
Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.00am in Committee Room 1 County Hall, Chelmsford, CM1 1QH on Thursday, 11 July 2019

Present:

County Councillors:

J Chandler (Chairman)
M Buckley (substitute)
M Durham (substitute)
B Egan
J Moran (substitute)
P May
M McEwan
R Pratt
C Souter
A Turrell (substitute)

Sharon Westfield de Cortez from Healthwatch Essex and Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer, were also present throughout.

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report on Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received and noted.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Baker, Butland, Deakin (for whom Councillor Turrell substituted), Guglielmi (for whom Councillor Durham substituted), Henry (for whom Councillor Buckley substituted), Lumley, Reid and Weston (for whom Councillor Moran substituted and Richard Carson, Educational Co-optee.

Declarations of interest:

Cllr Pratt - code interest - chair of board of governors.

Cllr May - code interest - school governor.

Both Councillors considered that this did not prejudice their consideration of the public interest and to speak on the matters on the agenda.

2. Minutes

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 27 June 2019 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public.

4. Special Educational Needs

The Committee considered report PAF/17/19.

The County Council had completed a formal public consultation on principles, values and vision for future SEN service provision. Ralph Holloway, Head of SEND Strategy and Innovation, joined the meeting to introduce the update and outline the feedback received.

During the discussion the following was highlighted or acknowledged:

- Growth in SEN demand had been greater than general growth in school pupil nos. Lifelong outcomes for those with SEN are poor.
- The County Council was looking to improve outcomes for those with SEN and communications needed to be clear and framed to demonstrate that there would be continuing support and that parents can have a meaningful input.
- A desired outcome from the review was to encourage a concept of a school-led system to share resource and challenges rather than just one school having to struggle on its own with an issue.
- An overriding message was that respondents wanted the SEN population to be integrated into the community and not be separate.
- There had been some concerns raised during the consultation that there was to be the creation of a two-tier system and that SEN pupils were going to be moved out of main stream schools.
- The intention was that the new service worked more closely with schools and the school effectiveness team to further support the aspirations of SEN pupils.
- Health and wellbeing and emotional support had been prioritised by respondents with choice paramount.
- Mr Holloway had attended meetings of SEN co-ordinators to also get their views - a significant proportion of them felt threatened and under resourced.
- Engagement had started with groups of parents to entice young people with autism to get back into mainstream education.
- SEN has not really benefitted in past from developer contributions but have started now. Will be looking as part of ten-year planning/forecasting.
- The County Council were working more closely with planning authorities to include provision for autism friendly environments in future plans. Generally, the feedback from existing schools was that

the bigger challenge was meeting care needs not the lack of physical space.

- Four new specialist schools were planned in Essex. With the development of garden communities further work would be required to predict the location of the future SEN population.
- There was a desire to make the Essex Family Forum more representative of the population. The service also wanted to use more direct engagement with parents and schools. Some special schools had already facilitated meetings with parents.
- The service would continue to consult with clusters of schools as it was challenging to engage with all 500 plus schools in Essex on an individual basis.
- The new strategy would need to look at existing schools and making them fit for purpose as well as developing specialist schools.
- Members questioned whether small rural schools would be particularly limited on how many SEN pupils can be supported and that they did not see this specifically addressed in the strategy. It was highlighted that there was a minor works capital programme which would fund reasonable adjustments to include a child.

Conclusion

The Chairman thanked Mr Holloway for the update, noted that further engagement work was planned during the Autumn Term on the new SEND structure and action plan and, accordingly, suggested that the Committee should be further updated at its November meeting.

5. Education update

At the invitation of the Chairman, Councillor Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member – Education and Skills, and Clare Kershaw, Director – Education, joined the meeting to provide an education portfolio update framed around six advance questions that had been submitted.

School readiness

- There were a number of actions that contributed to improving school readiness but there was no one answer or action.
- The relationship with the early years sector was critical. It was recognised that the sector was very diverse and included charities and voluntary bodies. Further work was probably required to ensure consistency and adequacy of provision. ECC work would start to better define expectations of the impact of interventions at certain ages with the sector - articulating skills, independence, language

and communication – and a further report on this would be provided to the Committee in due course. **Action: Clare Kershaw**

- The development of the Children and Families Wellbeing Service provided by Virgin Care was an important part of preparing children for school and there were contractual key performance indicators in the contract re: school readiness.

Primary/ secondary school transitions and processes

- A number of school partnerships had been established across Essex including multi academy trusts (cross phase -primary and secondary school level) to help further improve and support transitions.
- The first 'all-through' school had now opened. There was some evidence that if one can minimise the number of points of transition then outcomes were likely to be better.
- It was acknowledged that some secondary schools were not smoothly linking with and advancing an enhanced primary school curriculum. Further national funding had been secured to assist greater focus on the teaching of reading skills and encouraging reading to be enjoyable – this was being primarily aimed at primary schools although some secondary schools had also accessed it. Evaluation of the programme was being finalised. It was thought that pupils had been reading just enough to get 'scaffolded' through primary school education and focussing just on passing exams but fluency of reading comes with enjoyment of reading.

Missing education:

- Approximately 2,300 children were being home schooled in Essex and it was suspected there could be others not currently recorded. It was stressed that the quality of home education varied considerably. Stronger legislation was needed to empower local authorities to have more oversight and monitoring powers than those held at present. A cross party group had been established with additional co-opted educational representatives to review issues around missing children and home educated children. **Action: a further update would be provided to the Committee in due course.**

Gangs and knife crime

- Schools were being encouraged to take a stronger lead in confronting negative gang culture and identifying those most at risk. This was particularly important as there was some correlation between this and the level of exclusions.

- The police were working with some schools where vulnerable at-risk children had been identified.
- Anecdotal evidence was given that some schools may only be recording knife crime if it actually leads to an exclusion.
- Healthy Schools Programmes were operating in schools but members questioned how other programmes (which might be commissioned by individual schools) that might address obesity, anxiety, etc and reduce vulnerability actually linked together.
Action: Clare Kershaw agreed to review this further and how there could be greater promotion of resilience and report back to a future meeting.

Preparation for Further Education and employment:

- It was felt that a lot done in schools could be introspective and that more could be done to better prepare pupils leaving school for further education or employment.

Demand for school places

- Sophisticated forecasting was undertaken to inform a 10-year plan which was updated annually to support school places planning although it could never be precise science. Accurate forecasting was made more challenging with population migration. Extra short-term provision could be added in schools to accommodate spikes in demand.
- There was ongoing work with dioceses to look at whether declines in school numbers in some smaller (predominantly rural) schools was a short-term phenomenon and would reverse or a longer-term issue needing further assessment of the sustainability of the school.
- Planning for school places whilst offering parental preference remained a tension in the system requiring a delicate balance at times.
- There was some anecdotal evidence of children being withdrawn from mainstream schooling to go to private preparatory schools at 10 and 13 in the Uttlesford – it was not clear if this was an issue in other areas.
- Sometimes there was not always enough local population expansion to justify new builds (especially for secondary schools) and there needed to be flexibility in school places planning to be able to add capacity to existing sites as well.
- Although SEN pupils comprised 4% (and rising) of the student population, there was not any automatic arrangement for funding a

proportionate amount of SEN specific provision through developer contributions.

Conclusion:

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Clare Kershaw for their attendance, noting that further updates had been agreed on:

- (i) the work of a cross party group looking at children missing education;
- (ii) further defining the expectations of interventions by the Early Years' Sector; and
- (iii) ensuring that the various wellbeing programmes operating in schools all linked-up and how personal resilience was being promoted in schools.

6. Work Programme

The Committee considered and noted report PAF/19/19.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would be on Thursday 12 September 2019.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.20pm.

Chairman