
Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 9.30am on Wednesday, 14 December 2022 in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Chelmsford.

Present:

County Councillors:

Cllr Ray Gooding (Chairman)
Cllr Susan Barker
Cllr Mark Durham
Cllr Jane Fleming
Cllr Marie Goldman
Cllr Ian Grundy
Cllr Carlo Guglielmi (Vice Chairman)
Cllr Peter May
Cllr Aidan McGurran
Cllr Ross Playle
Cllr Laureen Shaw

Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer, and Gemma Bint, Democratic Services Officer were also present.

The following joined remotely via Zoom:

Cllr June Lumley
Cllr Wendy Stamp
Sharon Westfield De Cortez (Healthwatch Essex)

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

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

- Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors June Lumley and Wendy Stamp and Sharon Westfield De Cortez from Healthwatch Essex, all of whom however joined the meeting instead via Zoom.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2022 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendments:

- Minute 4 – The last sentence under bullet point (iii) which stated ‘However, it also depended on how ‘carer’ was defined’ to be deleted.
- Minute 4, third bullet point under conclusion replace ‘may be’ with ‘will be’ and also to be reflected in Matters Arising Report

3 Questions from the public

There were none.

4 Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022-2027: End of Year One Update

The Committee considered report PAF/23/22. The following attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Cllr Beverley Egan, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Early Years
Ralph Holloway, Head of SEND Strategy and Innovation
Carolyn Terry - EYCC Sufficiency and Sustainability Manager

Contributors provided the Committee with an End of Year One Update on the Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022-2027. During the presentation and subsequent discussion, the following was highlighted, raised and/or noted:

- (i) The establishment of an early years Data Dashboard and the implementation of gathering key data which would enable the prioritisation of key areas to focus on each year.
- (ii) A target had been set to increase by 1% the take-up of eligible 2 years-olds accessing funded care. The increase in the past year had been a 2.4% increase meaning 77.1% of eligible 2 year-olds had accessed a funded place compared to national average of 61.8%. A Year 2 priority would be to maintain and further increase the take up of eligible 2yr olds to access a funded learning place.
- (iii) There was not any significant evidence to suggest that there was a greater proportion of children with SEND within the 20% that currently did not take up a funded place. Most early cases of young children needing SEND support would be identified by the Health Visitor.
- (iv) An earlier integrated system check (conducted through the Essex Childrens Wellbeing Service) would be used to inform who was on track and identify interventions that needed to be in place. However, there would also be some communications to normalise that children each develop a little differently. It was important to ensure that young children had the appropriate assessment of additional need at an early stage which might in some cases mean that a formal Education Health Care Plan is not needed as the extra support needed can be provided without one.

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- (v) The pandemic lockdowns had resulted in speech and language development delays, social communications development delay and delayed independence skills for some young children.
 - (vi) There was increasing focus on reaching the economically disadvantaged to help narrow the word gap. Significant focus was on Canvey Island as it was identified as one of the County Council's Levelling up priority areas. However, work continued as part of Levelling Up projects particularly in Basildon, Harlow and Tendring areas as well. Community make-up and demographics, and lower levels of parental aspiration and engagement and access to resources could all contribute to an area underperforming.
 - (vii) Results for those children where English was an additional language were encouraging.
 - (viii) Adult Community Learning were engaging with and supporting parents, especially to help parents return to work.
 - (ix) There was some further consideration towards encouraging and facilitating employer based childcare schemes possibly through their sponsorship of places. Parent collaboratives were also being looked at.
 - (x) Some changes in the early years support required by parents had been seen since the pandemic, notably some parents moving childcare nearer to supporting family members and seeing shorter days of support being needed as parents may be increasingly working from home and no longer commuting resulting in less demand for services early morning and later in the day.
 - (xi) The role of grandparental support was increasing in importance.
 - (xii) There needed to be flexibility in Early Years' provision and an appropriate balance between school-based and private provision available locally.

Sustainability in the Early Years' sector

- (xiii) There were financial pressures on Early Years' settings from rises in the minimum wage, NI contributions, utility and food costs and business rates.
- (xiv) The Early Years' Sector were advising that government funding levels currently being paid for funded places were not covering the cost to Early Years' settings of providing the funded place.

- (xv) There were increasing numbers of children with emerging additional needs that needed more support which increased the pressure on providers. There were also efforts to distinguish those who had been adversely impacted by pandemic lockdowns who needed some additional support to catch up but did not have SEND needs.
- (xvi) Recruitment and retention in the Early Years' sector remained a challenge and the County Council were working with regional colleagues in looking at what could be done to help providers.
- (xvii) Some providers were changing their business model as a response to all the challenges being faced.
- (xviii) The County Council were expecting to see an increase in closures of Early Years' settings. Members challenged if such closures would adversely impact the implementation of the Strategy and achieving outcomes. The County Council were continually working with and supporting providers and finding ways to 'scaffold' them including helping them to renegotiate rents with landlords, changing their business models possibly through a slightly reduced offer, and quicker payments to help cashflow.
- (xix) The County Council gave regular feedback to the Department of Education on the challenges being faced by Early Years' providers.

Conclusion:

It was agreed that:

- (i) Further information be provided on the lobbying undertaken by the County Council with Government, the Local Government Association and other bodies to help drive further improvement in standards and outcomes.
- (ii) A more detailed report of the 2022 EY Foundation Stage profile which measured a good level of development – which had been the first published data since pre-pandemic – would be circulated.
- (iii) A further broad update would be arranged in due course.

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and Councillor Egan left the meeting with supporting officers remaining to support the next agenda item.

The meeting adjourned 11.22 and recommenced at 11.35am

5 SEND Strategy Update

The Committee considered report PAF/24/22. The following attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

- Cllr Tony Ball, Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Life-Long Learning and Employability
- Clare Kershaw, Director: Education
- Ralph Holloway, Head of SEND Strategy and Innovation
- Carolyn Terry - EYCC Sufficiency and Sustainability Manager

Contributors provided the Committee with an update on SEND services and support.

During the presentation and subsequent discussion, the following was highlighted, raised and/or noted:

The approach for Home to School transport in relation to climate considerations would be set out in a paper which was expected to be considered at Cabinet in January 2023.

- (i) Ofsted and the CQC had conducted a revisit of Essex SEND services in May 2022. Their report of the re-inspection had confirmed that Essex as a system was making sufficient progress to address the areas of weakness previously identified and that ongoing monitoring was no longer required.
- (ii) Ofsted and the CQC found that there had been a palpable change in the culture among partners related to joint working which enabled joint commissioning in a more strategic and systematic manner. However, the impact of this improvement work was not yet being felt universally by children and young people with SEND and their families.
- (iii) Improved input was being encouraged from partners outside the County and how they could contribute to the Local Offer.
- (iv) The Essex Family Forum (EFF), the local parent carer forum, was working closely with area leaders to address the weaknesses identified in the written statement of action and act as true and genuine advocates for parents and carers.
- (v) A new Local Offer website had been launched and initial feedback was that the information and signposting available from that site was clearer.
- (vi) Since the regulatory inspection in October 2019, the area had managed significant challenges including the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the changing organisational structures and leadership in health services. These factors had had an

impact on the timeliness to deliver some aspects of the written statement of action. However, there was now a view that it was easier to work with the new Integrated Care Systems with each of them now having a designated SEND Lead for example.

- (vii) A new inspection framework would go live in early 2023 including a greater focus on what happens in schools as well as across the local area.
- (viii) One of biggest ongoing challenges was continued differences in waiting times for diagnostic pathways across the county and identifying needs earlier. There was some evidence that some parents were paying for private assessments and diagnosis. Whilst there were recovery plans being implemented to address the backlogs, the success and quality of these plans varied across the geographical area. The regulators found that the three health integrated care systems in Essex were working independently of one another on this aspect and not sharing collective responsibility.
- (ix) There were still concerns about how young people accessed and navigated the pathway, and how they were supported whilst awaiting diagnosis and the handover after diagnosis.
- (x) A weakness identified during the original 2019 regulatory inspection had been the quality of Educational Health Care Plans (EHCP) and professional training had been improved and new guidance put in place to integrate and align all partners. However, the high number of requests coming into the system continued to have an impact on trying to improve timescales and there remained a national shortage of educational psychologists. There were plans to try and increase the workforce in response to demand pressures.
- (xi) There were still parents with historic support plans that still needed to see improvement in the support being received by their child.
- (xii) A further weakness identified during the original 2019 regulatory inspection was possible under identifying of moderate Learning Disabilities and speech and language difficulties and work continued to improve this. There was increased training both in Early Years' settings and within social care teams to assist earlier identification.
- (xiii) Assessing outcomes in relation to SEND services was difficult and often might require assessing over the very long term. It was reported that the Department of Education may be looking at commissioning a longitudinal study to look at this further. Some

outcomes may be quicker to assess such as timelines for assessment of need.

- (xiv) There were an increasing number of appeals against placements as special schools were generally operating at or close to full capacity. With high demand for appeals some hearings were scheduled for up to 12 months' time and interim support for those cases became very important. The Tribunal process still indicated that there were still some serious weaknesses and risks in the system.
- (xv) Independent schools could make request for assessment in same way as maintained schools and the County Council would respond in the same way.
- (xvi) Some parents had a personal budget to source some of their own support such as therapists although these were generally in a school setting.
- (xvii) There were approximately 11,000 people with an EHCP in Essex with a further 22,000 receiving other SEN related support.
- (xviii) In November 2022 a total of 299 requests for assessment had been received including 206 from schools and 86 from parents. There had been a total of 2,893 for the last academic year which represented a significant increase compared to pre-pandemic.

Conclusion:

It was **agreed** that:

- (i) The next step for the Committee would be to talk to representatives from the Family Forum in the new year to seek their views on the changes to services being seen and the challenges still being faced.
- (ii) The Committee would then need to assess the impact of the changes being seen and invite the Cabinet Member and officers to come back in six months with a further update.
- (iii) As part of the above update the Committee to be provided with some analysis of numbers and spend compared with other local authorities

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

6. Performance Monitoring falling within the Committee's remit, as reported to the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/25/22 comprising a report of the background to arrangements currently in place to scrutinise performance of the Everyone's Essex Strategy and the latest scrutiny session hosted by the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee. Under this agenda item the Chairman and Vice Chairmen had the opportunity to highlight any issues arising that may be relevant to the Committee to pursue and scrutinise in further detail. Although nothing was specifically highlighted this time there was the suggestion that consideration should be given to seeking more financial information on service areas within the Committee's remit to help support future scrutiny items.

7. Work Programme

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/26/22 comprising the work programme for the committee.

8. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Wednesday 14 December 2022.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 13.25pm.

Chairman