

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 22nd June, 2020 (Virtual Meeting)

PRESENT

Councillor J Saunders (Chairman)
Councillor C Bulman (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors M Addison, J Barber, M Beanland, D Brown, J Buckley, P Butterill, S Handley, A Moran, L Smith and N Wylie

PORTFOLIO HOLDERS IN ATTENDANCE

Councillor K Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Mark Palethorpe- Executive Director People
Jacquie Sims- Director of Children's Social Care
Jacky Forster- Director of Education and 14-19 Skills
Alison Stathers-Tracey- Director of Prevention and Early Help
Lauren Conway- Improvement and Development Officer

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence received.

2 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2020.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the chairman.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4 WHIPPING DECLARATIONS

There were no whipping declarations.

5 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no members of the public present wishing to speaking.

6 RESPONDING TO COVID-19

Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People introduced the item to the Committee, he set the context for the report and overview which included the lockdown period, the lead up to it and the move to recovery.

Mark thanked officers, partners, and elected members for all the support given towards children and families across the borough throughout the lockdown period. In terms of day to day business, the service had taken a significant shift but that essential services had continued and offered support to the most vulnerable children in the borough to remain safe. Vulnerable children had been supported to attend school and family care had been delivered differently this included meetings and contacts remotely.

The Committee heard that care leavers are one of the most vulnerable groups and that lockdown will have had an impact on cases of hidden harm which will have a future impact on those children and young people.

Midwifery services had been provided through children services, although several early year settings had been closed and staff had been furloughed.

The Committee were advised that the legacy of the pandemic was an increased demand for services (particularly mental health), capacity and costs for next year. It was acknowledged that the pandemic had caused a challenge in terms of dedication of staff both capacity and emotionally.

The Committee were invited to ask questions, and a number of comments were noted:

- Support for foster carers had been provided for those who had incurred additional costs via virtual school £185k had been projected until November 2020;
- Children who were on a child protection plan, received visits during the lockdown period. Virtual visits had commenced when the visit had been risk assessed and deemed safe. The goal was the return of physical visits for all children with staff safety;
- Older young people had enjoyed virtual meetings and built stronger connection with more frequent meetings. Agencies e.g. schools had done the same thing with vulnerable young people;
- More frequent virtual meetings are being scheduled for children with disabilities as it might not be safe to arrange a physical meeting with this cohort yet;
- The Committee acknowledged how useful briefings had been throughout the lockdown period, and also that not all residents and

vulnerable families had good connectivity to internet and in these instances telephone might be the only option;

- Visiting with children and families had varied considerably, from a telephone conversation to the video on screen, and be able to see inside the home, to doorstep visits and can talk in the garden, socially distanced walks, although high risk cases retained the need for the visit to go ahead as it would normally. Every child had been risk assessed and kept under review;
- Some Early Help cases had escalated into social care when risk could not be managed safely;
- 739 devices (laptops, 4G dongles for internet access) had been dispatched to vulnerable families;
- Short break carers had stopped and the authority, had to become creative by looking at short break providers to work on an offer for over the summer holidays;
- Members discussed the need to look at the financial impact of the pandemic separately and in detail;
- Domestic abuse was being considered in partnership with Cheshire Without Abuse who had received £300k funding in order to deal with the impact of hidden harm;
- An increase in the severity of referrals had been recorded, and concerns about this had led to a reshaped offer to enable an appropriate response;
- Initially only special schools and those with complex needs were provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the advise from the Department of Education was that PPE should not be worn unless there was a child with symptoms in the school and then only the carer for that child in school should wear it. All schools have been issued a supply of PPE however this could not be continued in the long term and the school would need to source their own or come back to the authority if there was an emergency; and
- There had been a gradual increase in schools opening, guidance had changed and schools had explored what could work according to the size and shape of the accommodation.

The Committee had a discussion about the recommendations contained within the report and concluded that there was not enough financial detail to support the recommendation at the start of the report.

The Committee agreed that any application for funding to central government will need to have a strong evidence base.

Visiting Member, Councillor Janet Clowes, advised the Committee that during the last Corporate Scrutiny meeting, it was decided that a sub-group of Corporate Scrutiny and Audit and Governance be formed to monitor all the Covid-Coded expenditure as requested on a monthly basis by Central Government.

Mark Palethorpe advised that the authority had received £19.7 million funding however there had been a loss of income from other services (e.g. carpark charges).

The Committee agreed it would be helpful to see the results of how schools are transitioning children to secondary school, especially the emotional transition.

RESOLVED:

That

the progress to date and issues outlined in the report be received and noted;

any funding relating to the Covid-19 pandemic be fed into an itemised report to Corporate Scrutiny as part of the Corporate/Audit and Governance sub-group; and

Members be provided with a briefing to explain how schools were dealing with students transitioning into High School, especially the emotional transition.

7 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the Forward Plan. There were three items that related to this Committee. The proposed expansion of Wilmslow High School, and the Regional Adoption Agency Integrated Services Agreement for consideration by Cabinet in September. The support for Syrian Vulnerable person resettlement programme and unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children and Asylum Seekers dispersal programme was expected to go later as September was not an appropriate timing as no travel was permitted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Plan be received and noted.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

Visiting Member, Councillor Rachel Bailey advised the Committee that funding had been announced from central government to help young people catch up on lost time through the pandemic. There had been a varied response from schools for various reasons. Councillor Bailey requested that the Committee consider an overview that related to pupil performance and performance of schools, and how the Local Authority looked at the skill set of those leaving school on the cusp of high school.

The Committee were advised that an additional meeting in August would be necessary to ensure the appropriate level of scrutiny was given to the items on the Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

That:

- a) Helen Davies add an item to the Committee's Work Programme to scrutinise the lost time for young people leaving high school and on the cusp of high school.
- b) Helen Davies advise the Committee of the scheduled date for the August meeting.
- c) Children and Family and Corporate Scrutiny Officers to liaise re: Covid-Coding finance.

The meeting commenced at 1.30 pm and concluded at 3.34 pm

Councillor J Saunders (Chairman)