

Scrutiny Children Services Review Group

Minutes

10 May 2021 at 6.00 pm

Present:

Councillor Keens (Chair), Councillors D. Chapman, Lovell, Petts and Roche

Statutory Co-optees:

Dr Mohammad Alramahi (Parent Governor Representative)
Katey Thompson (Primary School Representative)

In attendance:

Councillor M. Hussain, Portfolio Holder, Children's Services
Councillor Aslam Khan, Portfolio Holder, Education
Damien Elcock, Service Director, Quality and Improvement
Amanda Lewis, Corporate Director, Children, Families and Education
Allison Parkinson, Service Director, Children Operations
Paul senior, Interim Service Director, Education

19. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillor Moles and Debbie Main, Diocesan Representative.

20. Minutes (Ref: 2.1)

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2021 be taken as a correct record of the meetings and the Chair be authorised to sign them in due course.

21. Disclosure of Interest (Ref: 3)

Councillor Keens declared a personal interest as a local authority governor of Ashcroft High School, Richmond Hill School and the Virtual School and remained in the meeting.

Councillor D. Chapman declared a personal interest as a teacher at Icknield High School and remained in the meeting.

Councillor Roche declared a personal interest as the chair of governors at Meads Primary School and remained in the meeting.

Dr Alramahi declared a personal interest as a governor at Warden Hill Primary School and the chair of governors at Grasmere Nursery School and remained in the meeting.

22. Behaviour, Inclusion and Well-being Strategy (Education) (Ref: 7)

The Principal Educational Psychologist presented the report (Ref: 7), informing CSRG about the Behaviour, Inclusion and Well-being Strategy and seeking approval to progress with the launch the strategy for implementation in all Luton schools, further education providers and alternative educational provisions.

By way of background, she said that following one of the recommendations of the Behaviour Review in 2016, the Behaviour, Inclusion and Well-being Board (BIWAB) was established. The BIWAB set up a working subgroup to devise a Behaviour, Inclusion and well-being Strategy to develop a shared understanding of inclusion and a consistent approach to understanding and managing behaviour, well-being, inclusion and exclusion across Luton schools and further education settings.

The need to offer more support to schools to better understand children's underlying social, emotional and mental health needs was highlighted in the Timpson Review of School exclusion in 2019. Variation of approach and provision in relation to use and experience of exclusion across an area was also highlighted as problematic and the importance of consistency was emphasised. This also reflected the voice of young people, who reported a sense of inequity.

As set out in the report, she said that the sub-group included representatives from, e.g. Local Authority Education Service, Public Health Education specialist, various Head and Advisory Teachers and CAMHS

The subgroup agreed the aims, purpose and scope of the strategy, which was to develop a consistent, equitable, town-wide approach to inclusion for all children with additional needs, but especially for those with social, emotional and mental health needs, as behaviours could be symptoms of underlying issues.

Seven key priorities and objectives were developed to deliver the vision for inclusion, to inform school behaviour, inclusion and well-being policies and to develop the key performance indicators against which success would be measured.

She added that the intention was to get all in Education to sign up and work to the strategy, as decision making around exclusion was piecemeal. Everything needed to be done to prevent exclusion and to develop an approach to manage behaviour and promote quality teaching. Prevention during transition was important, as children were vulnerable at any point during transition, when there was an opportunity to re-integrate those at risk of exclusion and offer them the highest quality of teaching.

A consistent approach to exclusion was needed, as Luton's rate was higher than the national rate and needed to be reduced.

She said the strategy offered a consistent approach, so that no matter what school children went to, the approach would be the same. She re-iterated that the objective was to reduce exclusions by ensuring schools make use of the strategy when rolled out.

Dealing with comments and questions, further information was provided, with key points recorded as set out in the below paragraphs.

The strategy would be rolled to all schools, including academies. Academies were aware of its development, as they had a representative on the subgroup. It was hoped that they would sign up to it.

In terms of duty of care and dealing with children who might be a danger to others, the challenges were acknowledged, but it was hoped that the strategy would address them. Young people identified transition as a weakness, due to a lack of understanding about their needs. There was a need to develop relations with schools to support their internal provisions and the drive for expertise. Money had been invested to build on their internal vision to ensure children feel a sense of belonging when they stayed at school.

The Chair commended the officer for a good report and wondered if there would be additional finance to deliver the strategy.

Members were informed that the intention was to roll out the strategy internally, with training provided to schools to understand its ethos and help change attitudes. The indications were that schools wanted to keep their children in school and get it right. There was a lot of training available from support services for the strategy, guidance and advice. No additional resources would be needed.

The Portfolio Holder for Children Services commented that it was important that all schools, including Academies signed up to the strategy and take responsibility to prevent children from being excluded, as it was a concern that Luton had the highest number of exclusions. He added that there was great work done by some schools that did not have any exclusions.

In terms of timeline, members were informed that it was expected that the strategy would be launched by the end of the current term in September and schools asked to commit to it and build momentum.

The Portfolio holder for Education commented that exclusion was a growing challenge and that the strategy would provide schools a framework to understand behaviours and that exclusion was not the answer. He added that all needed to be done to support the roll out of the strategy, as it was very positive. It was important that schools bought into it.

In terms of parents' involvement, members were informed that they had played a big part to promote this work and it was a guiding principle that the views of parents and children were heard, as it had been an issue from feedback that they were not being listened to and that there was a lack of consistency during transition.

It was accepted that some parents were defensive and it was important from an earliest point to build relations based on approval and not on rules. It was a challenge, but parents needed to be at the forefront of minds and supported during transition, as it was difficult for children to involve their parents.

The parent governor representative commended the officer for a good report. He commented on the resource implications to address exclusions. He added that, Luton

being a super diverse town, there was a need for an inclusive education for the 80% of children who were from a BAME background in some schools, to promote their talents and ensure they benefited from the strategy.

It was re-iterated that the cost implication was not significant, as all training would be delivered in-house by council advisors. Schools found that keeping children in school was less costly than the expensive alternative provisions. Capital had been identified to build exclusion units within schools. It was expected that the strategy would benefit all pupils and prevent exclusions. Children needed to feel they belonged to the school, no matter what they did.

The Portfolio holder for Education commented that the strategy would provide cultural awareness for parents to build understanding and reduce cost. Roll out of the strategy would ensure all children develop the skills to engage with all people, not just teachers. Parents also needed to engage.

The parent governor representative commented that he was interested in how inclusive and visible the curriculum would be in schools, in terms of cultural and religious aspects, to create awareness. He supported the use of the strategy to help schools.

The Portfolio holder for Education commented that training and monitoring would be within schools and that the strategy would provide the framework and hold people to account.

The Corporate Director commented on the fit of the strategy with the Luton 2040 ambitions, given the richness of the community. She said that the ambition for children and young people in Luton 2040 was to create a child friendly town and employment for all children. She also commented on the excellent questions from CSRG, which were fitting and within context.

Members were informed that excluded children often went on to have other disadvantages, including living in poverty.

Home education was not believed to have been an issue during the Covid-19 pandemic. Children were monitored and given the confidence they would come back to school, the best place to learn.

The Interim Service Director, Education endorsed the information given by the Principal Educational Psychologist. He added the issues were seen nationally and there was legislation to support local authority's relations based approach to deal with increasing numbers of exclusions. The benefit of this approach was improved outcome of life chances, although these were not just affected by exclusions. A consistent approach across all schools was necessary to set the framework and invest in getting it right. Investment in early prevention and intervention was crucial to keep children in school. Not getting it right could cost the Council much more.

In terms of benchmark, the Interim Service Director said that, due to its demographics, Luton was compared against the data set of its family of local authorities.

The Corporate Director added that it was important for Luton to compare itself with the family of local authority benchmark and also to identify how well Luton knew itself to be able to develop.

The Portfolio Holder for Children Services commented that the high number of exclusions in Luton was a cause for concern, but not for alarm.

In the absence of any further comments and questions, the Chair moved that the recommendation in the report be approved, which was agreed.

Resolved: That the launch of Luton's Behaviour Inclusion and Well-being (Education) Strategy, to be implemented in all Luton schools, Further Education providers and alternative educational provisions be approved.

23. Effective Support Strategy (Ref: 8)

The Service Director, Children Operational Services presented the report (Ref: 8) informing CSRG about the effective support strategy, which updated interventions and set out what was to be done and how.

Key points highlighted were as set out in the below paragraphs.

There was no change to the duties relating to the legislative framework, working with children and families. The strategy set out how decisions were made on the most effective support to provide to children and families, when considering the needs of the child and what support parents and their carers would require to meet those need. It connected to the strategy at minutes 22 in terms of how to build relationships.

Children's services had undergone a large-scale organisational changes to re-align services into the Family Partnership Service, at the same time as addressing the Ofsted recommendation for a clearer threshold document to fully understand the levels of needs and the appropriate intervention.

The strategy shifted practice approach to identifying what would be the most effective support required for families and children, building on the needs threshold to provide prompt early effective support and, stepping up to statutory services when children needed protection. The strategy broadened out opportunities and built on previous levels of support, setting examples of what good looked like. It was not a 'one-stop shop'.

From comments and questions, key points made were recorded as set out in the below paragraphs.

The strategy set out in Appendix A was in still draft form, as work was slowed down due to the Ofsted visit and to allow tweaks to go in following feedback.

In terms of barriers to communication, the strategy was straightforward to people used to service transition, but not all understood how the support mechanism came together. There was a need to continue to engage with people and use their feedback on what needed to be tweaked to clarify understanding. There were benefits working in that way and to learn from engagement with people and build relationships. It was important that everybody was talking to each other on how services worked in Luton. There was a grant from government to identify unmet needs.

On the issue of the sensitivities around forced marriages, members were informed that services were working together to find out the difficulties young people faced and to create the opportunity for conversations, as there was not one solution that was applicable to all circumstances. This was a complex piece of work by skilled workers to help affected young people with the situation, while retaining their cultural identities and staying with their families.

The Principal Educational Psychologist commented that the approach was about 'curiosity', which was part of the children framework. Having conversations was key.

In the absence of further comments and questions, the Chair moved that the recommendation in the report be approved, which was agreed.

Resolved: That the Effective Support Strategy, as an updated threshold document for Luton Children Services be noted and supported by CSRG

24. Children's Services Ofsted Improvement Plan – Bi-monthly update on Progress (Ref: 9)

The Service Director, Quality and Improvement presented the report (Ref: 9), updating CSRG on progress made on the council's children's improvement plan in response to the Ofsted inspection outcome.

He said that details of progress were set out in the highlight reports to the Children's Improvement Board, attached as appendices to the report.

He reminded members that improvement plan had been in place for just under 12 months, during which time significant progress had been delivered. He went on to provide key highlights, as set out in the below paragraphs.

The Edge of Care service had been developed and launched to help families with children in danger of coming into care. Four members of staff were working with the families, providing intensive support to prevent young people from coming into care.

New performance management tools were now on-stream for managers, in the form of dashboards, where data would be easy to access. It was a self-service to help practice performance.

The business case for the EYES (One Child, One System) project was approved by the Executive. This represented a significant investment to buy software and ensure information on families in the plan was accessible. It would take 12 to 18 months to migrate the information and backfill.

New practice framework had been co-produced with staff and launched amongst staff team.

The foster carer offer, including the new foster carer's rates and allowance had been reviewed and agreed. Fees had been raised to be more competitive in the market.

At the time of writing the report, the Ofsted visit was expected. This had now happened over two days and initial feedback was promising. The initial report was expected on 20 May, with the full report expected in June.

Dealing with comments and questions, further information was provided, with key points recorded as set out in the below paragraphs.

The timing of the next Ofsted visit would be discussed in June, when their report on the last visit and assessment was expected. It would then be determined if the next visit would be a full inspection or a quarterly visit.

Ofsted did not specify any particular problem areas, but did recognise the financial challenges due to Covid-19 and despite it, the fact that the pace of improvement had been maintained.

In terms of the new team in place, Ofsted recognised the good practice and good performance achieved and the steps taken to maintain the paperwork.

Ofsted did not give any indication on where improvement was needed and where more needed to be done. Officers were very pleased with how well the visit went, despite Covid and the resource issues and although the service was in a good place, it was recognised that there was more to do.

The Portfolio Holder for Children Services praised members and officers on the good improvement achieved. He recognised there was still a long way to go, but thanked staff for all their hard work to bring up the service to where it was under very difficult circumstances.

The Corporate Director commented that she was pleased how well the service knew itself through self-assessment, as the areas of strength and areas for development were in line with those identified by Ofsted, which was very important.

She paid tribute to all staff across the whole system and partners for the progress achieved in the face of the pandemic and the financial difficulties and emergency budget. For example, she said the work on forced marriages by the Principal Educational Psychologist was on top of improvement work.

She also thanked Scrutiny and the Executive for their support during the improvement process.

The Service Director, Children Operations acknowledged how dedicated the workforce and network were and the support received from Luton Council, which was important. She also acknowledged the loss of colleagues and friends from the workforce to get the job done. She thanked colleagues for all their hard work.

A member commended the improvement achieved in a challenging year, compared to where the service was in January 2020. She paid tribute to all staff for all their hard work.

The Chair added that the service had done very well in the previous 18 months, despite the pandemic. He added that social workers had done a good job.

Responding to a comment on the impact on resources, which was significant and likely to be an issue in the medium terms, the Corporate Director said that the service had had to be tenacious in its approach, although the Executive had prioritised children social services in difficult circumstances. It had invested to save in setting up the social work academy and had to review all commissioned activities to ensure the service was getting good value. She added that demand continued to intensify and some matters had yet to reach children services, e.g. increase in domestic abuse and children mental health. In modelling what future demand would look like, it was necessary to push hard to get better value for money and ease the pressure on children social care.

A member acknowledged that it was good to see how the service had improved from where it was.

In the absence of further comments and questions, the Chair moved that the recommendation in the report be approved, which was agreed.

Resolved: That the series of highlight reports from the most recent Children's Improvement Board on 19 April 2021 be noted.

Notes:

Councillor Keens announced that he was stepping down as Chair of CSRG for the new municipal year, but would remain as a member. He thanked Amanda Lewis and all Children Services officers for their hard work and support to him over the years that he had Chaired CSRG and wished them well on the improvement journey. He also thanked Councillor M. Hussain for his support to CSRG as Portfolio Holder for Children Services.

On behalf of members, Councillor Lovell thanked Councillor Keens for his dedicated service as Chair of CSRG.

On behalf of Children Services, Amanda Lewis thanked Councillor Keens for his valued support and commitment to Children services.

(Note: The meeting ended 7.23 pm)