision before those who had been given a chosen preference option but still chose to appeal. Officers agreed to investigate the legal implications of this request.

38.7 Members asked for more information on alternative provision to be provided in the document to confirm if there are sufficient placements and if not, how long a pupil might need to wait for a placement. **Action:** Officers agreed to supply some further information to the Committee on how this experience might be for a family and what resilience is built into the provision.

38.8 Members were assured that accurate information was held on children who elected to be home educated. Children missing from school are regularly monitored and could lead to elective home education (EHE) arrangements being established.

38.9 The County Council does not hold information on how many children in West Sussex attend independent schools. Officers were reviewing the potential impact of the Government proposal to remove tax incentives to independent school provision. However, in the past there had not been an influx of pupils coming to the local education authority when an independent school closed, as parents tended to relocate their students to other independent schools. The County Council has had experience in dealing with unexpected influxes of pupils, such as when families are displaced from elsewhere in the world, and the number of surplus school places held across the county gives flexibility to place pupils.

38.10 Members asked that in areas where there were expected to be applications in excess of planned admission numbers, such as Adur, that information be made available for parents covering areas such as travel costs. Officers confirmed they had held information sessions for families in the Shoreham area and were committed to holding more to work with the secondary schools to increase the amount of information available to parents. Officers also confirmed that conversations were taking place with two schools in the Adur area on how to increase the number of places available. A study is underway with the schools and see if the expansion of those schools is something the County Council would wish to explore, including the funding of capital for the costs of the provision. The outcome of the feasibility study is expected in the spring.

38.11 Members expressed concern that, with growing numbers of academy schools in the county, who were in control of their own admission numbers, that the County Council had fewer negotiating powers when it came to creating more school places. Members were reassured that lobbying of Government on this issue was taking place. The County Council would also continue to have dialogue with all schools on school places and particular pressure areas.

38.12 Members were reassured that officers regularly reviewed district and borough council local plans and areas of housing development when planning school places. It was acknowledged that the development of housing on the edge of one district or borough could impact on the demand for school places in another. When there were delays in the development of new schools the County Council has responsibility to mitigate the delay in delivery.

38.13 Members requested that there be greater clarity on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) provision and future planning with the document.

38.14 The Chairman had further questions but would put them in writing to the officers. It was agreed that the responses to those questions would be shared with the Committee and on the public record.

38.15 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Highlights the importance of getting school place planning right, and the educational and social impact the allocated school can have on children and their families.
2. Raises the importance of having clear communication for parents and families particularly in areas where there are pressures on school places. The Committee asks that there is a clear plan in place for this, including clear information around transport implications, and that this is set out in the Planning School Places document and on the website.
3. Asks that there is further and more detailed information on SEND provision within the Planning School Places document.
4. Asks that County Councillor engagement is more robust and would welcome consultation with members on a district and borough level to be able to feed into the school place planning process.
5. Raises the importance of resilience within school place planning and asks that the impacts of wider pressures and risks, and how these will be managed are more clearly set out in the Planning School Places report.
6. Asks the service to explore if appeals hearings for those who do not gain one of their first 3 school preferences could be prioritised and if this would benefit those families.
7. Recognises the challenge of increasing numbers of schools becoming academies on the County Council's influence on school place planning and welcomes the continued lobbying of Government to highlight the risk around this.

39. Work Programme Planning and Possible items for Future Scrutiny

39.1 The Committee discussed the Work Programme, and it was agreed to ask the Business Planning Group to:

39.2 Review progress on the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing of Children and Young People.

39.3 Review the decision on the consultation on the relocation of Jessie Younghusband Primary School, the expansion of St Anthony's School and proposed Catchment Area Changes.

40. Requests for Call-In

40.1 There had been no requests for call-in to the Scrutiny Committee within its constitutional remit since the date of the last meeting.

41. Date of Next Meeting

41.1 The next meeting would be held on 28 February 2024 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at 1.00 pm

Chairman