



## Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting Held on 29 June 2020  
at 10:00 as a virtual teams meeting

### Present:

Cllr Steve Morphew (Chair)

Cllr Alison Thomas (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Stefan Aquarone

Cllr Joe Mooney

Cllr Roy Brame

Cllr Judy Oliver

Cllr Emma Corlett

Cllr Dan Roper

Cllr Phillip Duigan

Cllr Hayden Thirtle

Cllr Ron Hanton

### Substitute Members present:

Cllr Rhodri Oliver for Cllr Richard Price

Cllr Mike Smith-Clare for Cllr Chris Jones

### Parent Governor Representative

Mr Giles Hankinson

### Also present (who took a part in the meeting):

John Fisher

Cabinet member for Children's Services

Fiona McDiarmid

Executive Director Strategy and Governance

Sara Tough

Executive Director of Children's Services

Phil Watson

Director of Children's Social Care

Chris Snudden

Director of Learning and Inclusion, Children's Services

Tim Eyres

Assistant Director Commissioning and Partnership

Sarah Jones

Director of Commissioning, Partnerships and Resources, Children's Services

James Wilson

Director of Quality and Transformation, Children's Services

Lauren Downes

Head of Youth, Children's Services

Andrew Stewart

Director Insight and Analytics

Dr Louise Smith

Director of Public Health

Helen Edwards

Director of Governance

Martin Hinchliffe

Digital Skills Consultant Strategy and Governance Department

Karen Haywood

Democratic Support and Scrutiny Manager

Tim Shaw

Committee Officer

### 1. Chair's Opening Remarks

**1.1** In his introductory remarks the Chair said that this meeting was adjourned from 23 June 2020 due to technical difficulties with the public broadcasting of the meeting and would start with the first item on the agenda.

**1.2 Apologies for Absence**

**1.1** Apologies were received Cllr Chris Jones (Cllr Mike Smith-Clare substituting), Cllr Richard Price (Cllr Rhodri Oliver substituting), Ms Helen Bates (Church Representative) and Mr Paul Dunning (Church Representative).

**2 Minutes**

**2.1** The minutes of the meetings held on 27 May 2020 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair subject to the following words being added at the end of the fifth bullet point on page 7 “and particularly given the difference between a flu pandemic and a Covid-19 virus.”

**3. Declarations of Interest**

**3.1** Cllr Emma Corlett declared an “Other Interest” for item 8 because she was a care provider for a looked after child.

**4 Urgent Business**

**4.1** No urgent business was discussed

**5. Public Question Time**

**5.1** There was one public question with a supplementary question from Family Lives. The public question(s) together with the answer provided by the Executive Director of Children’s Services can be found on the committee pages website.

**6. Local Member Issues/Questions**

**6.1** No local Member questions were received.

**7. Call In**

**7.1** The Committee noted that there were no call-in items.

**8. Children’s Services Covid-19 Response**

**8.1** In his introductory remarks the Chair introduced the Executive Director of Children’s Services and those members of the Children’s Services Senior Management Team who would be introducing the report and providing detailed presentations to the Committee about the Children’s Services response to Covid-19.

**8.2** The PowerPoint presentations (which can be found on the committee pages website) explained the key challenges faced by Children’s Services which included ensuring immediate safety, maintaining critical service provision, system leadership in particular in relation to education, safeguarding and community support, keeping eyes and ears on children, managing a complex market, supporting staff teams, communication at an unprecedented scale and planning for the less obvious and longer term impacts on children and families.

8.3 The presentations covered the following areas of Children's Services activity:

- Education, Schools, Settings and Colleges
- Special Educational Needs and Children with Disabilities
- Children's Social Care
- Community / Tier 2 Support
- Commissioning, Resources and Funding (note: there was insufficient time in the meeting to consider this in any detail)

8.4 The issues that were discussed included the following:

- The Executive Director said that in response to the pandemic the existing safeguarding and strategic partnership arrangements for Children's Services were joined together to provide a new system wide partnership approach for core areas of business activity which focused on immediate child protection and workstream issues.
- From the start of the pandemic, 90% of Children's Services staff were available to keep key public services open and two thirds of the staff who provided face to face visits for vulnerable children were available to continue to do this line of work. From the second week of July Children's Services are aiming to return to a normal service in relation to visits for vulnerable children.
- The approach to the pandemic that was taken by Children's Services compared favourably with the approach taken elsewhere in the country. In many ways Norfolk had taken a national lead in the way that it had responded to the pandemic. Norfolk's forward-thinking approach was reflected in many aspects of the guidance issued by the Government. Norfolk had not had to apply many of the Government regulations aimed at introducing a reduced service during the pandemic.
- In reply to questions, it was pointed out that Children's Services had continued to undertake home visits throughout the pandemic for children deemed to be the most vulnerable and at the greatest risk. Children's Services had updated its risk assessments and had increased the use of its extended family network contacts and kept social care cases open longer than would normally be necessary. Case numbers were now at an acceptable level and staff were able to take on extra work as it came in.
- Alongside new publicity campaigns aimed at providing Covid-19 specific guidance and advice, and an extended front door offer, Children's Services had introduced a new seven days a week text messaging service and had increased the hours of its out of hours duty team.
- The senior management response had provided staff with more opportunities for flexible 24/7 working. By making increased use of extended family and neighbour contacts Children's Services had increased service resilience and had been better able to deal with any child care crises that emerge outside of office hours.
- The Committee heard that the pandemic had resulted in a reduction in the number of referrals. This had given staff an opportunity to reduce case load levels to a level planned before the start of the pandemic. It had also provided an opportunity to undertake the improvements in the quality of referral work that had been planned before the pandemic. The completion of social worker assessments was now above regional and national averages. There was also a reduction in the number of children in care who went missing.

- It was, however, pointed out that the work coming into the social care team was below 50% of normal levels as the department had reported leading up to the Easter bank holiday on BBC radio Norfolk.
- In reply to other questions, it was pointed out that with the registration of births being suspended Children's Services had received information on this issue from NHS colleagues and shared data with its partner organisations.
- Councillor Dan Roper asked for information to be made available (at a future meeting and to him at the end of this meeting) that defined the highest category of risk cases, gave numbers of such cases and explained the steps that were being taken to prevent the second highest category of social work cases from becoming the most important cases as a result of the pandemic.
- Councillors raised concerns about whether the case load of social workers was being distorted by cases being kept in the social care system longer than was necessary and if, as a direct consequence of the pandemic, less resources were being put into quality assurance than was entirely necessary at this time. In reply, officers said that senior management had taken a decision as part of the response to ensure resources were maintained in quality assurance and to undertake more into quality assurance work. This work has continued.
- Officers explained the new counter measures and joint working arrangements that had been put in place to prevent child exploitation including the appointment of the specialist missing persons teams and the appointment of a national expert in this field.
- Councillors raised concerns about the impact of court delays on vulnerable children. This was an issue for a future meeting.
- In reply officers said that in some ways it was now easier to present evidence at virtual meetings and to get people to give evidence, however, the courts continued to struggle with the high number of cases. A detached youth work team were working on issues to do with criminal exploitation and was involved in work on communication campaigns and work about the risk of on-line exploitation.
- In adding to earlier comments, it was pointed out that Children's Services planned to build on support provided by the voluntary sector.
- Councillors said that while they were pleased to hear that the relationship with the DFE on emergency planning issues had improved they remained concerned that work to identify any potential gaps in emergency plans should continue as a matter of urgency. Officers said that Children's Services had acted as a critical conduit for education leaders to DFE to problem solve and where possible influence policy.
- In reply to further questions it was pointed out that while it had not been possible to compel children who had a social worker to attend school, systems to track these children had been improved. Children's Services had surveyed schools on their approach to support for children who were not at school. There was an expectation that all children would return to school from September and the logistics were still to be worked out including the use of fines for non school attendance.
- Children's Services had taken steps to ensure a consistent response from schools, checking staffing capacity needs, helping with risk assessments, talking to unions, arranging supply of PPE, making sure transport arrangements were in place, providing support for definitions of critical workers.
- Children's Services had put in place a daily Inclusion helpline, provided

STEPs (behaviour support) to parents and continued to process EHCP referrals.

- Councillors queried if there was a continued weekly improvement in school attendance. Officers said that of the previous week, 42% of eligible children in the reception year had attended school. Approximately 37% of Year 1 children and approximately 65 % of Year 10 pupils had attended school. Detailed figures on attendances would be made available at a future meeting.
- In reply to further questions it was pointed out that schools were to be surveyed very shortly on their approach to remote learning. Key players in Norfolk had been involved in the development of the Oak Academy which allowed schools to make use of on-line lessons.
- Children's Services had supported schools with the roll out of the national food voucher scheme. Approximately 75% of schools had taken up the national scheme and 25% of schools had made use of their own scheme.
- It was pointed out that in Thetford there were strong local arrangements between the local primary school and the local Academy. Children's Services supported the transition arrangements that they had put in place.
- Councillors questioned what success looked like in relation to the roll out of laptops. In reply, officers said that it was not possible to broaden the national definition of who laptops could be made available.
- Many of our LAC children had access to a laptop through pupil premium funding. Some children on plans had received one from their school. 2,300 were originally identified in need of a laptop by social workers. We received 1800 from the DFE. However only 60-70 % of this 2,300 need a laptop of which we have distributed 700 at this stage.
- In response Councillors suggested that an analysis was required of how much difference the provision of a laptop made to the education of children. The analysis should identify who needed the laptops most (including any connection problems) and that this information should be made available at a future meeting. This Friday would be the first request to schools for details regarding this matter.
- In answer to further questions, officers said that It was not the role of Children's Services to coordinate the setting up summer school catch up provision over the summer holidays.
- Children's Services had continued with post 16 work to ensure there was not an increase in NEET and to ensure that post 16 pathways remained in place during these difficult times. The key concerns for this age group were around jobs and about work experience and apprenticeship opportunities.
- Councillors were particularly concerned about those families with a disabled child who had not had a break during the pandemic and urgently needed additional support. In reply, officers said that where families were in crisis, Childrens Services had put in place additional outreach work which included additional in house respite care and the restarting of face to face community support (similar to that provided in normal times) , however, at a time of a pandemic this level of support was very difficult to put in place. The response of Children's Services and of schools had focused on the creative use of personal budgets. All the SEN schools in the county but for one had remained open throughout the pandemic.
- In reply to detailed questions about which cohorts of pupils were most impacted by the pandemic, officers said they were most concerned about those in key stage 3, and those with SEN needs, where any loss of

education had a significant impact and where pupils had lost skills that could not be easily regained. There was also concern about the cohort of young carers and those children who needed support from an emotional care prospective.

- There were no known noticeable differences in school attendances in different parts of the county.
- In answer to a further question officers said that if there was just one thing that could be done differently it would be for the Government to give Children's Services more local discretion.

## 8.5 **RESOLVED**

**That the Committee:**

- Note the report and place on record thanks to the officers from Children's Services on their helpful presentations and to all Childrens Services staff on their hard work in providing the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Forward the minutes of today's meeting for consideration at the first meeting of the Sub-Group of this Committee tasked with considering Childrens Services matters.
- Ask the Sub-Group to consider those aspects of the PowerPoint presentations that there was insufficient time to consider in any detail at today's meeting.

## 9 **COVID 19 – Update on emerging issues**

9.1 The Committee received an update from the Director of Public Health and the Director, Insight and Analytics about emerging issues from COVID 19. The details contained in the update could be viewed on line by following the link that was provided on the front of the agenda.

9.2 During discussion it was pointed out that there were less than five cases a day of Covid-19 in Norfolk, excess deaths in King' s Lynn and West Norfolk were largely due to the age profile of the population and social deprivation in that area, and that it was difficult to provide information on numbers of those discharged from hospital to care homes.

## 9.3 **RESOLVED**

**That the Committee place on record thanks to the Director of Public Health and the Director, Insight and Analytics for the update about emerging issues from COVID 19.**

## 10 **The Children's Services agenda for Scrutiny**

### 10.1 **RESOLVED**

**That the Committee:**

- Agree the framework for Scrutiny of the Children's agenda by the Children's Services Scrutiny Sub Committee is organised under five

**strategic themes of the Children's Transformation programme, namely:**

- Inclusion
- Prevention and early intervention
- Effective Practice
- Edge of Care and Alternatives to Care
- Re-shaping the Care Market and creating the capacity we need.

**11 Children's Services Scrutiny Sub Committee**

**11.1 RESOLVED**

**That the Committee:**

- Note the establishment of a sub group of this Committee to consider Children's Services matters.
- Ask the Chair and Vice Chair to agree terms of reference for the sub group and agree wider membership.
- Ask the Chair and Vice Chair to consider developing a draft work programme for the sub group based on outcomes from the earlier Children's Services scrutiny and reports considered elsewhere on this agenda.

**12. Covid-19 - Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme**

12.1 The Committee received a draft of the forward work programme.

**12.2 RESOLVED**

**That the Committee agree its forward work programme as set out in a report by the Executive Director of Strategy and Governance.**

The meeting concluded at 13:30

**Chair**