

## **SCRUTINY BOARD (CHILDREN AND FAMILIES)**

**WEDNESDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER, 2024**

**PRESENT:** Councillor D Cohen in the Chair

Councillors J Bowden, R Downes,  
O Edwards, E Flint, T Goodall,  
J Heselwood, D Jenkins, R Jones,  
N Manaka, L Martin, K Renshaw and  
R. Stephenson

### **CO-OPTED MEMBERS (VOTING)**

Mr A Khitou  
Mr T Britten

### **Co-Opted Members (Non-Voting)**

Ms H Bellamy  
Ms M Adams

### **CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS**

Before moving on to the formal business of the meeting the Chair, Cllr Cohen, wished all pupils, teachers, support staff and all involved in education the best of luck in the coming academic year.

He also congratulated those who have received exam results in recent weeks and hoped that they had achieved the grades that they hoped for and are able to move on in the next phase of their education or careers.

#### **36 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents**

There were no appeals.

#### **37 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public**

There was no exempt information.

#### **38 Late Items**

There were no late items of business.

#### **39 Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **40 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes**

Apologies were received from the following:

Nick Tones, Non-Voting Co-opted Member  
Kate Blacker, Non-Voting Co-opted Member  
Andrew Graham, Voting Co-opted Member  
Shanaz Gul, Non-Voting Co-opted Member  
Julie Longworth, Director of Children and Families

#### **41 Minutes - 18 July 2024**

**Resolved** - That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 18 July 2024, be approved as an accurate record. Following a vote, moved by Cllr Edwards and Seconded by Cllr Renshaw, this was carried unanimously.

#### **42 Impact of Asylum Changes on Children and Young People in Leeds**

Before moving on to agenda item 7 the Chair noted that in the pre-meeting of the Board it was agreed that the report on the Impact of Asylum Changes on Children and Young People in Leeds would be considered as the first substantive item. So effectively a swap between items 7 and 8 as published in the agenda pack.

The Board considered a report from the Director of Children and Families setting out how recent changes to the asylum system have impacted children in Leeds, this is a follow up item to reports considered in the 2023/24 municipal year.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Farrah Khan, Deputy Director Social Care
- Jacinta Kane, Head of Service Corporate Parenting

The Executive Member for Children and Families introduced the report, highlighting concerns around recent far right extremist activity across the country. In addition, the complexity of needs and funding pressures of £1.2m were noted along with national changes that have led to the Rwanda Scheme now being scrapped and Government plans to process asylum schemes more efficiently.

Responding to comments and questions from board members the following points were covered:

- On funding the Chair sought clarity on the figures in the report around funding shortfalls and costs to the Council. In response the Board were informed that the figures in the report are projections not final figures and are based on the complexity of some of the cases which could lead to higher costs. By way of follow up, given the shortfall in funding from Government when compared to projected costs, the Chair asked where the funding will be sourced to make the shortfall up, in response the Board were informed that this would be met through the Children and Families directorate budget.
- The Board asked about the impact of recent far right activity on staff in terms of workloads and in terms of possible safety impacts on them and on any children living in adult accommodation due to incorrect age assessments. In response members were informed that staff are committed to corporate parenting and they have significant experience of carrying out age assessments, when a child or young person is assessed as being under 18 but living in adult hostel accommodation, the Board were assured that wrap around support is delivered as soon as any cases of that nature are determined.
- Members were also informed about impacts of far right activity on both staff and young people in terms of creating an environment of fear. This is being worked through with young people with an emphasis on safety and vigilance and also promoting diversity and Leeds as a welcoming and diverse city.
- The Board emphasised concerns about children and young people living in adult accommodation due to incorrect age assessment at Home Office level.
- The Board asked if the change in Government at national level had led to any developments in terms of a change in approach on asylum, in light of recent changes linked to asylum from Afghanistan. The Board were informed that engagement with Government is ongoing with the Home Secretary having recently visited Leeds during which discussion on community cohesion was a key focus. Leeds has a strong tradition of being a welcoming and compassionate city and the Team Leeds approach was emphasised. It was also noted that further engagement with the Home Office is planned on the issue of age assessments whilst also recognising that the Home Office has had a busy period in recent months.
- The Board asked for more details about the average age of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). In response the Board heard that the most common age for a UASC is 16-17 years old with a small number of younger children aged 13-14. Often the older age of UASC is linked to difficult decisions made by their families where age is a determinant on whether such a journey to seek asylum would be possible given the inherent danger and risk associated with those journeys. In addition, in terms of gender approximately 80% are male with approximately 20% being female which is again linked to family decision making. The Board were assured that no matter what laws exist in the country of origin in relation to adulthood the Children's Act in the UK means that any UASC under 18 is treated as a child.

- Board members asked about advice to staff and community hubs in relation to far right activity and security. Reassurance was given that across the Council and in schools work has been conducted on awareness and vigilance and increasing safety. A balanced and proportionate approach is taken on staff welfare and the welfare of children and young people. In respect of staff support the role of the Race Equality Staff Network was also noted. The commitment to diversity and being a welcoming city was again emphasised.
- The Executive Member for Children and Families summed up thanking the Board for their ongoing interest in this issue.

**Resolved** - Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) noted and endorsed the update report and asked that a further update on this issue is brought back to the Board in the 2024/25 municipal year.

(This was passed unanimously, proposed by Cllr Cohen and seconded by Cllr Martin)

#### **43 SEND - Education, Health and Care Plans – Review Process – Update Report**

The Board considered a report from the Director of Children and Families responding to the recommendations made by the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) through its inquiry report on the Provision of EHCP Support in Leeds in April 2024.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Dan Barton, Deputy Director – Learning
- Phil Evans, Chief Officer Resources, Transformation and Partnerships
- Sandra Pentelow, Projects and Programme Manager

The Executive Member for Children and Families introduced the report and highlighted the work done on service improvement since the scrutiny inquiry report in April 2024. It was acknowledged that there have been some delays to the timescales involved but work is now underway to reduce EHCP backlogs.

Responding to comments and questions from Board members the following discussion took place:

- In response to a question on how far the authority is behind in dealing with some EHCP cases the board heard that the main concern was around assessments that have not taken place and are out of timescale, it is expected that to catch up on this will take a minimum of 6 months with 100 extra assessments taking place per month following additional staffing resource coming online. It was noted that until the new operating model is in place demand pressures, which are being experienced

nationally as well as in Leeds, remain a problem and this is also linked to the review of FFI and transition of children and young people from that funding stream to EHCP assessment, which featured at the July meeting of the Board.

- On a similar theme the Board asked about how many new staff are in place and how the new staffing approach is being communicated to young people and their parents and carers. The Board were informed that there are approximately 20 to 25 educational psychologists (EPs) who have been procured through a private company with the assurance that the staffing resource can process 100 EHCP assessments per month. The staffing mix may vary and also includes plan writers.
- In terms of how this will look to families accessing the service this will look the same as it would in normal circumstances, with an officer conducting a piece of work through observation of a child in an education setting. The service does have a communication plan in place to set out timescales to families and explain that there are delays and the reasons for them.
- The Board were informed that the additional 20 to 25 staff are not solely utilised by Leeds but are procured through a private company and an individual staff member could be working for a number of different authorities. So, in effect the service has 'out-sourced' 100 EHCP plans per month with around 25 EPs working on this. A full time EP would be able to add wider value as well as doing more EHCP assessments per month. The Board acknowledged that the shortage of EPs nationally and the presence of private companies can make recruitment and retention of EPs a challenge for Leeds and all local authorities.
- The Board were keen to ensure that new digital approaches are accessible to all and that families who are less digitally skilled are still able to access EHCP services. The Board were assured that there will always be a way to request an assessment non-digitally – digital methods though will speed up processes and it was noted that system design is focussed on the routes used most commonly and digital submissions can be processed quicker. In terms of testing the new digital forms there has been engagement on the professional aspects of the form and feedback on it has been largely positive. The Board were informed that wider consultation with parents, carers and young people on the new form is being planned and will take place in the coming weeks.
- The Board were also informed, following questions, of how elected member casework and escalation routes for cases with elected member involvement will be dealt with. An existing email address will be used for this purpose with supporting training provided to members around EHCP cases. The Board were assured that the email address is monitored, and this will be the route for casework to be sent in by elected members. It was recognised that there are possible resource implications if the existing email address is used as there could be an increase in email volume to that address once communicated to councillors. The Board added that elected member contacts by residents can often be a measure of last resort so this email address will provide assurance that cases referred are being dealt with. The Board heard that the impact of the improvement work being done by the service, in time, will reduce the need for cases to be escalated down to an absolute minimum.

- The Board asked about recruitment of key roles within the service with two senior vacancies that need to be filled quickly. Whilst work is ongoing to improve the appeal of the roles it is possible that support may be needed to fill the roles, and this could involve a national search to find the right candidates if the vacancies persist.
- The Board noted the lack of training at national level for the education psychologist specialism with limited institutions that are accredited to train EPs and a limited number of bursaries available. In terms of psychology generally there is a sufficiency of graduates in that field and it is hoped that work at national level can facilitate more candidates coming forward and training as an EP.
- The Board asked if a work study or due diligence has been done to measure the cost effectiveness of the use of the private company, or agency, to do the 100 EHCPs per month. The aim would be to compare the costs associated with the use of the agency as compared to the cost of doing that internally. The Board heard that there is an awareness of time taken to do an EHCP and that EPs also do valuable early help work to reduce future demand on these services. The Board noted that it is more expensive to procure external support than it is to do the work internally which in part is explained by the availability of EPs to carry out this work through an agency whilst also having a lack of availability/candidates for full time roles working for a local authority, market forces play a part in this. It was agreed that more work will be done on costs of an EHCP internally to the Council to facilitate a comparison with the cost of procuring it externally. The point around wider added value brought by EPs working for Leeds was reiterated and accepted by Board members.
- The Board raised the need for better communication with parents and carers when there are delays in EHCP processes. It was acknowledged that more proactivity on communication needs to be developed and is a priority in the improvement work being done by the service.
- The Board discussed both successful application rates and re-application rates for EHCPs if an initial assessment had not secured one, particular given that needs of children and young people can change. The Board heard that around 75% of requests for assessment are accepted and at the end of assessment the rate is slightly lower for issuing of an EHCP. On re-applications it was agreed that this could be provided outside the meeting following some further analysis.
- Following discussion of budget pressure in the DSG Higher Needs Block it was agreed that the letter on the funding formula issued to the previous government will be re-issued to the new Government to set out the view of the Board on the funding formula and to call for this to be reviewed. The Board acknowledged the forthcoming budget announcement expected in October 2024.
- The Executive Member emphasised the importance and commitment to get services right for a range of stakeholders but most importantly the children and young people involved and ensuring that they get the support needed to access and succeed in their education setting.
- Board members discussed the health elements of the plans, education has been the focus but the health support elements do need to feature

more strongly, particularly mental health support. It was noted that this is an issue, and the mechanisms are in place to take this forward through a partnership approach.

- The Chair noted that Recommendations 5, 6 and 7 from the Board's inquiry are only dealt with briefly and that these will be the subject of an update in the future.

**Resolved** – The Children and Families Scrutiny Board noted the content of the report and:

- a) Asked for further details on the costs of EHCP processes to the Council when assessed using internal resource and;
- b) That a further update be brought back to the Board on this issue in the current (2024/25) municipal year.

(This was proposed by Cllr Cohen, seconded by Cllr Edwards and carried unanimously)

#### **44 Joint Targeted Area Inspection on Serious Youth Violence - Action Plan**

Following previous consideration of the Youth Justice Plan 2024-27 and the outcome from the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) on Youth Violence in June 2024, the Board considered the Action Plan responding to the JTAI.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Farrah Khan, Deputy Director Social Care
- Gill Marchant, Leads Health and Care Partnership
- Hannah Beal, Deputy Director Leeds Community Healthcare
- Sara Clarke, Head of Service (CAMHS) Leeds Community Healthcare
- Mark Charlton, Head of Community Safeguarding

The Executive Member for Children and Families introduced the item focussing on the positive outcome from the JTAI that took place in March 2024 which emphasised the strength of the partnership that addresses youth violence and those affected by it in Leeds. The Executive Member noted the aim of the action plan to tackle the issues raised by the inspection and the multi-agency response to it, particularly aimed at the three areas for improvement.

In response to question and comments from members the following issues were discussed:

- The Board discussed CAMHS services in the city in more detail and heard that there is a priority service targeted at ADHD and autism referrals and this applies to the cohort in the youth justice system. The Board were informed about waiting times for CAMHS and also referrals and how they are dealt with. CAMHS will account for around 35-40% of referrals with

other referrals being dealt with through school clusters where funding is being used to provide full coverage across Leeds for Mental Health services for young people. Waiting times for CAMHS are challenging and the service is subject to service re-design with work ongoing to clarify the offer and to who the offer is made. The Board noted the service re-design plans and asked that an update is provided to scrutiny when the service re-design is complete.

- Members were informed that CAMHS is a relatively small, or focussed, element of mental health provision for young people in the city. School clusters, schools themselves and the third sector provide key services and work is ongoing to identify the services offered and communicate that clearly to families. CAMHS are not the only agency involved in these services.
- The Board acknowledged the national nature of the challenge on access and availability of mental health services for young people. Pastoral support in schools has reduced as funding has reduced and there has also been increase in demand linked to the impact of Covid. The Board also noted on demand issues that societal changes and the 'pathologising of growing up' are also issues to be considered with anxiety in some cases being part of adolescence that doesn't necessarily require service interventions.
- The Board noted that school counsellors are not statutorily required although some schools do have the budget to support that role. Wider budget reductions have meant that over time school counsellors have reduced, and pastoral support often passes to teachers and existing school support staff.
- The Board asked about police protection notifications and sharing of information across agencies with consistency and training being key areas of interest. The Board were assured that there is a consistent approach to this from the Police with a mechanism added to the process used to share information. It was also noted that the Police were aware of this and welcomed the feedback from the inspection team.
- The Board queried whether parents and carers are aware of multi-agency meetings, linked to Project Shield, in relation to youth crime and knife crime. In response the Board heard that daily safeguarding meetings take place at the front door to deal with incidents. These do not involve assigned social workers but there is social work representation at the meetings and assigned social workers are informed of discussions linked to Project Shield where appropriate. The Board acknowledged that in some cases parents can be the risk to their children so in some cases may not be informed of multi-agency meetings.
- The Board were keen to ensure that the ongoing knife amnesty is widely publicised, promoted and communicated within communities in Leeds to ensure that young people are aware that they can hand knives in and that it is an amnesty with no prosecution linked to it. It was agreed that this will be raised with the Police and any outcomes shared with the Board.

**Resolved** - Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) noted and endorsed the presented action plan.



(Proposed by Cllr Jones and seconded by Cllr Martin, carried unanimously)

#### **45 Work Programme**

The Board considered the Scrutiny Board's work programme for the 2024/25 municipal year.

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser introduced the report setting out the Work Programme at Appendix 1 and July Executive Board minutes at Appendix 2.

The following issues were raised under this item:

- Board Members wanted to look in more detail at Further Education provision in the city following media reports about pressure on places in the sector. The Board also asked that appropriate witnesses from the sector should be invited and clarity on which level the pressure is focused on should also feature. This suggestion was agreed to and will be built into the 2024/25 Work Programme subject to discussion on timescales.
- The Board noted that FE responsibility is shared, sufficiency sits with the Council, the DfE funds/commissions the places and the FE sector delivers the provision. The Board were assured that system meetings do take place regularly and that the Council has done work on sufficiency suggesting that there are problems with availability of places for young people.
- The Board also highlighted potential issues with recruitment and retention of staff as being an important factor in future work.
- As a further future work item potentially in 2025/26 work on the scrapping of single word Ofsted inspections was suggested. It was noted that this would be better when further details on the 'report card' are announced by Government. When this does come forward the aim of the scrutiny work should be focussed on trying to influence the new approach if possible.

**Resolved** - Members noted the Board's work programme for the 2024/25 municipal year, and an item on Further Education will be added to it.

(Proposed by Cllr Edwards and seconded by Cllr Cohen and agreed unanimously)

**Meeting concluded at 12.50PM**

#### **46 Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Board is scheduled for Wednesday 9 October at 10.00AM with a pre-meeting for all Board Members at 9.45am.