

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.30am by video conference on Thursday 8 October 2020

Present:

County Councillors:

J Chandler (Chairman)
J Baker (Vice Chairman)
M Durham
B Egan (Vice Chairman)
C Guglielmi (part of meeting)
M Hardware (part of meeting)
J Lumley
P May
R Pratt
P Reid
C Souter
M Steptoe
L Wagland

Educational representative:

E Rigler (representing maintained primary school parent governors)

Observer:

E Spurgin (Healthwatch Essex)

Joanna Boaler, Head of Democratic Services and Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer, were also present throughout.

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report on updated Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received and noted. Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Deakin.

There was up to four co-opted places available for educational representatives and new nominations had been sought for these posts. As more than one nomination had been received for a parent governor representative for maintained primary schools in Essex, an election had just been held and won by Emma Rigler from Burnham-on-Crouch Primary School. She was welcomed by the Chairman to her first meeting as a co-opted member of the Committee. The other three places for educational representatives remained unfilled to date.

No declarations of interest were made.

2. Minutes

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2020 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public.

4. Education portfolio – actions arising update

The Committee considered report PAF/20/20 comprising an update on matters arising from previous discussions on education matters.

County Councillor Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member – Education and Skills, and Clare Kershaw, Director – Education, Essex County Council joined to introduce the updates and respond to questions. During discussion the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

Early Years strategy

- The pandemic had delayed being able to bring a finalised draft of the Early Years Strategy to the Committee for comment. This was now deferred until April 2021. The final proposed strategy would be considered by the Committee in due course.
- The County Council wanted to define its own expectations of the sector. Whilst current accountability mainly was via OFSTED, it provided only a snapshot and the County Council wanted to gauge the continued impact on young people.
- As part of the new strategy there would be an Essex definition of what was meant by School Readiness.
- There needed to be further focus on the relatively small number of children not reaching expected levels of educational attainment.
- The Essex Child and Wellbeing Service operated by Virgin Care was being consulted during the development of the Strategy.
- There would be more focus on home liaison support and supporting parents and carers.
- It was acknowledged that childcare could be a barrier for some County Council staff and any childcare provision for them by the County Council would need to be viable and financially independent from the County Council.
- Some members queried whether now was a good time to continue development of the new strategy with Early Years settings currently

under pressure. Clare Kershaw agreed to reflect further on this challenge and whether April 2021 was the right time to launch the new approach and if the summer term 2021 could be used more as a consultation term rather than for implementation. However, it was stressed that there was confidence in the level of resources available to undertake this work.

- The House of Commons Select Committee was looking again at children missing education and the County Council might update its previous representations made to Parliament on this issue and, in that case, would give the Committee opportunity to review any such updated representations.

Emotional wellbeing:

- There was now more focus on looking at the causes of challenging behaviour. A development programme was now available to schools to assist them support children who may be at risk of exclusion.
- The County Council was trying to further increase awareness of services and support available and better linking up the different parts of the support system.
- The success of the new approach would be evaluated by the number of exclusions (especially for challenging behaviour) and whether they have reduced, looking for improvement in emotional wellbeing performance measures, and whether there was also a decrease in numbers escalating to formal SEND diagnosis.

Disadvantaged children

- The County Council were looking to further 'up-skill' schools and link them better to all the different elements of the support systems.
- There would be focus not just on educational attainment but also wider life skills (as part of the Life without Labels Framework).
- Further details from Government were awaited on expectations for enhanced pupil support and 1 to 1 teaching, particularly around disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. It was important to manage expectations in the community and school settings.
- Members queried what could be done to stop the poverty of expectation emerging amongst young people and stressed that more focus was needed on other new opportunities that may emerge from the pandemic.

Conclusion:

The following actions were agreed:

(i) The Committee would have the opportunity to review any further updated submission on the County Council's views on elective home education to the House of Commons Education Select Committee.

(ii) Let's Talk YouTube links on emotional wellbeing support available to schools referred to during the discussion would be circulated.

(iii) Cabinet Member and Lead Officers were asked to follow up and investigate to what extent district councils had been involved in the development of the emotional wellbeing strategy.

(iv) The Lead Officer was asked to follow-up with schools suggesting a focus needed to be on looking at other new career opportunities that might arise from the pandemic to counteract the developing poverty of expectation amongst "generation Covid".

(v) Further updates be arranged in future in consultation with the Cabinet Member and Lead Officer.

5. Children's Safeguarding update

The Committee considered report PAF/21/20 updating members on safeguarding governance arrangements. The following joined the meeting to provide the update and respond to questions:

David Archibald - Independent Chair Facilitator of the Essex Safeguarding Children Board

Kevin Baldwin, Deputy Chief Superintendent, Essex Police

Alison Cutler Alison Cutler - ESCB Business & Performance Manager.

Lisa Nobes – West Suffolk CCG and North East Essex CCG (NHS representative)

Paul Secker - Director, Safeguarding & Quality Assurance (Children and Families)

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

- Support for those at highest risk had been prioritised during the pandemic. Social work practice had had to adapt and use different ways to keep in touch with clients.

- The impact of Covid-19 had been significant although not all anticipated 'pressure points' had materialised to the extent that they could have done.
- The full impact of Covid on children and young people was still not yet clear. Approximately an extra 100 young people were now on Child Protection plans compared to six months ago. Sadly, there had been three young people who had committed suicide during that period where Covid did seem to be a factor.
- The NHS and Police were now jointly accountable and responsible for child safeguarding with the other statutory partners.
- Whilst Education was not a defined statutory partner for the new safeguarding arrangements, they were still an active contributor to partnership discussions.
- Members were advised that the Board monitored the impact and the extent of local campaigns and their 'reach'.
- Members challenged how implementation of recommendations from Serious Case Reviews were monitored. It was acknowledged that the links between adults and children services could be further strengthened. The statutory partners recognised that a lot of time could be spent on Serious Case reviews and it was important that actions and learning came out of that process quicker.
- A new Business Plan for the Board would still focus on similar themes and priorities to previous years.

Conclusion:

The Committee were reassured about the new local governance arrangements in place and that partnership working was further improving.

6. Work Programme

The Committee considered and noted report PAF/22/20 comprising the current work programme for the Committee.

7. Date of Next Meeting

There being no further business the meeting closed at 13:20pm.

Chairman