
Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.00am on Thursday, 14 October 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

J Lumley

P May

A McGurran

R Playle

L Shaw

W Stamp

A Wiles

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

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report on Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received and noted.

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor Simon Crow.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 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. Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022

The Committee considered report PAF/11/2021 and the following people from Essex County Council attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Councillor Beverley Egan – Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Early Years,

Carolyn Terry – EYCC Sufficiency and Sustainability Manager.

The Committee received a presentation on the background of the Early Years and Childcare Strategy including the consultation and engagements taken place, the positive impact of the previous Strategy and the vision for Early Years and Childcare incorporating the new strategic aims and key priorities.

Following the presentation, the following was highlighted/raised:

(i) Early identification of the children who needed support was critical. Work was undertaken with the Essex Child Family Wellbeing Service and childcare providers to help identify those children as early as possible.

(ii) Summer born children could be at a disadvantage and did not always achieve a good level of development and that was mainly due to being a year younger than some of their peers.

(iii) A non-academic way of assessing a child or young person was being launched across schools in Essex including early years settings.

(iv) The Free Early Education Entitlement Funding was allocated to Essex based on demographics such as population numbers, indices of deprivation and rurality. There continued to be a national debate around the levels of funding for early years settings and school run settings. Essex was funded on a participation level, with the more children that accessed the funding the more funding Essex received.

(v) The feedback from the consultation survey formed a big part of the design of the strategy. The survey had been available online but had also been sent to all early years settings and schools, and distributed through the Essex Child Family Wellbeing Service, the Working Families Facebook page and ECC Twitter account.

(vi) The majority of under-5s attending an early years' provider would be in a setting rated 'good' or 'outstanding'. Early years settings that did not receive 'good' or 'outstanding' from Ofsted received intensive support with teams deployed to work with them to help improve their outcomes. If they were unable to improve then any Free Education Entitlement funding could be withdrawn.

(vii) There had not been Good Level of Development data collated at a national level since 2019 due to Covid, with the next collated GLD data to be available in summer 2022. However, in the meantime, preschools would still have been assessing their

own children and their levels of development. In the summer holidays some summer holiday activity groups took place to help children's physical and social interaction.

(viii) Pre-schools and schools ran early years provision only in term time. However, the Essex Wellbeing Service and the Family Hub had comprehensive family support programmes throughout the summer holidays for children that needed more help.

(ix) All district and borough councils were invited to the engagement sessions and workshops and ECC were keen to engage with them further.

(x) The engagement sessions had been attended by some childcare providers. As part of the school's forum there was an Early Years Subgroup with representation from each type of childcare setting.

(xi) A childcare efficiency audit was undertaken every year, to consider future housing developments and the forecast need for each type of childcare setting.

(xii) There was a childcare brokerage service for parents who were unable to access childcare, the team supported them to look into how they can find childcare and what options there were.

Conclusion:

The Chairman stressed that the strategy was aspirational and that more detail was needed on implementation. It was **agreed** that the following further information be provided:

- (i) A delivery plan/timetable and significant milestones would be brought to the Committee in early 2022, to include a brief executive summary-type overview of a 5-year plan and key objectives;
- (ii) Some further information and analysis of the Word Gap with more Essex context;
- (iii) Further analysis and breakdown of feedback from the various surveys and consultations;
- (iv) More information on numbers accessing funded places and breakdown including disadvantaged children;
- (v) Information on the childcare brokerage service

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

5. Home Education and Children Missing Education

The Committee considered report PAF/12/21 comprising of an initial introduction and update on the issues and challenges of Home Education in Essex.

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,
Clare Kershaw – Director, Education,
Anita Patel-Lingham – Statutory Education Compliance Manager.

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

(i) The Cross-Party Working Group had been meeting weekly since September to discuss the Education Select Committee report and prepare a further response on behalf of ECC by the end of October.

(ii) Funding was not available for parents who elect to home educate their child. The local authority did not receive funding for off-rolled children.

(iii) Monitoring responsibilities of local authorities were very limited with guidance indicating that local authorities were not in a position to routinely monitor the home education provision of children unless it appeared that they were not receiving a suitable education. However, 2019 guidance gave local authorities responsibility to contact families who were home educating at least on an annual basis.

(iv) Whether children were developing life skills during home education remained a concern as there was no guidance to follow and no stipulated minimum standards. The need for a national standard for different ages and levels would be included in ECC's response to the Education Select Committee.

(v) Home education had increased over the years with lifestyle considerations being the main factor stated by parents in Essex. Parents were not required to provide a reason for electing to home educate, however they were required to write to the school and ECC would scrutinise the letter to see whether there was something to be concerned about. There were a few schools where there seemed a disproportionate number of their pupils electing to be home educated and this continued to be monitored by ECC.

(vi) The Association of Directors of Children's Services annually collected elective home education data and ECC were in the process of putting together their response for this year. The data provided a breakdown of how many children in each year group were currently registered as home educated and also the reasons where available.

(vii) ECC had not received a response to its earlier submission.

Conclusion

It was **agreed** that in due course there would be a further update presented to the Committee once a response was received to ECC's submission to the Education Select Committee and Government and/or when the Cross-Party Working Group had any further aspects to report or consult the Committee on.

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

Thereafter the meeting adjourned at 11.40am and reconvened at 12.05pm.

6. Domestic Abuse Update

The Committee considered report PAF/13/21 and the following people from Essex County Council attended the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Councillor Beverley Egan – Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Early Years,
Clare Burrell – Head of Strategic Commissioning and Policy.

The Committee received a presentation from Clare Burrell, Head of Strategic Commissioning and Policy which provided an overview of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the duties ECC had as a Tier 1 local authority. The presentation highlighted the challenges of implementing the new duties, the benefits of the Act and an overview of the new Domestic Abuse Commissioning Strategy 2021- 2024 which included the five key objectives ECC was aiming to achieve.

During discussion, the following was highlighted/raised:

(i) ECC now had to provide support for victims of domestic abuse in safe accommodation. ECC considered that people should be helped to stay in their own home to stop disruption in children's lives. ECC had lobbied hard and victims homes could now be viewed as safe accommodation when appropriate safety plans were in place.

(ii) There was not currently a refuge provision for men.

(iii) The relationship with the Police was strong. There was now a joint communications team on domestic abuse with the Police and the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, encouraging people to come forward.

(iv) The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's Office and the Police were key partners of the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board which had jointly commissioned some of the current services that were in place. The Domestic Abuse Partnership Board had its own strategy with five key outcomes, and was overseeing work with perpetrators to reduce offending. The Data Analytics teams were commissioned to undertake supporting work around perpetrators.

(v) There was a working group that were looking at including domestic abuse victims within a Whole Housing Approach ,

(vi) As part of the new Care Technology contract recently placed by Adult Social Care it was hoped to also build in more use of technology to support domestic abuse victims.

(vii) Citizens Advice Bureaus and various other voluntary bodies were involved as key stakeholders. Governance processes had taken time in being put in place but ECC were now making progress in further building relationships.

(viii) Key messaging was important to help people who were in denial to understand that they could be in a domestic abuse situation. This needed to include advice where there was coercive behaviours but no evidence of physical harm.

(ix) All schools tried to offer opportunities for children and young people to speak out and talk about what they were experiencing. There was currently a range of intervention programmes and support from Mental Health school teams which was being rolled out across Essex in phases.

(x) Children and young people who had been vulnerable to domestic abuse situations also could look for belonging and friendship in gangs and become victims in different ways later in life.

(xi) Members agreed it would be helpful to know where to signpost and refer people when they came to them for advice on domestic abuse. Members highlighted that there was a prescribed process for reporting safeguarding concerns and suggested that similar should be developed for domestic abuse.

(xii) During the pandemic information had been sent out to food banks to distribute with food bags and parcels.

(xiii) Members were interested in the sustainability of funding and were minded to support any lobbying to ensure the security of future funding.

(xiv) There was discussion about setting up a Task and Finish Group. Members agreed that the group would need to have a narrow terms of reference, sustainable finance was suggested, and/or partnership working and that there should be a clear direction with objectives.

Conclusion:

The following was **agreed**:

- (i) A meeting would be set up between the Chairman and the lead officer to further discuss the Task and Finish Group;
- (ii) Information would be re-sent to food banks in good time before Christmas;
- (iii) A more detailed slide deck on domestic abuse issues/actions beyond what was being done for children would be sent to members;
- (iv) Some examples of messaging around spotting subtle signs that may point to domestic abuse would be provided to members.
- (v) Copies of communications for where to go for help would be provided to members.

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

7. Work Programme

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/14/21 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 Wednesday 10 November 2021.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 1.32pm.

Chairman