

Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Children, Education and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton, NN1 1DE on Monday 5 February 2024 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Andrew Grant (Chair)
Councillor Harry Barrett
Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Imran Ahmed Chowdhury BEM
Councillor Louisa Fowler
Councillor Azizur Rahman
Councillor Zoe Smith
Councillor Nick Sturges-Alex
Councillor Mike Warren

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Stephen Hibbert
Councillor Cheryl Hawes

Officers:

Stuart Lackenby, Executive Director - People Services & Deputy Chief Executive
Ben Pearson, Assistant Director - Education
Jacqueline Brooks, Housing Services Manager
Sarah Credland, Strategic Housing Officer
Jo Barrett, Head of Housing Strategy and Partnerships
Sally Burns, Director of Public Health
Racha Fayad, Public Health Principal
Katie Morlidge, Head of School Effectiveness
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer

1. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies were received from Councillors Hibbert and Hawes. Apologies were also received from the Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education and from the Director of Children's Services.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Aziz declared a pecuniary interest in Item 5 (Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy). He left the room for the duration of this item and did not take part in the discussion.

3. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. **Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy**

The Housing Services Manager outlined the collaboratively-produced West Northants Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. Members were invited to input to the strategy before it was presented to Cabinet for adoption by April 2024. Key aims were increasing activity around prevention of homelessness, reducing numbers in temporary accommodation, which required working with partners to source and deliver suitable accommodation and reducing rough sleeping. There were four themes: improved collaboration between partnerships to make homelessness everyone's business; early joined up intervention and prevention of homelessness; increased provision of and access to suitable and sustainable settled housing solutions; and ensuring that rough sleeping was rare, brief and non-recurring.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Concerns were expressed regarding help for people with protected characteristics.
- Hidden homelessness needed to be considered.
- The strategy was a credit to the housing team and public health. It was good to see collaboration.
- There needed to be collaboration with WN charities around homelessness and rough sleeping – historically relationships had been difficult.
- How would the acquisition of new homes be implemented?
- Were modular homes being considered? There were garages waiting for demolition which could be replaced with modular homes.

The Housing Services Manager responded as follows:

- Those with protected characteristics were a definite focus in the priorities and the particular needs of women were addressed in the strategy.
- There would be a 12 month delivery plan for the strategy. It would then be reviewed every 12 months to take account of government policy and other changes.
- A session on rough sleeping had been attended by voluntary agencies and there was an impetus to work collaboratively and provide ongoing support.
- An acquisition programme for new homes was being delivered with a plan coming to Cabinet in May.
- There had been discussions about modular construction and a plan to visit Milton Keynes where the council had recently delivered modular housing.

The Cabinet Member for Housing made the following comments:

- Work had been done to look at best practice of other local authorities.
- The draft document to Cabinet would have an acknowledgement of women and survival sex in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Collaboration and partnership working was important and had been very impressive. A focus was starting on preventative work.

- Any potential site for modular homes would be looked at. It was important to get the right site where residents would be safe, for example on their walk to the town centre.

The Chair thanked those who had produced the thorough strategy and welcomed the work that had been done.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) welcomed the work that had been done on the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and looked forward to the Strategy producing outcomes;
- b) agreed to receive a further update on the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy delivery plan at the Committee meeting on 3 April 2024 following presentation of the Strategy to Cabinet in March.

5. **0-19 Health Visiting and School Nursing Service**

The Director of Public Health noted that the budget for this service was almost half of the entire public health budget. This was an opportunity to deliver against the ambition to provide the best start in life for people in West Northants.

The Public Health Principal presented the report and stated that there was a public health duty to provide a health visiting and school nursing service. The service was currently provided jointly with North Northamptonshire but from 2025 separate contracts would be in place. The draft commissioning timeline as outlined in the report was shared. There had been widespread consultation and roundtable workshops to inform the process.

Councillors made the following comments:

- School nursing teams were expressing concern over their jobs. How was communication with staff and messaging to services being managed? Support would need to be provided where needed.
- Was consultation with families with children aged 0-5 with all families or a selection? How would the selection process and consultation take place?
- What sort of organisations might be looking to tender? Could an in-house bid be requested?
- It needed to be ensured that people did not slip through the net during the process of change.
- Was the aim of offering a single contact number/booking for the REACH service too complicated?
- How would children who were at risk in their own home from the effects of smoking/drug abuse be protected?
- A staff voice was needed on the consultation – a people-first mindset.
- The challenge of the relatively lesser need of the South Northants area affecting funding for the greater need in Northampton town needed to be addressed.

The Director of Public Health and Public Health Principal responded as follows:

- Work would be done with the provider from the start regarding appropriate communication with staff. The roundtable would start that sort of consultation and inform the process going forward.
- A consultation with surveys to parents and carers received more than 2500 responses and those groups would be engaged with to establish what was working well now, what were the challenges as service users and how the service could be designed to work well for them.
- The majority of authorities had services provided by a health trust. Some were in-house. The most common would be through a health body, particularly for provision of clinical services.
- Work was being done to ensure all services worked together and transitions were covered.
- The specification for procurement was being looked at and all options would be considered.
- There was an opportunity to understand need, and those who did not take up services which were offered. Another challenge was the need to deliver services for a year whilst the new service was being designed and commissioned.
- A service improvement plan was being looked at for REACH to consider how the service could be optimised in the best way for children not meeting the CAMHS threshold.
- There would be high expectations on the provider to make a difference. This was one of a number of big programmes of work orientated around having the best start in life.

RESOLVED: that the Committee agreed to receive a further update on the 0-19 Health Visiting and School Nursing Service at the Committee meeting on 3 April 2024 before the procurement process commenced.

6. **School exclusions**

The Assistant Director Education advised that the three distinct areas of work being considered were all covered by the Head of School Effectiveness. There had been key developments in the service with increased staff, together with systems and processes to develop effective practice. The Department for Education were preparing a statutory document to inform LA processes which would set out responsibilities, but this was not yet in place.

Elective Home Education (EHE)

The Head of School Effectiveness stated that every parent had the right to choose EHE. The council had a responsibility to ensure children were safe and receiving an effective education – a term which had not been defined. There were 1013 children in WN educated at home, 49 with EHCP, 16 were children in need and 376 were eligible for free school meals (FSM).

Councillors made the following comments:

- Were children in need getting vaccines etc?
- Were children still entitled to FSM if they were EHE?

- There were significant safeguarding concerns for EHE children. Yearly assessments were done for all children. How many were flagged on the risk register? More resources were needed.
- Data was requested regarding numbers on school attendance orders.
- The lack of clarity around what constituted effective education needed to be tackled.
- Home school pupils found it difficult to find an exam centre to do GCSEs because schools feared a negative impact on their statistics.
- It was unfair to penalise EHE children by not facilitating access to exams where possible.
- The emphasis should be on getting EHE children back to school rather than facilitating exams.
- It was worrying that the largest numbers of EHE children were at the most critical stage of their education and also had the most mental health issues. There was no consistency in schools to manage mental health and some parents considered EHE to be the only way forward.
- How many year 11 Fair Access Placements had there been? These did not contribute to outcomes but often came with issues.
- Why did the council not intervene and police parents who were not providing an effective education?
- What percentage of the school population was EHE? How did WN compare to peers? Was EHE increasing and if so, why?
- Schools were a safe place for vulnerable children. Referrals to care were increasingly from EHE. Could there have been intervention earlier?
- One of the concerns with EHE was socialisation of children.

The Assistant Director Education and the Head of School Effectiveness responded as follows:

- Children in Need (CIN) meetings took place regularly which would pick up issues such as vaccination.
- Those responsible for FSM would implement it for EHE children.
- Vulnerable children were RAG-rated when they came out of school. Those who were red would be monitored half-termly and more frequently if there were concerns. Checks were made in respect of safeguarding and the quality of education. Those who were vulnerable were linked to social workers.
- It had been hoped that the DfE would require a register for EHE but this had not happened.
- Some data, including on school attendance orders, had not been collected historically. With new leadership and tighter rigour this was now being addressed.
- The reasons for EHE were complicated. It could be around mental health stresses, SEND needs not being met or lifestyle choice.
- Schools were often not keen to re-admit year 11 EHE children.
- The definition of 'effective education' was so loose that it could not be enforced. The focus needed to be on safeguarding.
- Some EHE was very good and if a child wanted to take GCSEs in year 11 help should be provided.
- The EHE community often distrusted the LA for many reasons. Work was being done to engage with the community. There were EHE forums to discuss

and hear challenges and incentives such as museum passes. New team members were full of enthusiasm and ideas.

- There were communities where EHE children could come together and socialise.

Children missing from education (CME)

The Head of School Effectiveness defined Children missing from education (CME) as those children who had been allocated a school place but did not turn up at school. There were currently 260 CME. The numbers fluctuated and were slightly higher than other authorities. However there was no standard way of data reporting so some figures could be skewed. CME posed more of a risk than EHE. There were 186 schools with CME and engagement with the council varied considerably with some not reporting to the LA. Ideally intervention would take place early but in many cases the LA was not aware of CME at an early enough stage.

Councillors made the following comments:

- One issue was that absence of a child with a social worker had been treated as an attendance issue rather than CME.
- What was the closure rate on CME within 5 days of cases being opened? What links were there between the CME teams and safeguarding?
- Were there problems with non-cooperation from academies which were outside LA control?
- Could numbers of BAME community students who were categorised as CME be provided?

The Head of School Effectiveness and the Assistant Director Education responded as follows:

- The team were working with school admissions to establish where responsibilities lay for CME.
- The most common time for children to be missing from school was 3-6 months. This was a challenge for the team and there were links with social care.
- The legal team now had in-house education lawyers. Prosecutions had been paused while processes were reviewed but would be re-instigated as soon as possible.
- There were clear procedures for schools around starters and leavers. This was an area looked at by Ofsted.
- All schools had a school attendance support officer who would be asking about missing pupils. This would be picked up by Ofsted as a safeguarding concern, resulting in an inadequate rating. The LA met with Ofsted each half term and flagged issues.
- School attendance generally was declining. There had been many more children absent from school since Covid, although attendance in WN was much higher than average.

Exclusions

The Head of School Effectiveness outlined the data on permanent exclusions. There were more children excluded from secondary schools than primary schools. Fixed term exclusions were most common for physical assault against an adult.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Counsellors were needed in schools because teachers did not have time to deal with issues.
- How could the barriers to change in culture in Multi-Academy Trusts be overcome?

The Head of School Effectiveness and the Assistant Director Education responded as follows:

- A large proportion of suspended or excluded pupils had undiagnosed needs. An investment had been made in therapeutic thinking for all schools.
- Additional needs were under-identified. Training around early identification and assessment was being encouraged. Teachers needed to be equipped to manage behaviour.
- Changing culture was challenging and would be underpinned by the alternative provision draft proposal. Models in other LAs were being looked at.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) Requested further information on the following:
 - The number of yearly assessments for the 1013 EHE children in West Northants.
 - The number of school attendance orders which had been made.
 - The 1013 EHE pupils as a percentage of all pupils and how WNC compared to its peers.
 - The number of cases where a child subject to a care referral was in EHE.
 - The number of closure rates of CME cases within 5 days of them being opened.
 - The percentage of CME cases in the BAME community.
- b) Requested that representations be made to the DfE regarding a register of EHE children.
- c) Requested to receive an update on school exclusions at the Committee meeting on 4 June 2024.

7. **Provision of free broadband to young people leaving local authority care**

The Chair advised that the item had been brought to the Committee to enable it to consider the matter and determine what action, if any, it wished to take. Councillor Danielle Stone who had proposed the original motion to Council in September 2021 addressed the Committee.

Councillors made the following comments:

- It was disappointing that the report did not give much context and no comparative work had been done with other local authorities. For example, a group of councils in Greater Manchester had run a pilot looking at digital inclusion and were now rolling it out.
- A digital inclusion strategy was needed. Many young people did not know how to use computers.
- Not all young people leaving care would need the support, so costs would not be as high as estimated.

- Care leavers have needs and are over-represented in the justice system.
- Digital exclusion is not just lack of a computer but not knowing how to use it. A digital club could be offered for training in digital skills, particularly focused on job applications. Pay as you go (PAYG) SIM cards could be provided.
- Broadband providers could be approached to negotiate a cost-effective deal. Most providers had a social tariff. WNC had a transformation budget which could be used.
- A one year pilot scheme could be introduced.
- It was not easy to manage everything digitally on a phone. Application forms, for example, were difficult to complete on a small screen. It was possible to access computers in libraries, but opening hours were limited.
- Some children were provided with technology through schools. Data to access this technology could also be provided for those that needed it.
- A potential task panel on care leavers/digital exclusion could be considered.

The Executive Director People responded as follows:

- The passion evident around this subject was appreciated.
- The discussion had widened from the original suggestion to provide free broadband to care leavers to include supporting digital access.
- The Manchester model had buddied with Virgin/O2 who had accessed government money to support the scheme.
- Existing support was available. A PA was allocated to each care leaver and they had the responsibility of maximising funding to help the young person.
- The complexity around administration and cost were factors in why the original motion was not being recommended. However, digital empowerment needed to be focussed upon and more targeted work for those who were digitally excluded.

RESOLVED: that the Committee supported action by WNC in the following areas:

- a) To ensure providers such as supported lodgings have accessible Wi-Fi for those who live there;
- b) To ensure foster homes have accessible Wi-Fi for those living there;
- c) To work with employers around social values and encouraging the recruitment and support of care leavers;
- d) To continue the ongoing review of the local offer for care leavers and for PAs to be tasked with ensuring that care leavers have access to free broadband.

8. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

The Committee reviewed its current work programme and considered prospective business for coming meetings, including additional topics identified at the current meeting. The Committee also considered a request from Councillor Barrett to extend the time allocated to the scrutiny review of support for children with SEND to enable it to complete its work effectively.

RESOLVED: that the Committee:

- a) Agreed that an extension of time be given to the SEND Task and Finish panel to complete its work. A report would be brought to the Committee meeting on 4 June 2024.

- b) Agreed that a task panel on care leavers/digital exclusion could be considered in future.
- c) Agreed to include the following topics as agenda items for the Committee meeting on 3 April 2024:
 - Update on the operation of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)
 - Update on action being taken to address issues raised by scrutiny review of child and adolescent mental health and the risk of self-harm
 - Review of the specification for the 0-19 Health Visiting and School Nursing Service contract
 - Review of the draft delivery plan for homelessness and rough sleeping.
- d) Agreed to include the following topics as agenda items for the Committee meeting on 4 June 2024:
 - Update on School Exclusions
 - Reports from Task and Finish Panels (SEND and Foster Carers)

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____