
Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.15am on Thursday, 14 April 2022 in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Chelmsford.

Present:

County Councillors:

R Gooding (Chairman)

S Barker

L Bowers-Flint (participated via Zoom)

J Fleming

C Guglielmi (Vice Chairman)

D King (substitute)

J Lumley (participated via Zoom)

P May (Vice Chairman)

A McGurran

L Shaw

W Stamp (participated via Zoom)

A Wiles

Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer and Gemma Bint, Democratic Services Officer were also present. Sharon Westfield de Cortez from Healthwatch Essex participated via Zoom.

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 Mark Durham, Marie Goldman (for whom Councillor David King was substituting) and Ross Playle.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2022 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3 Questions from the public

There were none.

4 Education Co-opted Members

The Committee noted report PAF/08/22 comprising of an update on a change to the process for seeking nominations to serve as an Education representative on the Committee, which was approved by Full Council in

February, as well as new attempts to increase the current representation on the Committee.

5 Essex Safeguarding Children Board update

The Committee considered report PAF/09/2022 comprising of the latest update on the Essex Safeguarding Children Board (ESCB).

The following people from Essex County Council attended the meeting to provide the update and respond to questions:

David Archibald, Independent Chair Facilitator

Alison Cutler, Essex Safeguarding Children Board Business and Performance Manager

Andrew Packer, Deputy Chief Superintendent – Essex Police

Jane Kinniburgh, NHS West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group

Paul Secker, Director – Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (C&F)

The Committee noted that the three statutory partners had joint and equal full accountability for the Board's oversight of safeguarding arrangements in Essex. In Essex there had been a move towards equal funding of the partnership by each of the three partners.

During the discussion the following points were highlighted, raised and/or noted:

- (i) The Independent Chairman had stressed that continuity was very important in relation to the operation and effectiveness of the ESCB and that he had expressed some anxiety about the ongoing NHS organisational changes and the possible distraction of the transition to Integrated Care Systems. He had asked for a standard Board agenda item on the progress of NHS changes.
- (ii) During the pandemic it had been important to focus on children that were hidden from professional view. Priority ratings were given for children and young people who were considered to be at the highest risk.
- (iii) The last six months had continued to be extremely difficult, with staff across most of the agencies involved in safeguarding exhausted. Recruitment and retention of staff across the whole system had become a big issue nationally.

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- (iv) Members encouraged the promotion of career opportunities in schools.
 - (v) Officers believed that the level of training opportunities and support given to staff in Essex was as good as anywhere and local agencies were looking at how to use staff more flexibly across the system.
 - (vi) More frontline social workers were needed and their jobs needed to be made more manageable. ECC had recently upgraded some hourly rates for agency staff.
 - (vii) ECC had reached out to re-employ some former employees during the pandemic. There had been a range of reasons for them to leave in the first place including no longer able or willing to continue to serve on the front-line.
 - (viii) The pandemic had adversely impacted on young people's emotional health, depression, anxiety and eating disorders had increased significantly. This has put more pressure on services. There was an indication that some early help services may not have been as effective due to pandemic.
 - (ix) There was a single point of access to the children's emotional wellbeing and mental health service where individuals and parents could self-refer and did not need a formal referral from a GP or other professional.
 - (x) There were extreme pressures on child placements and finding residential placements was incredibly difficult. There were examples where young people with challenging behaviour were ending up being placed on paediatric wards.
 - (xi) It was suggested that there needed to be more national oversight to assess the level of need for secure beds. Placements could be a long way from home but agencies did try to minimise the length of time spent in them but the young people impacted were extremely at risk individuals.
 - (xii) The Board held four executive meetings a year and had also started to add extra meetings as and when they were required.
 - (xiii) Members encouraged more focus on confronting knife crime and supporting those most vulnerable including those in Pupil Referral Units.
 - (xiv) Members encouraged Police initiatives for further links with community groups.

- (xv) Concern was raised regarding the children being home educated and the possible barrier this could cause to hearing their voice and engaging with them.
- (xvi) Serious Case Reviews were very time consuming although it was stressed that there were designated and dedicated nurses to link into these reviews so staff were not taken away from front-line work. There was also a separate child death review team to help identify lessons learnt.

Conclusion:

The following was agreed:

- (i) Information on accessing services in the Dengie area to be provided to Councillor Stamp;
- (ii) More knife bins should be placed in smaller towns, including placing them within Essex libraries to prevent vandalism.

Members would further discuss their broader conclusions after the meeting and follow-these up with the Independent Chairman.

[FILE NOTE: these were subsequently agreed and covered:

- (i) Ensuring the MASA arrangements remained fit for purpose and were regularly reviewed;
- (ii) Ensuring that Board activities were streamlined and avoided duplication;
- (iii) Ensuring continued prioritisation and vigilance on County Lines and drug gangs;
- (iv) Considering stronger links to the County Council's aspirations and priorities in their Everyone's Essex Strategy.]

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

6 Our Co-Parenting Strategy – How we do Corporate Parenting in Essex

The Committee considered report PAF/10/2022 comprising of an update on the new Co-Parenting Strategy.

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

Cllr Beverley Egan, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Early Years (via Zoom)

Sukriti Sen, Director of Local Delivery

Jo Boyd-Wallis, Senior Strategy Advisor

During the discussion the following points were highlighted, raised and/or noted:

- (i) There was a legal duty to oversee the care and support for looked-after-children and publish a suitable corporate parenting strategy with local ambitions including after-care.
- (ii) The updated Strategy had been co-produced with children in care and care leavers.
- (iii) The divisional based intervention teams had been expanded, the team connected and reunited children in care with their families.
- (iv) ECC had invested heavily in the fostering service, which had focused on wrap-around support for foster carers with difficult children.
- (v) With the support of district, borough and city councils, council tax exemption had been put in place for care leavers.
- (vi) A positive care leavers regulatory inspection had taken place in October 2021, although it had stated that the voice of young people should be reflected in the new strategy.
- (vii) Measurable outcomes that ECC were held accountable to had been included in the Strategy.
- (viii) Seven outcomes had been identified to focus on in the Strategy.
- (ix) Care leavers received an allowance every week and, if there was a specific need, additional payments might be made.
- (x) There was a national challenge around sufficiency of suitable placements for children in care and care leavers. There was a lot of competition in terms of residential provision. When children from other local authorities were placed within residential accommodation or fostering accommodation in Essex, it became more difficult to find placements for children who came into the care system in Essex.
- (xi) In terms of allocation of housing for care leavers, there were some differences amongst district/borough councils around how

housing was allocated to care leavers and it did create challenges.

Conclusion:

It was agreed that:

- (i) A Champion within each district/borough for children in care and care leavers should be considered.
- (ii) Priority policies on housing allocation to help give young people the opportunity to progress in life be considered.
- (iii) For context in the Strategy that figures be included within the introduction section showing the number of children taken into care in the last three years.
- (iv) The paragraph regarding co-grandparents in the Strategy be expanded.
- (v) Further consideration be given to increasing the corporate parenting role at Full Council.
- (vi) Further consideration be given to how to encourage other anchor organisations to help and that a guarantee of a job interview could be a significant first step.

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

7 Work Programme

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/11/22 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 Thursday 12 May 2022.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.53pm.

Chairman