

Lancashire County Council

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Wednesday, 14th October, 2020 at 10.30 am in Skype Virtual Meeting - Skype

Present:

County Councillor Andrea Kay (Chair)

County Councillors

M Dad	J Mein
Mrs S Charles	E Nash
A Cheetham	J Potter
S Clarke	J Purcell
J Eaton BEM	M Salter
A Gardiner	J Shedwick
N Hennessy	B Yates
S Malik	

Co-opted members

Stephen Whittaker, Representing CE Schools
(alternate for Dr Sam Johnson)

County Councillors John Shedwick and Barrie Yates replaced County Councillors Peter Steen and David Smith respectively for this meeting.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Mrs Janet Hamid, representing Parent Governors; Simon Smith, representing Roman Catholic Schools; and Oliver Moores, representing the Youth Council.

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None were disclosed.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2020

Resolved: The minutes from the meeting held on 2 September 2020 were confirmed as an accurate record.

4. Preparing for an increase in demand in Children's Social Care

The Chair welcomed Sharon Hubber, Director of Children's Social Care, to the meeting. A presentation updating the committee on the plans in place to manage the increase in children's social care referrals was delivered.

Members were informed that at the beginning of lockdown all social workers and family support workers were supported to work remotely and all offices were closed. Risk assessments were undertaken on every case and RAG rated. All face to face family time was suspended. Visiting guidance was produced for social workers. All schools were closed and all court cases were suspended.

Regarding children's homes, they had not closed during the pandemic. Volunteers from across the county council were trained to cover shifts if required. All visits to homes were suspended. Children were unable to be discharged meaning beds quickly became full. Courts were unable to discharge care orders.

In terms of the recovery plan for when lockdown finished, it was reported that the MASH was fully staffed to ensure the front door was able to meet the demand and staff would be deployed if necessary. Level 4 referrals were directed straight to Duty and Assessment allowing for work to be allocated immediately. Where it was safe, discharge of cases was taking place. It was noted that courts were now sitting full time and able to discharge cases. There was now a pathway in place to step up cases from Early Help and step down with no referral. School cluster links were to be contacted before a referral was made ensuring the team around the school was known and being used.

Referrals to MASH had increased following the opening of schools. Members were informed there was an increase in Elective Home Education and an increase in free school meals applications. Social workers and schools were clear there was a need to follow up children not attending school. The county council had fewer children in external provision but it's spend had risen. This was due to providers needing extra measures during the Covid-19 crisis. There was an increase in children entering the social care system that had not been known beforehand.

Comments and questions raised by the committee were as follows:

- Concerns were raised over the backlog of court cases and the committee enquired was there any indication when the courts would catch up. Members were informed that technology has been put in place quickly to allow remote court hearings. Some cases were deferred due to some people not having the technology. Courts were now back functioning but it was taking longer than anticipated to catch up.
- Members enquired if there had been any bereavements of parents or grandparents of the children who were in Lancashire's children's homes. The Children's Services Team had been keeping a close eye on this and there had been no bereavements. The team was looking after and protecting older foster carers so that they were not put under undue risk.

- Regarding school cluster links and referrals there were concerns about children with SEN and transport to school. It was reported that there had been an enormous piece of work done regarding this. Transport had been made available for children with complex needs and it was working very well.
- Regarding school cluster links, these were put in place at the beginning of lockdown. The clusters were reported to be very responsive and within them there was Social Care, Schools and Early Help.
- It was noted that the adoption process had continued through Covid-19 crisis. Children's Services had made the process very safe.
- Members were informed that Elective Home Education was parental choice. However, the high number of home education children was a concern. Members enquired what was in place to support these families. It was confirmed that there was a legal requirement for Children's Services to visit these families and thorough assessments carried out. Support would also be offered to these families.
- There were concerns over the extra pressures being put on the Children's Services staff. It was confirmed that staff had been redirected to assist where required and support was provided. Praise was given to the staff for all they were doing and that a long term strategy was required.
- It was highlighted that schools were notifying the Children's Services Team everyday regarding children who were not attending school.
- The Children's Services Team was gathering data on the increase of free school meals and in what areas these increases were.

Resolved: That the information presented be noted.

5. Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2020/2021

The report presented provided information on the single combined work programme drafted for all of the Lancashire County Council scrutiny committees.

The topics included were identified at a work planning workshop for members of the Internal Scrutiny Committee held on 29 May 2020 and from a previous combined meeting of both Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Committees.

Members were informed that there would be an update on the recommendations of Schools Causing Concern Task Group for the February 2021 meeting.

At the April 2021 meeting there would be an update on the SEND Accelerated Progress Plan as well as an update on the Lancashire Breaktime.

For the November 2020 meeting on Digital Poverty and Lessons Learned, the committee requested invitations to go to headteachers to provide their views.

There was concern about the number of Afro-Caribbean and Black African pupils who were being excluded from schools. A request was made for this to be made

part of the SEND review or alternative provision. In addition, the subject of 'A' level students and their exams in 2021 was raised.

The committee was informed that information on school closures could be found on C-First.

Resolved: That the work plan presented be noted.

6. Urgent Business

There were no items of Urgent Business.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next virtual meeting of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee would take place on Tuesday 10 November 2020 at 10.30am.

L Sales
Director of Corporate Services

County Hall
Preston