

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 16 September 2021 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT:

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Nick Housden
Cllr Alastair Chambers	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Fiona Crouch	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr David Drew	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People

Officers in attendance: Andy Dempsey - Head of Strategy and Partnerships
Clare Dudman - Head of School Improvement
Lyn Green - Participation Officer
Kirsten Harrison - Director of Education
Mandy Quayle – Director of People and Digital Services

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In respect of agenda item 5: Education Provision in Gloucestershire: -

- Cllr Ben Evans declared a personal interest as a Director of Chime Management CiC.
- Cllr Nick Housden declared a personal interest as a Director of Bridge Youth Services.

2. NOTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS - 17 JUNE AND 15 JULY 2021

The notes of the meetings held on 17 June and 15 July 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. CO-OPTION OF THE ROLE OF AMBASSADOR FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The committee agreed to co-opt the role of Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People on to the committee for the duration of this council.

4. EDUCATION PROVISION IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

- 4.1 The committee was pleased to welcome Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education, and Clare Dudman, Head of School Improvement, particularly as both had only been in post for two weeks. (The presentation slides to accompany this agenda item were published on the council website.)
- 4.2 The Director of Education informed the committee that their key role was to look to establish appropriate vehicles for change and improvement, and develop collaborative system leadership. They stated that their focus would be to aim for influence on the system in the best interests of the children and young people of Gloucestershire.
- 4.3 The committee was informed that the new Ofsted framework brought outstanding schools back into the inspection regime. Over 20 schools in Gloucestershire have not been

inspected for over 10 years; there could have been many changes in the school during that time.

- 4.4 The current climate was challenging for everyone, including, but not limited to, the recovery from Covid, financial challenges, and pressures on high needs provision.
- 4.5 Members were informed that the council does not have a fixed position around Academisation, but could not ignore the national agenda. The Education Reference Group, which brought together the Director of Education, the Director of Strategy and Partnerships, the Regional Schools' Commissioner's Office, the Dioceses and the Chairs of the Headteacher's Associations – secondary, primary and special, was established in the summer term 2021 and has met twice. The purpose of the group was to discuss local education system areas of operation, opportunities and barriers to collaborative working as well as considering innovative ways to work together for the benefit of young people.
- 4.6 The committee noted that the SEND area review was due within the next 18 months to two years. A SEND strategy document would be received by Cabinet in December 2021.
- 4.7 Both the Director and Head of School Improvement would be spending time getting to know the teams, and looking at those schools and aspects of the school system that were causing particular concern.
- 4.8 The committee was informed that one of the upsides of Covid was that it had led to more effective weekly communication with Headteachers, which had resulted in a better level of trust and understanding; it would be important to build on this.
- 4.9 Members were informed that officers were working actively to achieve closer harmonisation between education and social care teams to better collectively support the most vulnerable children and young people.
- 4.10 It was questioned whether the performance data indicated that educational achievement in Gloucestershire was benefiting from pupils from outside the county accessing our grammar schools. It was explained that this type of data would be hard to extrapolate, and that it was important to note that young people from Gloucestershire also travelled cross border for their education.
- 4.11 In response to a question the committee was informed that it was the council's role to support schools to ensure that the pupil premium was used as effectively as possible. However its operational and strategic use was determined by individual schools.
- 4.12 It was questioned whether Elective Home Education (EHE) was an issue that would be investigated? The Director explained that this would be a focus area. There has been a significant increase in the number of young people home educating across 2019/20, and it would be important to understand the reasons why parents were making this choice, and the impact of Covid.
- 4.13 In response to a question regarding alternative provision the Director explained that this provision was being reviewed as part of a transformation project; there was the possibility that we did not have the right provision in place to meet the needs of all children and young people. It was agreed that this was a potential item for the committee's workplan. Members agreed that it would be important to ensure that this provision was of the required quality. The Head of School Improvement informed members that it was important that schools provided a curriculum that was fit for purpose. Ofsted would be looking closely at this aspect of provision.

- 4.14 A member shared their concerns regarding a particular Academy Trust, and asked a question about what could be done with regard to Academy Trusts that were not performing as required. It was explained that all the local authority could do was to try and build a good working relationship with a Trust, and work with the Regional Schools Commissioner. It was also explained that with regard to school buildings the responsibility for these also sat within the Trust; the Regional Schools Commissioner would have teams looking at the quality of buildings. Another significant factor was the shift to an ACEs trauma aware practice and a focus on how it could be ensured that Academies (and Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)) were taking this on board. The Director informed members that these issues would be worked through the Education Reference Group; working with systems leaders to get system buy in and make progress with these issues.
- 4.15 With regard to school exclusions the committee was aware that some MATs have a zero tolerance approach; this was at odds with the restorative practice approach promoted by the local authority. The committee had commissioned a task group to look at the issue of school exclusions in the previous council. Members remained concerned with the number of students being excluded and indicated that they would wish to follow up on this matter. These were our most vulnerable children and young people and it was important that they did not miss out on their education. The committee was informed that there was a lot of work in place with regard to this area of concern.
- 4.16 The Director agreed that being excluded was one of the most catastrophic things that could happen to a child/young person. It was important to try to understand what had brought them to that crisis point. The Head of School Improvement stated that it would be good to think that the school would reach out for support before it got to this point. It was stated that it was often the case that the individual at risk of being excluded was known to other agencies. It was acknowledged that partnership working/multi agency support was important. A key factor would be the support that the school put in place around the child to avoid permanent exclusion.
- 4.17 It was questioned how every child who was good enough to go to a grammar school could be encouraged to do so. The Director indicated that they did not know the answer to this question. Some members agreed that this needed to change; it was important that every child was encouraged to reach their potential.
- 4.18 In response to a question the committee was informed that the county would be welcoming 35 Afghan refugee families; this would be coordinated through GARAS (Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers www.garas.org.uk).
- 4.19 Members were concerned with regard to the morale and mental health and wellbeing of teachers. The Director informed the committee that they met with GASH (Gloucestershire Association of Secondary Headteachers), GAPH (Gloucestershire Association of Primary Headteachers), and GASSH (Gloucestershire Association of Special School Headteachers), on a weekly basis. Mental health and wellbeing was discussed at these meetings, and an education wellbeing charter had recently been published by the DfE for rollout in schools.
- 4.20 It was stated that it would be helpful to have a map of Gloucestershire showing where schools were located, and their Ofsted rating, to better understand the picture across the county.

ACTION: Kirsten Harrison

5. DIGITAL AND ICT SERVICE CHILDREN'S SERVICES REPORT

- 5.1 The committee received a briefing from the Director of People and Digital Services. The Director was clear that the state of the ICT service had negatively impacted on children's services. However, they wanted to give the committee confidence that there was a plan in place to address this position.
- 5.2 The Director described the challenges that had been encountered as the council tried to move toward a more sustainable future for its ICT Service. The pandemic had proved to be a particularly challenging time with the service not immediately best placed to be able to support the level of remote working that would be required. This had also delayed some of the planned improvement work. The focus now was on improving and replacing much of the infrastructure. The committee was informed that some of the inherited inconsistencies were causing some issues, but things were improving month on month. The service was now receiving positive feedback from children's services.
- 5.3 It was noted that the service was about to begin the rollout of Microsoft 365 which would be a further increase in the stability of ICT.
- 5.4 The Cabinet Member Safeguarding Children and Early Years informed members that they had met with Director on this matter. They wished to record their thanks for the work undertaken to improve the situation. The committee was also informed that the Cabinet Member had seen an improvement in feedback from Children's Services.
- 5.5 Members were concerned that this could have a negative impact on the expected Ofsted Inspection. The Director stated that there was no straightforward answer to this question. There was a difficult period in April and May (2021) as the (inherited) system had not been fully documented by the previous provider and was not fully understood by the present incumbent. However, the number of Priority 1 incidents had now significantly reduced, and the previous issues around the MASH were no longer being seen. There had been a period where there had been a lot of frustration.
- 5.6 The Director informed members that Ofsted would want to see that there was a plan in place to address issues. The Director believed that the current position with ICT was not negatively impacting the council's ability to keep children safe.
- 5.7 The Director of Partnerships and Strategy (Children's Services) informed the committee that the operational impact at the start of the pandemic had included connectivity issues related to LiquidLogic, logging on to the system, and an inability to have collective conversations. These issues had impacted on performance data; children's services were required to respond to particular issues within 4 hours. A WhatsApp group had been established to enable an immediate sharing of problems. The traffic in this group has fallen significantly; the concerns and number of incidents have reduced. As part of the 6 month review officers had spoken with the DfE and were clear that this situation was not preventing council from keeping children safe. The SEF (Statement of Evidence) would reference this situation but would show that there has been improvement. The Director was cautiously optimistic.
- 5.8 It was agreed that when Microsoft365 was rolled out that there must be the appropriate training and support for officers.
- 5.9 The committee asked that a timeline of key milestones be produced to enable members to better track progress.

ACTION: Mandy Quayle

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

6. COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

- 6.1 In addition to the items already included in the work plan to add: -
- The outcome of the Ofsted Inspection (this may require an additional meeting of the committee)
 - Exclusions – the Timpson review into exclusions and the committee's task group report to be shared with members
 - Domestic Abuse – January 2022
 - Alternative provision
 - Adoption
 - Fostering
 - Peer to peer violence
 - Education – how can children and young people be inspired to achieve.
 - Gangs
- 6.2 It was agreed that Performance Reports be scheduled on a quarterly basis, and that members would send in questions on these reports at least two days in advance of the meeting.

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 12.33 pm