

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Glenfield on Tuesday, 1 June 2021.

PRESENT

Mr. M. Frsiby CC	Mrs. C. Lewis
Mrs. H. J. Fryer CC	Mr. N. Lockyer
Mr. L. Hadji-Nikolaou CC	Ms. Betty Newton CC
Mr. R. Hills CC	Mr. C. A. Smith CC

In Attendance

Mrs. D. Taylor CC – Lead Member for Children and Families
Mrs. B. Seaton CC – Cabinet Support Member
Mrs. A. Hack CC (Via Microsoft Teams) – For Agenda Item 5

1. Appointment of Chairman.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Mrs. H. Fryer CC as the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the period ending with the Annual Meeting of the County Council in 2022 be noted.

Mrs. H. Fryer CC – in the Chair

2. Election of Deputy Chairman.

RESOLVED:

That Mr. C. Smith CC be elected Deputy Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the period ending with the Annual Meeting of the County Council in 2022.

3. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2021 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

4. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 34.

5. Questions asked by members under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

The following questions, received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5) were put to the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

(a) Mrs A Hack CC asked the following question of the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Pupil Premium is a top up provided for schools for each child who receives a Free School Meal (FSM) at a rate of £1,345 a year for Primary School Children and £955 pre secondary school children. This premium is calculated in October and January each year. However, in 2021, schools have been denied access to apply for Pupil premium for any child that became eligible from October 2020 to Jan 2021. In light of the reported figures, that almost 62% of schools have seen at least 5 pupils become eligible for FSM, how many children in Leicestershire became eligible for a Free School Meal from October 2020 to January 2021?

Mrs H Fryer CC replied as follows:

The DfE changed the way it allocates pupil premium from the January census to the October census to be in line with school funding in general. Between October 2020 and January 2021 an additional 596 FSM pupils in primary and 157 secondary pupils became eligible.

Supplementary Question

Mrs Hack CC asked a supplementary question in relation to over 750 children becoming eligible for free school meals from October 2020 to January 2021, which seemed like an unprecedented increase in the cohort. What representations have been made by Leicestershire County Council to the DfE to delay the change in the calculation?

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services replied to the effect that the Lead Member for Children and Families had recently written to the DfE and local MPs to raise the issue nationally. The issue had also been raised directly with the DfE department via the Association of Directors of Children's Services, where it was discussed on a regular basis.

(b) Mrs A Hack CC asked the following question of the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

In light of the change of timing for schools to apply for Pupil Premium, what is the current estimated loss per school in Leicestershire due to the change in calculation?

Mrs H Fryer CC replied as follows:

Schools don't apply for Pupil Premium, it is self-generated allocation from the census day. The total monies not allocated, due to the move to using the October census data is a total of £801,620 across all Leicestershire primary schools and £149,935 across all Leicestershire secondary schools.

Supplementary Question

Mrs Hack CC asked a supplementary question in relation to the fact that in the original question, it was requested that the funding loss, which is almost £1m in Leicestershire, was estimated per school and whether this was available. If not, it was asked whether Councillors could receive the total loss for the schools based in their divisions?

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Director of Children and Family Services responded that a breakdown for each school was not currently available as it would be a relatively big piece of work to undertake. However, the Director stated that if members did want to understand the impact for their schools, they should contact her directly.

(c) Mrs A Hack CC asked the following question of the Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

In light of Covid, there has been an earlier response than in 2020 to the management of all Exams. There is an expectation that schools will do most of the work on assessments, rather than the exam boards. Schools pay for Exam fees of approximately £60 per BTEC/Alevel and £30-£40 per GCSE and there is no current agreement on refunds (total refunds for 2020 was £42m). With schools currently being obliged to pay for exams and also being obliged to undertake teacher assessments, what support is being given to plug the financial/workload gap?

Mrs H Fryer CC replied as follows:

Almost all Leicestershire Secondary Schools are academies and therefore the local authority is not directly involved in their funding – this would be between the ESFA and the academies. The Leicestershire Education Effectiveness Partnership has developed a support offer to schools to assist in the moderation of centre assessed grades.

6. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

7. Declarations of interest.

The Chairman invited members who wished to do so to declare any interest in respect of items on the agenda for the meeting.

No declarations were made.

8. Declarations of the Party Whip in accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 16.

There were no declarations of the party whip.

9. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 36.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 36.

10. Wider Impact of Covid-19.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an update on the wider impact of Covid-19 on children and young people in Leicestershire. This included in Early Years, Safeguarding, the Children and Family Wellbeing Service and Education Effectiveness. The report also detailed how the department had responded. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were raised:

- i) The Director stated that the Coronavirus pandemic had posed unprecedented pressures and challenges and it was known that this specifically presented a higher level of risk for some children. It was pleasing to note that the service had adapted and changed the way it had delivered services to reflect the changing circumstances, guidance and restrictions and had dealt with the additional pressures presented by local lockdowns.
- ii) The Association for Young People's Health had produced a report which suggested that children and young people had been disproportionately impacted by the social, educational and economic impacts of the pandemic. There was evidence that many of the known risk factors for poorer outcomes for children and young people had been increased and those already facing challenges seemed to have been the hardest hit. The report also highlighted particular concern about the possible 'slow burn' impacts of educational and employment constraints and the role the pandemic was playing in widening health inequalities.
- iii) Barnardo's had commissioned a number of surveys with children and young people and at least a third of those surveyed said that they had experienced an increase of mental health and wellbeing issues and nearly 75% said that they had missed going to school or college. The findings had suggested that Covid-19 had had a disproportionate impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- iv) The County Council's Policy Team had recently undertaken a project titled 'Conversations about Covid', which aimed to understand the full impact of the pandemic on local people. The project had spoken with a range of people and a wide range of experiences had been revealed. The Children and Family Service also actively sought feedback from children, young people and their families on an ongoing basis. The Barnardo's national consultation had been adapted and used to obtain timely localised data. As a result of the survey, the Leicester and Leicestershire and Rutland Safeguarding Children Partnerships had continued to highlight young people's mental health as a key part of their business plan and had commissioned an audit of CAMHS waiting lists.
- v) A member raised the point that a general lack of engagement was an issue for schools and it was queried what more could be done to increase engagement. The Director responded that there had been an increase in children being electively home educated but there was confidence that schools were doing everything they could to support children on returning to school. Assurance was also provided that the department was supporting children in returning to school. It would be necessary to continue to monitor this over the coming years.
- vi) The Director confirmed that the same level of support was provided across all age groups. However, there had generally been greater attendance in Primary schools and more issues with those not attending in secondary schools.
- vii) The Director stated that the longer term impact of Covid-19 was not yet clear, but it could result in further increases in the number of children and families requiring

support with concerns over their short-term and long-term educational achievement and mental health. This would continue to be monitored.

The Director recorded her thanks to staff across the service and to those working in the education sector during the pandemic and this was reiterated by the Lead Member for Children and Families.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

11. Children and Family Services Department.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of the work of the Children and Family Services Department. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

The vision of the department was for Leicestershire to be the best place for all children, young people and their families. This was underpinned by the mission statement that children and young people in Leicestershire were safe and living in families where they could achieve their potential and have their health, wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities. The Children and Family Services Department Plan 2020-2023 set out four key ambitions for the department – to help every child get the best possible start in life, help children and their families build strength, resilience, confidence and capacity, help children to live in safe, stable environments and have secure attachments, and help every child to have access to good quality education to ensure they achieve their maximum potential.

In relation to Educational Excellence, it was asked that reference be made to also working with the Church of England and Roman Catholic diocese.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

12. Annual Report of the Virtual School Head.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services which provided an overview of Virtual School practice up to 31 March 2021 and a summary of data relevant to the academic year 2019-20. National benchmark data for 2019-20 had been published in March 2021 and was taken into account in the report. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the discussion, the following points were raised:

- i) Across the 2019-20 academic year, the number of Leicestershire children entering care continued to rise and currently, there were 438 children of statutory school age in care. It was noted that there had been a significant increase over the last four years, although the number was lower than had been forecast and was also lower than neighbouring authorities. It was stated that the increase could be attributed to the offer and support given to homeless 16 and 17 year olds. The number of Leicestershire looked after children with a Special Educational Need was in line with other local authorities.

- ii) The Director stated that all children, for the previous term and a half, had had their education disrupted. Consequently, it was worth noting that examination results would not be comparable with those from previous years. The Virtual School had worked hard to remain in contact with all statutory school age children in care and assurance was given that the service had a complete picture of their progress.
- iii) The Virtual School's role to facilitate effective communication between the school and parents was highlighted and a query was raised around support was given to children in need. In response, it was stated that the DfE was currently looking at how this cohort might be better supported. In terms of the Virtual School, the support offered to schools directly was equally as appropriate in relation to how they supported children in need on roll. Support was also offered to parents of children who were previously looked after. There was the potential that Virtual Schools could be asked to provide this service for children and parents. It was noted that the response from the DfE had been delayed due to Covid-19, but once this had been received, information would be provided to the Committee.
- iv) A member questioned the safeguarding role of the Virtual School, and whether it dealt with traveller children. The Director reported that the Inclusion Service was responsible for children missing education, and that included traveller children. The Virtual School did not have the responsibility for this cohort as its responsibility lay with children in the care of the local authority. The Virtual School did not have a primary role in safeguarding, but had a wider role in ensuring children were protected. The Virtual School was essentially a skilled group of practitioners who acted as champions for children.

The Lead Member assured the Committee that further information on the role of the Virtual School would be provided in training on corporate parenting. Newsletters from the Corporate Parenting Team would be circulated to all members of the County Council.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

13. Quarter 4 2020/21 Performance Report.

The Committee considered a joint report of the Chief Executive and Director of Children and Family Services which presented an update of the Children and Family Services Department's performance for the period January to March 2021 (Quarter 4). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 13' is filed with these minutes.

The Committee agreed that this was a very pleasing report, with no indicators being Red. Although there were areas that required further work to improve, there appeared to be a steady trajectory of improved performance.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

14. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 7 September 2021 at 2.00pm.

2.00 – 3.02pm
01 June 2021

CHAIRMAN