
Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 9.30am on Thursday, 9 September 2021 in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Chelmsford.

Present:

County Councillors:

R Gooding (Chairman)

L Bowers-Flint

M Durham

J Fleming

M Goldman

C Guglielmi

P May

A McGurran

R Playle

A Wiles

Councillor Alan Goggin, in his capacity as Chairman of the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee (at the specific invite of the Chairman), 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 and noted.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors June Lumley, Wendy Stamp, Laureen Shaw, Christine Martin from St John Payne Roman Catholic School (Roman Catholic Diocese education representative) and Sharon Westfield de Cortez from Healthwatch Essex.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2021 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public.

4. Essex Libraries Pre-Draft Consultation – further opportunities for People and Families to support the strategy

The Committee considered report PAF/08/2021 and the following people from Essex County Council attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Councillor Louise McKinlay – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance [via Zoom link],
Juliet Pirez – Head of Libraries,
Elisabeth Sippings, Citizen Services Manager.

The Committee received a presentation from Cllr Louise McKinlay. The presentation provided information on library successes and ambitions such as the Winter Reading Challenge, Silver Sunday and Black History Month and how these would be delivered. Two public engagement sessions were taking place on 20 September 2021 to share and discuss key principles ahead of a public consultation on the draft strategy in October 2021. It was confirmed that the People and Families Scrutiny Committee would have the opportunity to give valuable input to ensure the Council's strategic aims would be met.

Following the presentation, the following was highlighted/raised:

- (i) Members requested that the feedback and findings of the public consultation and public engagement sessions be shared with the Committee prior to the strategy being finalised.
- (ii) Members requested that they be provided with a copy of the previous libraries' consultation from two years ago, so they had some background to the current strategy. Members were informed that not everything had changed since then, and some important groundwork was undertaken to help with the current draft strategy.
- (iii) Throughout the strategy it was important for the needs of local areas to be reflected. Public feedback would be welcomed on what services were needed and it was expected that there would be some local variations to meet differing local needs.
- (iv) Internal data such as data on what books had been taken out and what library spaces were being used would be monitored. Local requirement opportunities would be considered, for example a possible change of opening time hours.
- (v) Volunteers were important but library staff numbers should be protected. Libraries would continue to be run by paid ECC staff.
- (vi) It would be important to hear from non-library users as there was a need to understand why they were not using the library services and to encourage them to do so. Questionnaires would be undertaken via social media and hard copies would be available in some community settings to also seek the views of non-library users.
- (vii) There was a need further promote and market what services were on offer and improve the Outreach offer. Each initiative

would have its own marketing campaign, for example, prior to Black History Month there was going to be a display set up in the libraries.

- (viii) It was confirmed that the consultation process also involved library staff.

Conclusion:

It was **agreed** that in recognition of potential overlap with the remit of the Place and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee, that the Scrutiny Board would discuss setting up a joint scrutiny review of the ongoing development of the library service, possibly in the form of a Joint Task and Finish Group.

The witnesses were thanked for their attendance by the Chairman and then left the meeting.

5. Impact of the pandemic on Children and Families Services and Education Services

The Committee considered report PAF/09/21 comprising an update on the impact of the pandemic on Children's and Families Services and Education Services and actions taken to mitigate the impact.

The following people from Essex County Council attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Councillor Tony Ball - Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Life-Long Learning and Employability,
Councillor Beverley Egan - Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Early Years,
Clare Burrell - Head of Strategic Commissioning and Policy,
Clare Kershaw – Director, Education.

During the discussion, contributors and members all acknowledged the challenges faced during the pandemic and paid tribute to practitioners and staff for their dedication and resourcefulness during this time.

Children services

CLr Beverley Egan provided an update on Children's Services, and during the discussion the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

- (i) The Early Years' Strategy would be considered at a later date by the Committee.
- (ii) In terms of staff wellbeing, a number of staff wellbeing events had been organised.

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- (iii) Some Members raised concerns for young children who were unable to socialise and the impact this could have on them in the future when they attend nursery and school.
 - (iv) Members requested an update in future on the backlog in the Courts and Justice system and the impact on the Youth Offending Team, fostering and adoption.
 - (v) Whilst the Multi-Disciplinary Team pilot in Tendring was originally an 18-month project, it had been delayed due to the pandemic, but it was back up and running and progress would be monitored.
 - (vi) An update on County Lines post pandemic was suggested to look at the differences prior to the pandemic, during and now.
 - (vii) Use of webinars were part of the recovery process and were accessible to schools when they needed them.
 - (viii) During the first lockdown the Children and Young People's response plan was produced to provide guidance and advice around welfare checks and for schools to help support their vulnerable children.
 - (ix) It was important that teachers were also receiving wellbeing support. There was also a County Headteacher Wellbeing Programme which included support for governors and teachers.
 - (x) Further information on the trend of children being placed outside the county was requested. Members also referenced the Good Law Project legal challenge.
 - (xi) The County Council worked collaboratively with other councils in the region in supporting asylum seekers.

Education Services

Cllr Tony Ball and Clare Kershaw provided an update to Members on Education Services, during the discussion the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

- (i) All schools were open and operating with a more normalised setting. The County Council was offering support to encourage high levels of attendance and regular testing of children as part of getting back into routines and schools being a stabilising factor for children.
- (ii) A big challenge of remote education was the issue on digital divide. The Council worked with schools to ensure every young

- person had access to a laptop and connectivity. Further information on where laptops were distributed was requested.
- (iii) There had been higher levels of absence in the education system due to self-isolating, and the numbers being home educated had also increased as some families wanted to shield themselves.
 - (iv) Schools had contact with all children during the closures and more regular contact with vulnerable children. However, it was acknowledged that during the pandemic any family could have become vulnerable. A contact number was provided through the Education Workforce where schools could go for further support, the Children and Families Wellbeing Service was used as a support service in terms of families that were struggling with lockdown.
 - (v) Some Members raised concerns about the difference in attainment between private and public sector schools and suggested that the gap was widening. Reference was made to the OFQual report expected later in the year. There would be a need to rebase the system at the end of the academic year and focus on the inequalities within the state sector. It was stressed that it was important that employers did not see it as a downgrading of the assessment process over the last two years.
 - (vi) Concerns were raised regarding the lack of regulations around home-schooled children.
 - (vii) Annual checks were undertaken by the County Council on home-schooled children. Children's services could intervene if safeguarding concerns were raised and advice and support would be given to families if the education standards were identified as low. A School Attendance Order could be issued for the child to go back into a school if required standards could not be met.
 - (viii) The Educational Task Force had set a target that all children would be at the national reading age or above. Members commented on the aspirations of the Group and whether they were realistic. It was suggested that a further scrutiny discussion on evaluation of the Group's targets could be scheduled in the future.
 - (ix) Funds had been put into the Education Task Force for residential activities, and that activities would go ahead during October half term and the Christmas holidays.
 - (x) It was confirmed that SATs were going ahead. Performance measures would be incorporated in the Corporate Strategy and a

future update for the Committee on educational attainment would be scheduled in early 2022.

Conclusion

As identified above, it was **agreed** that the following further information be provided:

- (i) the trend of children being placed outside Essex;
- (ii) the backlog in the Courts and Justice system and the impact on the Youth Offending Team, fostering and adoption;
- (iii) numbers and where laptops were distributed

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

6. Work Programme

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/10/21 comprising the work programme for the Committee.

7. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Thursday 14 October 2021.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.30pm.

Chairman