

Minutes of the meeting of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 23 November 2021 at 2.30 pm

Present: Councillor Phillip Howells (Chairperson)
Councillor Jennie Hewitt (Vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Graham Andrews, Helen l'Anson, Mike Jones, and David Summers

Virtual Attendees: Councillor Toni Fagan
Councillor Jim Kenyon (non-voting member)
Mr Sam Pratley – Education Co-optee

In attendance: Councillor Diana Toynbee, Cabinet Member for Children and Families
Gladys Rhodes-White, Department of Education Advisor and Chair of the Strategic Improvement Board

Officers: Director for Children and Families, Interim Assistant Director - Quality Assurance, Safeguarding and Partnerships, Democratic Services Officer, Communications Manager

43. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Mr Andy James, Education Co-optee and Jane Ellis, Healthwatch.

Councillors Toni Fagan and Jim Kenyon, and co-optee Mr Sam Pratley attended the meeting remotely and did not vote on the resolutions of the Committee.

44. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no named substitutes.

45. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

46. MINUTES

Resolved: It was resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2021 be approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chairperson.

At this point it was also highlighted that Councillor Kenyon was not included in the list of committee members shown on the front of the agenda pack. This was an oversight by the Interim Democratic Services Officer and would be corrected.

47. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Two questions had been received from members of the public. The questions and their responses were attached as a supplementary item to the agenda.

The Chair read out a supplementary question to Q1 regarding the recruitment of a co-opted adult representative of families who are or have been supported by social workers, and confirmed that a written response would be supplied and appended to the minutes.

In response Councillor Hewitt stated that she was dismayed that the advertisement did not accurately express what the Committee had agreed, namely that the Committee would appoint an expert by experience rather than a volunteer in that sector or retired social worker, as it was this third sector voice that was crucially needed. In future what was agreed by the Committee needed to be accurately reflected in the Action Tracker that was appended to the minutes.

48. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

There were no questions from Councillors.

49. ANNUAL INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS REPORT

The Interim Assistant Director - Quality Assurance, Safeguarding and Partnerships introduced the report the purpose of which was for the Committee to consider the Annual Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) Report for 2020-21.

During discussion the following principal points were noted:

- Previously IRO officers had a double hatted role and were also Child Protection Conference Chairs. Due to increased demand on the service, these two roles had now been separated.
- IRO roles were being re-evaluated as, historically and in comparison with other areas, the Herefordshire IRO role was not at a high enough grade and status given that the regulations required IROs to have at least five years qualified Social Work experience and be an authoritative professional.
- The report highlighted that there continued to be barriers for children and young people accessing Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The Council would look at alternative solutions to meet needs but would also hold its partners accountable to push for the support that Looked After Children needed. Covid had impacted demand on the service and it was suggested that the wider issue of all children and young people accessing CAMHS be scheduled as a work plan item.
- The IRO report for 2022 would include some comparator data and also, as this data was now available, the impact of the service on children.
- There were currently no backlog of cases but the IRO caseload of 70 was at the top end of average. Extra resource would be put in if needed.
- The IRO Annual Report was taken to the Safeguarding Partnership Group but had not in the past been tabled as a Scrutiny agenda item. Members had requested, during their work planning, that the IRO report be one of several annual reports to be considered by the Committee each municipal year, and this year's report would be a clear benchmark with which to monitor ongoing progress.
- If the need for extra resource became apparent between the annual reporting cycles then the service would not wait to take action.

- The IRO team had sought independent legal counsel on behalf of the child on two occasions in order to clarify a situation and help get the correct plan for the child put in place.
- Caseloads for IROs were adjusted to take account of differing working patterns and hours.

The following recommendations were proposed and seconded and carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Having reviewed the Independent Reviewing Officer's Report for 2020/21 the Committee recommended that:

- a) The Committee receive the IRO Report as an annual agenda item.
- b) The next iteration of the report should include comparator data with statistical neighbours where this was available.
- c) A workshop be arranged with the participatory officer on how to include the voice of the child in future meetings.
- d) Health partners be asked to attend a future meeting of the Committee to discuss barriers for children and young people accessing CAMHS or other therapeutic support and counselling.
- e) An update on progress be provided to the Committee in six months' time.
- f) The update report to be provided on children's legal services include information on legal support for the IRO service.

ACTIONS:

1. That the IRO handbook be circulated to all members of the Committee for information.

50. CHILDREN IMPROVEMENT PLAN - PROGRESS UPDATE

The Director for Children and Families introduced the report the purpose of which was to provide an opportunity for Members to reflect on what had been done since the non-statutory improvement notice had been put in place in May of this year and for Members to indicate which specific areas they wished to see reported on in the future.

During discussion the following principal points were noted:

- The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee would attend at least the next two meetings of the Improvement Board in order to enable greater engagement with the improvement plan. Future regular invites for attendance would be reviewed after the next two meetings based on an assessment of the benefit and relevance to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee's work.
- A detailed performance and outcomes report was already scheduled for the next improvement focus meeting of the Committee and would be a regular feature of the Forward Plan subject to the conversations had on this matter under the next agenda item.
- The Strategic Plan was endorsed by Cabinet on 28 October and has been submitted to the Department for Education.
- Members, including scrutiny Members had contributed to the development of the Plan through a number of workshops.
- All actions stipulated in the notice had been completed. The primary focus was to establish an improvement board, a robust governance structure and to ensure necessary resources were in place.

- Ms Rhodes-White who was present observing the meeting, was the Chair of the Improvement Board that had been put in place.
- Each month the Director would present an update to the Board which would be a progress and exception report. As the Plan was very detailed it would not be examined line by line each month.
- The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care would also provide the Board with a performance report on their area every month.
- A staff reference group had been established and this too would routinely report to the Board.
- The Department for Education had recently led a six month review of the non-statutory notice and was pleased with the direction of travel and had confidence in the Plan.
- £1.5 million of grant monies had been received from the Department for Education to speed up some of the improvement activity that was being undertaken.
- The notice would be kept in place until the next Ofsted inspection. It was always expected that the notice would be for a minimum of 12 months.
- Officers expected that scrutiny's role was to make them accountable for delivering on what they said they would deliver on, but also to help drive the improvement agenda; for example, if scrutiny saw that the improvement journey was stalling for any reason it could keep up the pace of change by making recommendations to Cabinet and full Council.
- The work that the Committee would be doing with the LGA would help to define what scrutiny should be doing and how they should be doing it, to help keep children safe.
- The Vice-Chair welcomed the Improvement Plan and its identified role for scrutiny in holding officers to account but felt that there has been a broken contract between officers and elected members which still needed mending. Although the Plan and recent work between officers and scrutiny members had helped to start repair this broken contract, trust would only be fully established once there were some answers and clarity on what had happened in the past.
- The Committee were impressed by the rag rating system used in the Strategic Improvement Plan and would like this to be adopted for scrutiny reports.
- There was an omission of feedback from the 'third sector' which would greatly benefit and help inform the Improvement Plan.
- The Cabinet Member echoed the Chair's congratulations to the Director of Children's Services on his permanent appointment.
- It was highlighted that the use of the term special measures was inaccurate as what the Council had been issued with was a non-statutory notice of improvement.
- Although schools were not the focus of meetings currently, they were not forgotten and the Director of Children's Services wanted to recognise the amazing job that school colleagues had done throughout the pandemic, especially in relation to pastoral care. This sentiment was echoed by the Vice-Chair and the wider committee.

The following recommendations were proposed and seconded and carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee recommended that:

- a) Feedback from the third sector (for example community groups and charities) be recognised as an additional source of information informing the whole system approach to quality assurance and performance management
- b) Work on mental health in schools be highlighted in the Committee work programme.

ACTIONS AGREED:

1. That the rag rating system used for the Strategic Improvement Plan be implemented for Scrutiny reports.
- 2.

51. WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The Committee reviewed the draft work programme for 2021/22 and made the following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee recommended that:

- a. Reports on dental health and obesity which were provisionally scheduled as agenda items for the December meeting be instead presented to the Committee as a briefing note, and circulated to the Committee outside of the meeting schedule.
- b. The scheduled meeting on 7 December 2021 be cancelled.
- c. A workshop to go through the following items be organised for 7 December 2021
 1. the headline budget proposals ahead of public scrutiny of the budget in January
 2. the LGA scrutiny self-assessment exercise
- d. A themed mental health agenda be scheduled for the March meeting and that a range of different bodies be asked to submit reports.
- e. A monthly programme of scrutiny meetings be continued until the end of this municipal year at which point the practice would then be reviewed. There was a caveat placed on this that a meeting should not be held for the sake of it and that if the meeting was not needed it would be cancelled.
- f. When appropriate to do so, workshop training sessions on upcoming agenda items be organised before the meeting and that they be held online and preferably from 5pm onwards to enable greater participation. Members also requested that the sessions be recorded so those unable to attend could catch up.
- g. The Chair and Vice-Chair meet with lead officers to further discuss and populate the work programme. Outstanding items to be included were the Director of Public Health's Annual Report and an Improvement Plan focussed paper on workforce and resourcing issues.

52. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as Tuesday 11 January at 2.30pm.

The meeting ended at 5.28pm.

Chairperson