



Children's & Education Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's & Education Select Committee held on Thursday 4 March 2021 in Virtual Meeting via MS Teams, commencing at 2.00 pm and concluding at 3.40 pm.

Members present

S Adoh, D Barnes, M Collins, E Culverhouse, D Dhillon, B Foster, A Hussain, N Hussain, D Johncock, P Kelly, R Stuchbury, P Turner and J Ward

Others in attendance

C Pease, M Skoyles, M Shaw, T Vouyioukas, R Nash and A Cranmer

Apologies

R Jones

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Cllr R Jones.

2 Declarations of interest

Cllr D Barnes declared that his wife worked for a grammar school in Buckinghamshire.

Cllr P Kelly declared via the Teams chat bar that he worked for Sebmat Academy.

3 Minutes

Cllr D Johncock stated that Item 3 on the previous minutes regarding the exclusion of BAME children needed to be amended to say the information would be included in a future meeting of the Select Committee not the next meeting.

Subject to the above amendment, the Committee:-

RESOLVED: The minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2021 were AGREED as an accurate record.

4 Public Questions

There were none.

5 Support for Care Leavers

The Chairman welcomed Cllr M Shaw, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, and Mr R Nash, Service Director for Children's Services. Care leavers were young adults that had been in the council's care and they required a clear strategy to support their outcomes as they moved into adulthood,

A key issue was access to housing. The establishment of Buckinghamshire Council had enabled a closer working relationship with the housing service to identify solutions. The Council currently supported 291 care leavers aged between 16-25 years old and they had a wide range of individual needs. It was important to work on planning for care leavers living independently and successfully within their community. Work had been ongoing in the last 12 months to expand the accessibility of housing and to develop more specialist housing options. The pandemic had slowed progress on some aspects of this and Government guidance issued during the pandemic discouraged housing care leavers on their own. Tenancy training was also in place for care leavers to make sure young people understood the legalities and expectation of tenancy, and where support was available. The service had also set up a system whereby care leavers could register for social housing at an earlier stage and ensured that young people had access to the right housing in the right locations in relation to employment and training opportunities.

The following key points were raised in the discussion:

- Apprenticeships were available to care leavers and work streams were in place to make sure apprenticeship opportunities were maximized in the Council, partnership agencies and businesses. Care leavers were supported in achieving their aspirations.
- A Member commented that it was positive to see that the benefits of unitary was being realized through the partnership of the care leaver and housing services. It was also noted that strong working relationships with housing associations were key.
- Financial support was available to care leavers attending other further education establishments as well as university. The amount was subject to each individual's circumstances.
- One Member had been involved in their local Community Board's project whereby care leavers received gift vouchers before Christmas. The feedback on this had been positive.
- Personal Advisers played a vital role in supporting care leavers and the service recruited on an ongoing basis. The current number of Personal Advisors would be checked and fed back to the Committee after the meeting.

Action: Mr Nash

- Buckinghamshire Council's performance for care leavers compared well against other local authorities in the key metrics. These would be circulated to members after the meeting.

Action: Mr Nash

- Out of the current care leavers, 66% of 17-18 year olds were in employment,

education or training. The figure for those aged 19-21 years was 51%. It was expected these numbers would improve once the pandemic subsided and access to education became more available.

The Chairman thanked Members for their contributions on the item.

6 Ofsted Self-Assessment Presentation

The Chairman welcomed Mr Tolis Vouyioukas, Corporate Director for Children's Services, to the meeting. Cllr M Shaw, Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member Children's Services, introduced the item to the Select Committee and thanked all staff who had worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic. The Ofsted visit had lasted three weeks and was focused on the service's response to Covid-19. Buckinghamshire Council would receive Ofsted's report in April 2021.

Mr Vouyioukas highlighted some key aspects of the report. Ofsted had an interest in understanding the impact Covid-19 had on the delivery of the service which coincided with when the local authority became a unitary council. The lockdown had significantly impacted the service with it being delivered remotely to children, young people and their families. Partnership working had been important in maintaining the delivery of the service and Mr Vouyioukas expressed his gratitude particularly to schools for their responsiveness. The service had experienced an increase in demand which had meant moving internal resources to support the multi agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and Assessment Teams. Regarding children in need of help and protection, the report outlined areas that required further attention and Ofsted had accepted this. The service had clear commitments over the next 12 months which included the need for recruitment.

Following the update, Members raised a number of key points which included:-

- The Committee complimented the officers for how they had adapted their work to continue the service during the pandemic.
- Part of the increased demand was due to the three lockdowns causing a strain on families and parenting.
- There was a discussion around how individual members can support local families in their interactions with social care. Mr Vouyioukas advised that this might not always be appropriate and urged members to raise any specific concerns with him.
- It was clarified that the Director for Children's Services reported to the Members Recovery Board, chaired by the Leader and attended by Cabinet Members, that took place once a week. In addition there was a separate all Member briefing each week during the pandemic.
- There had been benefits to remote working as some young residents had preferred this communication.
- The release of funding for 21 social workers was due to caseload pressures and the need for additional team capacity.
- The SEND progress report had been included to highlight the achievements to Ofsted since 2017, but it was not the focus of this visit.

- It was important that the service supported, nurtured and developed its staff to meet their needs during the pandemic.
- There had not been a significant increase in the number of children entering care due to Covid-19. Instead, the service had seen an increase in more complex cases.
- Covid was leading to financial pressures in Children's Services across the country. The Council had maintained close monitoring and control on the budget whilst being mindful of the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable families.
- It was important to maintain the current standards for adoption and this service had been performing strongly. Adoption timescales were continually monitored (Covid had led to some court delays) and needed to be balanced with the need for a child's permanent future arrangements.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked all the officers and all the staff for their excellent work, and was pleased that performance had improved.

7 Update on Children's Services Improvement Plan

Cllr M Shaw, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, introduced the improvement plan update to Members and highlighted areas of the report. Covid-19 had impacted the delivery of the plan and had led to an increase in the complexity and seriousness of situations that children and young people found themselves in. The report had been discussed by the Improvement Board in January 2021 and had been questioned by Hampshire County Council; the Council's improvement partner. The RAG ratings had all initially been red and changes were only made to the rating when the service was confident that the correct standards were being achieved consistently and had evidence to demonstrate this. Improvements had still been delivered despite the pandemic.

The Committee had questions following the update and were advised that:-

- The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) initial strategy meetings with colleagues in health, education and police were well-attended. Sometimes there was a need for subsequent strategy meetings on open cases which involved different contacts and attendance at this stage needed improvement.
- A member asked if timelines could be added to the improvement plan. Mr R Nash explained that timelines had been included previously however it was felt this was not helpful and instead the focus should be about achieving the right standard. There was also a need to continually evaluate green ratings to ensure these were being maintained. The last 12 months had prioritized the Covid response which had slowed some progress. Recruitment continued to be a focus so that the service would be maintained and that red/amber ratings would be addressed.
- Items marked red could be due to a lack of consistency for their outcome.
- There were two ways the service worked with unaccompanied young people: either through being found in Buckinghamshire or through the national dispersion scheme. The service had worked with five unaccompanied young people so far this calendar year.

- Performance management reports went to Cabinet and additionally, Cllr M Shaw, Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member Children's Services, was part of the Improvement Board which scrutinized the improvement plan in detail.

Members of the Select Committee raised the following points during the discussion:-

- The Chairman was pleased to see improvements with some ratings green and amber.
- One Member felt these reports should have come to the Committee prior to going to Cabinet.
- A Member suggested that a timeline for reds to ambers and ambers to greens may be useful but appreciated that the plan was an evolving document.
- Consideration should be given to more detailed data and metrics being scrutinised by the Select Committee in future.

The Chairman thanked the officers for the update.

8 Date of next meeting

This was the final meeting of the Select Committee before the elections in May. The Chairman advised that a proposed inquiry on social worker retention and recruitment last year had been postponed due to the pandemic. It was hoped this inquiry could be revisited in the future. The Chairman also welcomed ideas for the future work programme after the elections.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked all officers, democratic services and webcast technicians for their support. The Chairman also thanked teachers, social workers, all Councillors and co-opted Members for their work during the pandemic.

Mr Vouyioukas thanked the Committee and all elected Members for their support, attention and contributions to the service.

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