

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE POLICY AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD, ON THURSDAY
6 DECEMBER 2012**

County Councillors present:

T Chapman (Chairman)
S Barker (Vice-Chairman)
A Brown
R Callender
J Deakin
I Grundy

E Hart
T Higgins (Vice-Chairman)
S Hillier
D Morris
J Young

Non-Elected Voting Members present:

Mr R Carson
Mr S Geddes

Rev R Jordan

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Graham Redgwell Governance Officer
Matthew Waldie Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 10.00 am.

1. Apologies and Substitutions

The Committee Officer reported the receipt of the following apologies:

Apologies	Substitutes
Cllr J Baugh	
Cllr L Mead	
Cllr R Pearson	
Cllr T Sargent	

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Higgins declared that she is on the management committee of Stepping Stones, a nursery for Special Needs children in Colchester. Councillor Callender declared that he has a daughter working in Social Care in Suffolk. Both were personal interests.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Children and Young People Policy and Scrutiny Committee held on 1 November 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. Matters Arising

The Chairman summarised discussions she had had with officers regarding the possible attendance of some young people at the meeting in March 2013.

5. School Attendance in Essex

Introduction

Members received report CYP/23/12, providing background information on and Duties and Responsibilities in respect of School attendance in Essex. The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Tim Coulson, Director for Education and Learning, and Julie Weddell, County Manager, Education Welfare, SA & CE SIEY.

Mr Coulson pointed out there were three main levels to be addressed when considering this issue:

- i) When it is appropriate for a child to be “too ill” to attend school
- ii) What makes a child want to go to school (the biggest area)
- iii) Those children with ongoing attendance problems – “persistent absentees”. This is the toughest and the most important area, as this will substantially impact on their school career and possibly the course of their entire life.

He added that recent changes had led to a shift in responsibility more towards schools themselves. This has had a significant impact on the Education Welfare Service (EWS) at the County Council, reducing its resources but leaving it with the most punitive areas. The authority to declare an absence as unauthorised remains with the individual school.

Discussion

Officers responded to points raised by Members:

- Schools’ approaches vary – some are very rigid on attendance issues, while others use more discretion. What differentiates between schools the most is how they deal with time taken off for family holidays
- It is now up to each school on how it allocates resources in respect of following up on attendance, so it is hard for the Council to gauge how needs are being matched to attendance
- There is a correlation between poor attendance levels and a lack of attainment
- The EWS now charges for the provision of its services, but all schools are offered a free termly consultation – it is for schools to decide whether to take up this offer
- Many schools currently operate on a “pay-as-you-go” basis, which presents EWS with resourcing problems. The intention is to get schools to subscribe to these services in future. Some schools do employ an EWO direct
- The raising of awareness with schools and parents of the importance of good attendance (by EWOs attending meetings with parents, for example) has helped reduce unauthorised absences significantly

- The monies received from Penalty Notices are used for the administration of the scheme; the Council is not allowed to “profit” from these fines. About 30% of the Notices are not paid, so prosecution for non-payment is needed. No comparison with other authorities was available at the meeting and officers undertook to provide appropriate figures after the meeting
- In response to concern expressed, that some parents were not aware of their responsibility under the law, it was pointed out that schools had appropriate materials. It had been suggested that ECC should issue something to all parents
- Home school agreements, when used, can be very helpful, although the most important element of these was the relationship with the parents that these engendered. A school showing commitment to engaging with parents and the local community would often succeed in lowering absenteeism
- It was noted that a private company has been authorised to issue penalty notices in respect of a limited number of schools in the Colchester area. Once the Notices had been issued, any follow-up has to be done by council officers. Concern was expressed at this; this arrangement seemed not to reduce the workload but was likely to create more problems. The accreditation of such a company was carried out by the Police. The Council would need to monitor performance carefully, to ensure any such organisation was doing its job well, and to inform the Police if it was not
- If a child is missing school because he/she is having to care for a parent or sibling, an EWO will make an assessment of the situation, to see if other resources need to be employed
- The EWS can provide a late gate attendance scheme, to assist schools in dealing with those pupils that are consistently late for school. Although the DfE recommends closing the Register half an hour after the registration period ends, each school has to set its own policy.
- Mr Coulson confirmed that he would be contacting the new Police Commissioner in the near future, to discuss the Police role in this subject.

The Chairman thanked officers for their contribution and the Committee **Agreed** that:

- i) A report should come to the scrutiny meeting on 7 February 2013 detailing data on schools generally but drawing attention in particular to those which have relatively high or low rates of attendance compared to the county average (and, if known, the reasons for this).
- ii) Details of numbers of penalty notices and prosecutions for each Local Authority in 2011/12 (so that these can be compared to the data shown for Essex in the agenda item) should be provided for Members after the meeting

6. Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

Introduction

Members received report CYP/22/12, on Special Educational Needs and Disability in Essex. Tim Coulson, Director for Education and Learning, introduced the item.

He drew several points to Members' attention.

- This has moved across into Councillor Castle's portfolio. He hopes that the Committee will get involved in the policy making process
- The number of children in Essex with special needs is high in comparison with the rest of the country.
- The Government is bringing in a new, more holistic approach in 2014 (with Education, Health and Care Plans) with more details to follow before it will be clear what impact this will have
- Two particular issues are being addressed – the first concerns resources, seeing if a child needs to go to SEN; the second looks at the sending of children outside the County
- One approach will be to see if funds currently being used to pay for these services out of County can be used to build further specialist provision in Essex. The colocation of special and mainstream schools can be effective, and there is often much to commend having greater numbers of those with special needs actually in mainstream education. Those with autism provide a good case in point, as they can be provided for in mainstream schools with extra facilities. However, it is not easy to find schools that are willing to take on these extra responsibilities
- An important element of the new legislation is "the local offer", which seeks to make it clear to parents just what is available, and also what they themselves can do. When a child is diagnosed early on in life, this can be substantial, although it is less the case when diagnosis is delayed. One area that has improved in recent years is diagnosis of dyslexia
- Members noted the specific proposals to upgrade the Market Fields premises

Discussion

Members raised some issues, to which Mr Coulson responded.

- Although records are kept on children from birth, the system struggles in the transition for some when children get to school. Evidence suggests that a greater proportion of Essex children are identified as having special needs than in other authorities. This indicates that Essex should be providing better facilities within mainstream schools, and looking at better ways of integrating such children into mainstream education. There is however a recognised national rise in diagnosed cases of autism
- All authorities take children from other authorities and Essex does not have a disproportionately high number of its children being educated out of county
- There is a clear rise in special needs diagnosis when children start secondary school. This implies either that primary schools do not recognise these needs, or that secondary schools cannot deal with these needs within their existing structure/facilities/modus operandi. It was

noted that children's centres are playing an increasingly important role in working with those with the greatest needs

- With regard to reading difficulties, children going to secondary school without being able to read are stigmatised and will never thrive. In primary schools, special volunteer reading groups operate to assist those with difficulties; a similar approach at secondary level could be of great benefit. Another approach might be the creation of an intermediary school, which concentrates on core skills
- ADHD, HDD and Aspergers are other important areas of need but are not mentioned in the paper
- It may often be difficult for some children to endure the constant presence of an adult; research suggests such support is limited in its educational benefits, but it does help the school integrate and deal with the child
- The role of parents is very important, but they are not necessarily in a good position, with their clear emotional involvement. This creates added pressure on those working with them, who need to maintain a professional stance
- One suggestion was that Members needed further information and training and should take part in a workshop centred on this, similar to the one conducted relating to safeguarding.

It was **Agreed** that a Task and Finish Group should be set up, to consider issues around children with special needs. The membership will be Councillor Higgins as chairman, Councillors Hillier and Morris, and the Rev. Jordan. The Governance Officer will identify a number of issues the Group may wish to address, based on the discussion at this and previous Committee meetings, and draw up a scoping document. It was also agreed that the Group should begin work without delay and report back to this Committee from time to time.

7. Academic results in Essex

Members received an oral report from Tim Coulson, Director for Education and Learning.

Full results from the summer 2012 examinations were expected soon: Primary figures later in the month and Secondary ones in January. He intended to bring a full report to the Committee in February, with substantial data.

As far as Ofsted ratings were concerned, 61% of Essex primary schools were in the middle category. 20 primary schools were "inadequate" – and all of these, from now on, would be expected to convert to academies, with a strong sponsor. 150 schools "required improvement" (formerly called "satisfactory"). These schools will be told that change will be required, with encouragement that they convert to academies, again linking with a stronger partner school.

The specific issue of Leadership was raised. There has been work done – Essex encourages aspiring senior managers to take the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) – but there are a large number of ageing head teachers, and so a large gap is likely in a few years' time. Getting the balance right in how to deal with weak management is difficult. In the past 12

months, Essex has exercised its powers of intervention 12 times and removed the governing body on 4 occasions. Mr Coulson pointed out that there are some very good schools across the County, but there is a genuine inequity as to whether a child will actually attend one or not. Raising the standard of schools generally remains a high priority.

The Chairman thanked Mr Coulson for his contribution and looked forward to his comprehensive report in the new year.

8. Forward Look

The agenda items already agreed by the Committee for the next two meetings were noted.

For January 2013 it was agreed that there would be two substantial items:

- Families with Complex Needs
- Children's Centres;

plus an update on the work of the Families Safeguarding Sub-Committee.

For February 2013 it was agreed that there would be two substantial items:

- Domestic Violence
- Children's Partnership Review;

plus a full report on the academic results in 2012 and an update on school attendance.

9. Issues in Basildon Hospital

- a) It was noted that the CQC has been looking into two incidents at Basildon Hospital involving children, where one had died. The Essex HOSC and the Safeguarding Board are both following events and, in these circumstances, the Committee agreed that it should take no action on this at present and should await the findings of these other bodies.
- b) Members would be provided with an update (not as an agenda item) in respect of the development of the Basildon Academy.

10. Date of next meeting

It was suggested that the next meeting should be rescheduled to a later date in January, with the new date to be confirmed after the meeting. *[Meeting subsequently moved to Monday 7 January, at 10.00 am, Committee Room 1. Pre-meeting for Members only at 9.30 am.]*

The meeting closed at 12.15 pm.

Chairman