



Buckinghamshire Council Children's & Education Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON TUESDAY 22 MARCH 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 2.53 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

M Bull, T Wilson, P Birchley, K Bates, N Hussain, S James, R Matthews and P Turner

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

R Stuchbury

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that Councillors Adoh, Blamires, Collingwood, Cranmer, Dormer, Jones, Kayani, Osibogun and Mrs Williams had given their apologies for the meeting.

Councillor Stuchbury was attending as substitute for Councillor Kayani.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Hussein declared a personal interest as a school Governor.

Councillor Bates declared a personal interest as a Chair of Governors.

Councillor Matthews declared a personal interest as a school governor and volunteer at Transitions UK.

Tony Wilson declared a personal interest as a Trustee of the Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20th January 2022 were reviewed.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20th January 2022 be AGREED as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

4 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman, Councillor Birchley, announced with pleasure that the council's recent Ofsted inspection of Children's Services had shown the extensive improvements that the department had made since the last inspection in 2017 and during the time of the Covid pandemic. She

thanked the Strategic Director, Richard Nash and all the staff for their hard work.

5 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

It was noted that no public questions had been received for this meeting.

It was noted that information relating to a previous public question had been included in the agenda for this meeting. Councillor Bates would follow up the issue on the provision of data for exam results with the Strategic Director.

6 OFSTED INSPECTION OUTCOME REPORT

The Chairman introduced this item on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection which was recently undertaken at the end of 2021. It related to the services provided for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. The service had undertaken an extensive amount of work prior to and during the pandemic. Many issues related to the retention and recruitment of social workers, and front-line managers and these were compounded by increased workloads. The Select Committee responded to this immediately and had set up a rapid review group in January to look in detail at the issue social worker recruitment and retention. The group would present their report to the committee in June.

The Chairman thanked all the staff in the Children's Services department and the Directors for their thorough work over the last few years.

Richard Nash, Strategic Director, attended the meeting via Teams and noted that the meeting had been rescheduled due to another Ofsted inspection of the SEND services. The findings of this would be reported in due course.

Mr Nash gave details of the Council's Ofsted history noting that the service was found to be inadequate in 2014 based on previous service provision. The service was also found to be inadequate in 2017 when it had been hoped that a different outcome would result. 2017 was the starting point of the current leadership team's attempt to turn the service around. It is recognised that change in Children's Services takes time to achieve. The inspection was very thorough with the outcome "requires work to be good" and so was no longer "inadequate".

The findings, which were published in February, were as expected as the department was aware of the shortcomings through quality assurance. 400 children's cases were reviewed and 350 documents. The inspection took place over three weeks with two weeks on site. The report showed that much good work had taken place but it was understood that there was more work to be done to keep the service improving into the future. The work that was achieved by the staff during the pandemic and with the history of poor service in Buckinghamshire was extensive and was recognised by Ofsted.

In response to points made by Councillor Hussein regarding (i) the frequency of change of social workers and therefore fragmented service in some cases and (ii) performance data not feeding through to reducing referrals, Mr Nash responded that the recruitment and retention of social workers was a national problem.

In Buckinghamshire the pandemic has caused a huge increase in volume of work (62% in child protection) which had put great pressure on the workforce, and therefore some social workers would make decisions to work in different roles. The issue was mainly in the frontline child protection area. Agency worker turnover also impacted as cases had to be transferred to other social workers.

Three things were being actioned to address this:

- the expansion of the in-house social worker academy enabling workforce planning; encouraging staff loyalty and reduced dependency on agency staff;
- support around career development and
- the management of high caseloads.

Social work is a difficult area of work and Mr Nash noted the department's intention to support and manage the issues as best as possible.

Mr Nash reported that:

- the Ofsted Inspection is a "stop the clock exercise" i.e. Inspectors report on the situation current at the time. With regards to performance management, the department were aware of the issues.
- High re-referrals were due to a) the pandemic and b) the historical state of the department.
- 93% of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Ofsted picked up on two cases where there was an issue. The department would manage the changing circumstances of care-leavers lives carefully and although unsuitable accommodation was sometimes used when necessary, the department always tried to ensure that this is for as short a time as possible.
- Children's social work is a statutory requirement of a council so the number of cases referred to the teams varied day to day but had to be dealt with and measures were taken to balance out the workloads on a daily basis. However, work could be at too high a level for some people for some of the time.
- One of the impacts of the pandemic was not being able to involve children as much as possible in the department's work, however going forward they would be involved in corporate parenting.
- In response to a question, the Director noted that part of the improvement work since 2017 included ensuring that the children's recording systems were fit for purpose. Two systems were currently in place but work was progressing to implement only one.
- Supervision and management oversight was very important and performance data was provided on a monthly basis giving information as to which staff had supervision sessions. It was important to make sure this was reported regularly.
- High caseloads meant that sometimes supervision was functional rather than reflective due to time pressures and the high volume of cases but this was being addressed going forward.
- Much work was required to ensure school children moving in and out of the county were given school places at the right place and time. Most schools were near full capacity and therefore the support for children in their education had to be flexible sometimes.

In response to a question from Councillor Collingwood, Mr Nash noted that the service had created a comprehensive set of action plans from the 2017 inspection which were monitored through the Improvement Board, chaired by John Coughlin, Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council.

- Progress from the Board was regularly reported to the Council's Cabinet.
- There was a combination of actions to be taken to avoid the issue of children having too many changes of social worker. The whole service would be looked at to ensure maximum consistency for children.
- The SEND Ofsted inspection report would address the issues of early help mentioned in this Ofsted report and there would be an action plan going forward for that inspection relating to various issues including emotional health which would be addressed in conjunction with health partners.

Foster care had shown an improvement in both the number of carers and placements also. Mr Nash noted the following:

- that work would always seek to improve the numbers of adopters and fosterers.
- Work was underway to increase assessment of the type of skills required by some children re-referred to the service.

The Local Authority Designated Officer had been referred to in the report and the issues in relation to this were resolved prior to the inspection.

The Corporate Director noted how important it is for the service to keep improving. Ofsted had covered a wide scope during its last visit and would keep in touch with the council once a year and would visit again in the future.

Mr Nash emphasised that all the service's staff who had all worked over the last two years during the pandemic with a hugely increased workload to keep children safe under pressurised circumstances, were to be valued highly for their hard work.

The Chairman and the Committee thanked and congratulated the service on the work done in a short space of time to improve the service from "inadequate" to "requires improvement".

7 WORK PROGRAMME

- a) The Chairman noted that a rapid review group had been set up by the Select Committee to look at the recruitment and retention of social workers. The Chairman of the review group, Councillor Dormer had sent his apologies to this meeting but had provided the following words for the Chairman to read in relation to the investigations the group had made so far, as follows:

Update for Children's & Education Select Committee Report into the Retention and Recruitment of Social Workers

With the OFSTED inspection expected in Q4 2021, members of the group took the decision to postpone the commencement of the report to allow senior Officers to focus their time and efforts on the imminent inspection. The following progress had been made:

- Once the inspection had been completed the group began its investigations. All meetings have been held online and in an 'open mic' session with free two-way conversation encouraged. At all stages, the group has emphasised its approach as one of a 'critical friend' looking to help and support the service, but not being reticent about making firm but fair conclusions.
- The group began its investigation with a lengthy meeting with the head of the service, Richard Nash, who provided a full assessment of the national backdrop and how this specifically affected Buckinghamshire with its then 'inadequate' OFSTED rating. Subsequent meetings have included members of the finance team to provide context for the financial implications of recruiting agency and overseas staff. The group has been forensic in its approach to data and costs and delved deep into the financial implications and costs of how the staffing model currently operates and how it might work in an optimal situation.
- The group has examined the organisational workings of the service, together with the administrative burdens placed on certain sections of the organisation, the technology employed to support staff and the role and function of Human Resources.
- In order to ensure that the group created an open forum for discussion, the decision was

- taken for the Head of Service to be excused from meetings with Line Managers and individual Social Workers, in addition the group itself took responsibility for encouraging participation, rather than relying on individuals proposed by others within the service.
- A broad section of Line Management from across the service have attended meetings and there has also been two additional meetings with social workers themselves to ensure that the group has received a wide range of opinions from a variety of different people. A great deal of time has been spent in pre-meeting preparation to ensure that key topics and areas were fully examined in depth, but the group has also been keen to allow and encourage open conversations and discussions throughout all meetings. In addition, all meetings have been concluded with the reaffirmation of our approach to privacy and encouraging those attending to send in further thoughts and observations post the meetings as they see fit.

The group has now concluded the interview and meetings aspect of its investigation and is moving to the 'wash-up' stage. However, we will retain the option to revisit the meetings stage if we feel that we have areas which require more investigation or granularity before the group reports its findings.

The overriding aim of the group is to deliver a report which reflects a true and fair reflection of the current situation for the recruitment and retention of social workers together with key recommendations. Where Buckinghamshire is successful and on point, we will ensure that this is recognised, but where there is room for improvements, the group will not shy away from criticism where it is due.

B) Future Items for the work programme

A draft list of items included children's social care improvement plan: SEND inspection results, Early help and children's centres, and the report of the rapid review group.

Councillor Hussein requested more information on the attainment gap and the workings of the 11 plus exam scheme, in particular the relationship between the schools and the authority, as the council was not responsible for the scheme but for running it.

Councillor Turner requested more information on the engagement and participation of children in care and engaging them in the work of the council on corporate parenting.

Councillor Birchley requested more information on children with special needs placed outside Buckinghamshire.

Mr Nash noted that the Improvement Board held him to account and the work was also reported to the Cabinet. The Select Committee would have sight of the work, rather than have a separate item coming to the committee.

Councillor Stuchbury noted the need to ensure Section 106 contributions matched the needs required in the council.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The provisional date of the next meeting of the Select Committee was Thursday 16th June 2022.

The meeting concluded at 2.55 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

