
Minutes of the virtual meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.15am by video conference on Thursday, 18 March 2021

Present:

County Councillors:

J Chandler (Chairman)

J Baker (Vice Chairman)

M Durham

B Egan (Vice Chairman)

C Guglielmi

M Hardware

J Lumley

P May

R Pratt

P Reid

C Souter

M Steptoe

L Wagland

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 Councillor Jude Deakin and Christine Martin from St John Payne Roman Catholic School (Roman Catholic Diocese education representative).

2. Minutes

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 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. Children and Families Services - update

The Committee considered report PAF/04/2021 comprising an update on Children's and Families services and projects.

The following joined the meeting to introduce the item:

County Councillor Louise McKinlay, Cabinet Member – Children and Families;
Christopher Martin, Director – Strategic, Commissioning & Policy (Children and Families);
Richard Comerford, Managing Director, Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service, Virgin Care Services Limited
Clare Burrell, Head of Strategic Commissioning & Policy (Children and Families);
Sukriti Sen, Director – Local Delivery (Children & Families).

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

- There had been limited movement on Respite Care, but an update was likely to be provided in the summer.

Children services during the pandemic:

- The impact of Covid had been significant in terms of Children's services but the operational teams had adapted well, and a Children & Families Function Resilience Group had been established to provide leadership throughout.
- Virtual meetings had been the core way to communicate with families after a risk assessment had been undertaken in each case to decide whether there still needed to be face-to-face contact. A greater level of attendance had been noticed in some cases and this would be taken into consideration for future service delivery.
- The numbers of children entering care had been reasonably stable, but there was increasing complexity of the cases that had been coming forward.
- The Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service had continued to run successfully, and the staff had remained available throughout the pandemic due to the quick introduction of safe working practices including virtual contact. A challenge would be maintaining staff commitment and morale when the restrictions start to be lifted through the summer as levels of exhaustion and sickness rates could increase.
- Services had been maintained across Essex except the National Child Measuring programme, which had stopped due to children not being in school to be measured but it would be re-introduced from April.

Domestic abuse:

- From 1st April 2021 ECC would have a statutory duty to provide support for victims of domestic abuse.

- Evidence from other countries suggested that domestic abuse would increase during lockdown. Whilst cases were reported to have increased nationally, this had not been born out locally in Essex.
- There were a range of activities that enabled victims to be able to make themselves known and ask for and access help and these were promoted by all agencies including the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Domestic Abuse Board.
- There was a service for male victims of domestic abuse.
- A press statement was to be issued announcing the establishment of an advisory group on street safety with conversations taking place with the police and other partners.
- Community services were working with victims online and visiting high risk cases. The online chat functions had been very successful during the pandemic and communications that had been done through the police, ECC and the Southend, Essex and Thurrock partnership had resulted in a significant number of self-referrals. Numbers were steady and similar to previous years; however, cases were more complex, and numbers were expected to increase.
- There was ongoing work looking at how data analytical information could be provided in ways to enable some element of self service for people to help themselves.
- Not everyone used technology and information and signposting to services were also advertised in local newspapers. Recent newspaper campaigns had then correlated to a higher number of visits to connected advisory websites.

Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service:

- There were 38 mandated children centre sites across Essex and each district had a Family Hub with affiliated satellite Delivery Sites. Clinics also operated from some libraries and GP practices.
- A priority group model was being used to target particular activities to address specific vulnerabilities identified.
- Some children had been displaying some behavioural issues and challenges when they returned to school which might require an underlying diagnosis to be identified such as ADHD or autism.
- The Harlow hub also hosted other partners to provide other early help children services such as autism and maternity services which had previously been delivered on multiple sites. Further

consideration was being given to replicate this type of site across Essex.

- Schools had helped children adjust to the return to the classroom and resocialisation by encouraging social activity and interactions with each other.
- Education colleagues had worked with schools to offer a programme of support on how to recognise and respond to the emotional needs of young children and signpost where to get help. Since schools had re-opened, one phone number was now being promoted for families to call and be signposted to the relevant service, and prevent families being passed around the system.
- Digital technology had facilitated interventions and new ways of delivering services and engaging with service users, particularly those living in remote locations.

Looked- after children:

- The numbers of children in care had fluctuated during the pandemic with peaks particularly in Basildon, Colchester, Harlow and Tendring.
- There had been an increase in both the 0-4 age group and teenagers coming into care and in each quadrant the referrals for unborn children had been higher than usual.
- There had been an increase in the number of children being exploited online and it was expected that there would be further indications of increasing exploitation as social restrictions were removed.
- There had always been challenges in finding suitable local placements for children in the teenage age group and those who were vulnerable to exploitation. A variety of options were looked at when considering a placement including internal foster carers, agency foster carers and alternative placements such as forms of residential care. The priority was to keep children within the Essex area, within the family setting and provide bespoke services for them.
- A Multi-Disciplinary team was launched in Tendring to support vulnerable families, initially as an 18-month pilot programme, and its effectiveness would be reviewed before looking to implement it elsewhere.

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

The meeting adjourned at 12pm and reconvened at 12.05pm

5. Task and Finish Group Report – Domiciliary Care

The Committee considered report PAF/05/21 comprising the final report of the Task and Finish Group established to look at aspects of domiciliary care provision in Essex.

The following joined the meeting to support the item:

County Councillor John Spence, Cabinet Member – Health and Adult Social Care;

Moira McGrath, Director – Commissioning (Adult Social Care).

During discussion the following was highlighted:

- There had been issues that the Group would have liked to have pursued further but was unable to due to the pressures from the pandemic and the need to close the review ahead of the County Council elections. In particular, the Group had not spoken to anyone from the NHS particularly in relation to hospital discharge processes.
- The Cabinet Member and Officers were able to accept the recommendations and assurance was given that officers would take forward other issues that had been raised that were not included in the recommendations and investigate further.
- ECC had been under notice of NHS plans to review discharge methodologies in any case and it was suggested that the review of discharges as proposed by the Group could align with, and benefit from being done in the light of the emerging NHS proposals.
- It was suggested that a briefing on financial advice management and debt work being undertaken by the County Council in the care market could be provided to the Committee at a later date.

Adult social care staff – working from home arrangements

- A recent County Council survey showed that 22% of its Children and Family staff were not working from home compared to 2% of Adult Social Care (ASC) staff, and it was queried as to why only 2% of ASC staff were doing face to face client contact. It was confirmed that whilst many ASC staff were predominantly working at home they would still be conducting visits as appropriate and necessary after suitable risk assessment. A risk-based approach had been

taken as part of the decision to ask staff to work from home but they were still in contact via video and phone calls. Domiciliary care was delivered by external providers and the vast majority of that service continued to be delivered face to face.

- Work had been undertaken through the Essex Wellbeing Service and wider services to ensure welfare checks were still taking place and service user feedback had indicated that this was greatly appreciated.
- The Task and Finish Group and the officers and contributors were thanked for their commitment and contributions.

Conclusion:

The Committee **agreed** to endorse the Task and Finish Group report and recommendations, set out in the final report.

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

6. Date of Next Meeting

No further meetings were scheduled ahead of the County Council elections. The date of the next meeting would be confirmed after the Elections in May.

The Chairman thanked Members and officers for their hard work and contributions to the committee over the last four years. The contribution of the Healthwatch Essex representative at meetings was also acknowledged.

Members of the Committee thanked Councillor Jenny Chandler for her leadership as Chairman of the Committee.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.28pm.

Chairman