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**Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 9.30am on Wednesday, 15 February 2023 in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Chelmsford.**

**Present:**

*County Councillors:*

Cllr Ray Gooding (Chairman)

Cllr Susan Barker (via Zoom)

Cllr Mark Durham

Cllr Jane Fleming

Cllr Marie Goldman

Cllr Ian Grundy

Cllr Carlo Guglielmi

Cllr Dave Harris (substitute)

Cllr Peter May

Cllr Ross Playle

Cllr Laureen Shaw

Cllr Wendy Stamp

Cllr Alan Goggin (Chairman of Places Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee) joined via Zoom.

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

**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 Cllr Aidan McGurran for whom Cllr Dave Harris was substituting, Cllr June Lumley and Cllr Susan Barker who however joined the meeting via Zoom. Sharon Westfield de Cortez from Healthwatch Essex had also sent her apologies.

Cllr Ray Gooding declared an interest in that he was Chair of the Essex Housing LLP Board.

Cllr Peter May declared an interest in that he was Director of Business Opportunities for the Physically Handicapped, in Canvey Island.

**2 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendment:

- Minute 3, under bullet point iii – to add the following sentence to the end of the bullet point 'The Cabinet Member went on to explain it

was not possible to provide a guarantee on present staffing levels being maintained.'

### **3 Questions from the public**

There were none.

### **4 Draft Disability Strategy**

#### **A. Discussion with Healthwatch Essex Ambassador Samantha Tracey (along with her communicator, Julie from Deafblind Enablement) on her lived experience**

Samantha introduced herself and provided a personal background for the Members. During the discussion the following points were highlighted:

- (i) Samantha was a registered deafblind Healthwatch Essex Ambassador. She had a communicator guide supporting her for 10 hours per week. Samantha stressed 10 hours was not enough and she would like further help. She had to prioritise how the hours were used and health appointments could take up the majority of the time.
- (ii) Further assistance including technological solutions could help reduce Samantha's social isolation and give her greater independence.
- (iii) Samantha did not receive much help financially although the costs of attending health appointments were funded; she had some technological gadgets which were self-funded such as a ring doorbell and a talking microwave.
- (iv) Samantha found it difficult accessing help and guidance particularly when it involved accessing organisations online or via telephone.
- (v) An information pack for people in a similar position as Samantha would be helpful at time of diagnosis and subsequent appointments.
- (vi) Travelling independently was a challenge, particularly alighting at bus stops and if there were changes to usual routes.
- (vii) Samantha was on medication and awaiting counselling for anxiety however there was a long waiting list for this.
- (viii) Samantha was unsure of the future in terms of where she would live if she was to lose her eyesight completely and whether she would need to move into sheltered accommodation. She had

enquired to go onto the housing list but had been told she was not currently entitled to social housing.

## **B. Consideration of Draft Disabilities Strategy**

The Committee considered report PAF/04/23. Cllr John Spence, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health, and Ruth Harrington, Director for ASC for Adults with Disabilities attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

A presentation was given setting out the County Council's ambition and highlighting the engagement that had taken place around developing the strategy, how the engagement had shaped the strategy and consultation findings. The Council was already operating a successful Meaningful Lives Matter Programme for those with Learning Disabilities and autism and wanted to widen it to include those with physical and sensory impairments. The Draft Disability Strategy had taken the approach that autism alone was not a disability although this continued to be debated as the draft strategy was further developed.

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

- (i) 160 questionnaires had been received so far plus 16 people were approached for in depth interviews. 74% of respondents were female. The consultation would finish on 23 February 2023. A Delivery Plan would be launched in May.
- (ii) Supported housing was an important part of facilitating more independence and it needed collaborative partnership work with district/borough councils and other partners to help further increase this provision. Supported Housing provision needed to be built into all Local Plans.
- (iii) Due to the pandemic many community support activities had collapsed and needed to be re-built again. These activities needed to be stimulating and meaningful. As well as setting up separate activities for people with disabilities there should be conversations with community organisations to help them be able to accept people with a range of disabilities including addressing any concerns they may have around safeguarding.
- (iv) Clear and direct access to support services was essential to help disabled people to further develop their employability and fulfil their ambitions. Inclusive employment strategies also needed to be promoted. The Committee highlighted the aspirations of the Essex Anchor Network to further support local communities and cited the farm development at Market Fields School which was providing work experience and job opportunities for local people

with disabilities so that they could build greater independence and to contribute to the local community.

- (v) Some Members queried what happened when SEND children leave education and highlighted the importance of supporting them into employment. However, it was stressed that not every child with SEND became an adult with disabilities needing support.
- (vi) The ambition was for people to be able to plan for their future and support their ambition to live an independent life. Supporting independence discussions had been introduced where social workers were being asked to focus on each individual and their independence including employment and housing.
- (vii) The County Council also needed to be honest in acknowledging the current challenges in recruitment and retention of care staff and its responsibility to ensure the sustainability of a viable local care market. Some proposals were being submitted to Cabinet in March 2023 regarding further support for domiciliary care providers. There was also a 20-25% vacancy rate for social workers which impacted on those needing support, including the timeliness of arranging assessments.
- (viii) Employment was important as it provided social contact and many people engaged and build relationships through work. There remained an ongoing challenge to ensure roles were accessible to everybody.
- (ix) Partnership with health partners was challenging as they had many other competing priorities. Work and conversations were taking place with hospitals around their health inequalities work and further improving accessibility for people with learning disabilities as well as those with physical and sensory impairments.
- (x) There was a highly successful CareTech programme that was currently supporting people to live at home, particularly those with physical disabilities which could be expanded to other cohorts. Home care providers were being encouraged to use this type of technology, and a small grant pot was being considered to help with some of the upfront funding of technology. NHS virtual wards were another way to support people remaining at their home.
- (xi) Shared endeavours work was taking place bringing together different teams and parts of the County Council with Adult Social Care, particularly around employment and housing, to ensure they were part of the Delivery Plan. Further conversations would

show gaps, duplications and any further work that could be included.

Conclusion:

It was **agreed** that:

- The final Disability Strategy should be clear that it supported the current Market Fields School project, and other similar schemes which provide work experience and job opportunities for local people with disabilities and further utilities the potential of local people.
- A further update would be given providing a Delivery Plan and identified actions ideally at or around the formal launch of the Strategy.
- A further update would be given in due course demonstrating progress and the changes being implemented.
- District/borough councils should be encouraged to include provision for supported housing in their Local Plans;
  - Appropriate specifications and provision for supported housing should also be reflected in the County Council's own Design Guide;
  - Representation be made on the increasing need for supported housing in the current consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework;
  - Request that Essex Housing consider if there is a role for it to further promote and influence the increase in supported housing provision.
- Request the Scrutiny Board to consider further scrutiny of the planning for future housing provision particularly in relation to supported housing for disabled and other vulnerable people, jointly with other appropriate Scrutiny Committees.

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

## **5 Work Programme**

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/05/23 comprising the work programme for the committee.

## **6 Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Thursday 9 March 2023.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.15pm.

**Chairman**