

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 7 November 2024 at 6.00 pm in Council Chamber, Third Floor, Southwater One, Telford, TF3 4JG

Present: Councillors J Jones (Chair), C Chikandamina, P Davis, A R H England, A S Jhawar, K Tonks and J Urey.

Co-optee S Fikeis

In Attendance: R Carey (Achievement & Enrichment Service Delivery Manager), D Knibbs (Director: Children's Safeguarding & Family Support), S A W Reynolds (Cabinet Member: Children, Young People, Education, Employment & Skills), P Starkey (Senior Democracy Officer (Scrutiny)), D Thomas-White (Lead Lawyer: Children and Adults), M Tustin (Children's Safeguarding & Family Support Service Delivery Manager) and S Wellman (Director: Education & Skills)

Apologies: Councillors S P Burrell and L Parker
Co-optee C Morgan

CYP29 Declarations of Interest

None.

CYP30 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 April 2024 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

CYP31 Terms of Reference 2024/25

The Lead Lawyer: Children & Adults presented the draft Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee Terms of Reference for the 2024/2025 municipal year. There was a requirement in the Council's Constitution that an annual review of the terms of reference took place at the first meeting following the Council's Annual General Meeting and that each council Committee had been granted delegated authority to approve their own Terms of Reference. It was noted that there were no proposed changes.

RESOLVED – that the Terms of Reference as set out in Appendix A of the report be approved.

CYP32 Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2024/25

The Lead Lawyer: Children & Adults presented the draft Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for the 2024/25 municipal year.

A two year work programme was implemented in the preceding year to allow for in-depth work to be completed and the programme presented to Members at the time of the meeting marked the halfway point of the two year programme. Members heard that each scrutiny committee had been granted delegated authority from Scrutiny Management Board to approve their individual work programmes.

RESOLVED – that the work programme for the 2024/25 municipal year be approved.

CYP33 Ofsted Action Plan

The Service Delivery Manager: Children’s Safeguarding & Family Support presented a report to the Committee which outlined the findings from the Ofsted inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) which took place between 29 April and 3 May 2024.

Prior to the most recent inspection, the Council’s Children’s Services last received an ILACS inspection in January 2020 whereby the Council were the only local authority in the region to receive an ‘outstanding’ judgement as a result of the inspection. The most recent inspection in 2024 had concluded that the Council’s Children’s Services had maintained its ‘outstanding’ judgement and were 1 of 30 local authorities to receive this judgement out of 151 that had undergone inspection. The Council were also subsequently 1 of 5 local authorities who had maintained its ‘outstanding’ judgement since its last inspection in 2020.

The inspection included four key areas for judgement:-

- Impact of Leaders
- Help & Protection
- Children in Care
- Care Leavers

Areas relating to the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families, the experiences and progress of children in care and the experiences and progress of care leavers were judged as ‘outstanding’. The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were judged as ‘good’.

The report identified two areas needing improvement which included the management of contacts within Family Connect and the consistency of making children aged 16 and 17 years old who presented as homeless aware of their rights and entitlements.

Members heard that following the ILACS inspection, the Council would be required to submit an action plan to Ofsted within 70 working days outlining how it had addressed the areas that had been identified as requires improvement. Actions had already been undertaken to address these areas including a review of contacts, introduction of new processes in Family

Connect and the appointment of a Senior Lead to oversee further pathway development for children aged 16 and 17 years old who presented as homeless.

Members welcomed the report and noted the overarching themes as wholly positive and felt that the work of the service had been reflected well in the totality of the Ofsted report and final grading received of outstanding. Following the presentation Members posed the following questions:-

Given my background in care and experience on foster panels, I understand that the Council was aware of programmes such as Foster Plus and Shared Lives. One child I worked with had special educational needs and transitioned from care to living alone in a flat in London without a support network. When referring to consistency in making 16 and 17 olds who presented as homeless aware of their rights, can the Council confirm if these children were they children from care? If so, when transitioning from care, did the Council ensure ongoing support was available for these children, and was there a support network for them through the VCS?

The Director: Children's Safeguarding & Family Support offered assurances to Members that the children presented to the Council as being homeless were not children in care. Members were informed that the Council's offer was very comprehensive and that the team had continued to work with housing colleagues to ensure support was provided in terms of accommodation.

Was there an update on items 7 and 8 of the Ofsted action plan which included developing a range of information platforms for young people which had a due date of 31 October 2024?

The Director: Children's Safeguarding & Family Support confirmed that meetings had taken place with the Dandelion Group to devise leaflets appropriate for young people. The leaflets were due to be designed by the Council's internal team and would include the use of QR codes.

Did the Council recognise and identify young people who need additional support to either stay or get into higher education and does the Council have an approach to address this?

The Director: Education & Skills confirmed that the Council have a dedicated Virtual School team and undertake strong governance and monitoring for children in care. Members were also informed that the Council continues to acknowledge the additional support that is required for some children and had been working with schools in order to recognise these needs.

The contents of the report and action plan was noted.

CYP34 School Attendance

The Director: Education & Skills and the Service Delivery Manager: Achievement & Enrichment presented a verbal update to Committee on

school attendance during the last academic year and the Council's response to improving school attendance across the Borough.

Nationally, there had been a focus on children's attendance at schools following concerns from the Children's Commissioner for England that a fifth of children are regularly absent from school. Data showed that 19.2% of pupils in England had been recorded as persistently absent from school in the Autumn and Spring terms of the 2023/24 academic year.

Further data presented to the Committee showed that the West Midlands had an overall absenteeism rate of 6.9%. In the last year, 18.1% of pupils had been recorded as persistently absent and 2% of pupils had been recorded as severely absent in schools in Telford and Wrekin with an overall absence of 6.4%. At the time of the meeting, Telford and Wrekin schools were below regional average for severely absent pupils and the average for persistently absent pupils had decreased.

National figures for the 2023/24 academic year indicated that primary schools had a 94.5% attendance rate and 90.9% attendance rate for secondary schools. Telford and Wrekin schools attendance rate had been recorded as slightly higher than the national average.

In August 2024, the Department for Education (DfE) published updated statutory guidance on working together to improve school attendance to help schools, trusts, governing bodies and local authorities maintain high levels of school attendance and improve consistency of support. Members were informed that the updated guidance outlines the roles and responsibility of schools, academy trusts, governing bodies and local authorities in maintaining high levels of attendance in schools with an emphasis on building strong relationships with families, understanding and addressing barriers to attendance and promoting a whole-school culture that values high attendance.

As part of the updated guidance, schools are encouraged to undertake accurate record keeping and regular data analysis to help identify patterns of absenteeism and support families to overcome barriers of non-attendance including supporting pupils who may be struggling with mental or physical health issues and those identified with special educational needs.

The Council had continued to work collaboratively with schools and academies in the Borough to improve school attendance through the following practices:-

- Reviewing and analysing weekly attendance data collected using a newly introduced DfE attendance collection system (IDAMS);
- Appointing attendance advisors to carry out termly attendance support meetings with all schools and academies;
- Providing and facilitating termly briefings and surgeries for schools and academies; and
- Auditing and sharing early help practices and undertaking signposting in schools to support attendance of pupils.

Following the presentation, Members posed the following questions:-

Did the figures include instances where children were excluded by schools for reasons such as wearing the wrong shoes or other policy violations, or were these cases recorded separately?

The Service Delivery Manager: Achievement & Enrichment confirmed that attendance figures included any pupil who had missed lessons, including those excluded for uniform violations. Previously, pupils may have been sent home for not wearing the correct uniform, but under the new guidance, schools were now encouraged to find alternatives to exclusion such as keeping a surplus of uniforms to provide for children in need. Members were also advised that the Council had promoted a pre-loved uniform scheme to help foster a school culture that supports sharing uniforms ethically. This approach had aimed to shift behaviours away from shaming and would allow parents to seek assistance with travel or uniforms.

Given my background in school attendance and data analysis for 700 schools across the UK, I have noticed issues with national statistics. The data is collected from AM and PM sessions, with AM data taken up to 15 minutes into the morning tutor period. In some local authorities, if a child is late within 5 minutes, they receive a U code and are marked absent for the whole morning. There is often a discrepancy between lesson attendance data and statistical data. Was the Council or the government planning to set a standardised time before the U code is used to ensure fairness across schools, and will lesson attendance be analysed correctly to provide accurate attendance data?

The Service Delivery Manager: Achievement & Enrichment confirmed that as a local authority governed by statutory guidance, there had been a significant change around attendance codes. The Council had recently conducted additional term briefings for schools following the implementation of new attendance codes to ensure that one school was not interpreting them differently from another. Members heard that whilst the system may not be perfect, one of the key pieces of work during termly attendance visits had been to use these visits as a basis for starting discussions with schools.

Mental Health services had long waiting lists with assessments for children taking up to 3 months. There was no statutory requirement for schools to have a school counsellor. What had been done to help reduce waiting times and enable children with mental health needs access to schools?

The Director: Education & Skills reassured the Committee that the Council had recognised that children's mental health support in schools was a national issue and advised that the Council were currently awaiting the introduction of the new Mental Health bill from Local Government.

Was the 10 by 10 initiative having a positive impact on school attendance?

The Service Delivery Manager: Achievement & Enrichment advised that schools in the Borough had been very committed to the 10 by 10 initiative.

Schools had been regularly asked to look at proportional representative to identify which pupils were accessing the activities on offer. Members heard that the Council had undertaken several projects around attendance including supporting pupils at risk of persistent absence by offering further sessions around music and sports. Schools regularly assess activities to ensure they are focused on topics pupils enjoy.

What were the Council doing to educate parents on the importance of children attending school?

The Service Delivery Manager: Achievement & Enrichment advised that often parents make the decision not to take their child to school. The Council's early help offer is key in understanding families and recognising what barriers exist. Members were informed that a recent Early Help conference found that language barriers could have occasionally prevented children from accessing services in school and recognising this has allowed a more coordinated approach for schools to signpost parents to resources such as Live Well Telford. Members also heard that many school offices have telephones that parents can use to call services when needed and Pastoral Support teams were able to assist with day-to-day life, not just school-related issues.

Members noted the presentation.

CYP35 Chair's Update

None.

The meeting ended at 19.14 pm

Chairman:

Date: Thursday 30 January 2025