

SCRUTINY BOARD (CHILDREN AND FAMILIES)

WEDNESDAY, 9TH OCTOBER, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor D Cohen in the Chair

Councillors Mr E A Britten, 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
Ms S Gul
Mr N Tones

47 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

48 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There was no exempt information.

49 Late Items

There were no late items.

However, member's attention was drawn to the supplementary information on Item 10 Post 16 SEND Transport Policy. This was circulated as supplementary information due to publication deadlines for this meeting and the Executive Board on 16 October 2024, at which the final proposals for any changes to Post 16 SEND Transport provision will be decided.

50 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

51 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from:

Cllr Jordan Bowden
Kate Blacker
Andrew Graham

52 Minutes - 4 September & 9 July 2024

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meetings held on 9 July 2024 and 4 September 2024 be approved as an accurate record.

These were both unanimously approved, the July minutes proposed and seconded by Cllr Renshaw and Cllr Edwards, the September minutes by Cllr Jones and Cllr Martin.

53 Leeds Safeguarding Children Partnership - Annual Report 2023/24

The Board considered the report from the Director of Children and Families presenting the Leeds Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2023/24. The report outlined the activity that has taken place across the year in relation to the Safeguarding Partners' statutory duties to work together in exercising their functions of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, including developments in practice, progress with priorities, learning, scrutiny, inspections and statutory responsibilities.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Stephen Dodds, Leeds District Commander (LSCP Executive)
- Jo Harding, Leeds Place Nurse Lead (LSCP Executive)
- David Derbyshire, Independent Scrutineer – LSCP
- Belinda Sharratt, LSCP Business Unit Manager

The Executive Board Member for Children and Families introduced the report stressing the importance and strength of the partnership approach to safeguarding work in Leeds across the local authority, health and Police. The impact of poverty continues to be a risk factor in terms of safeguarding and the development of early help approaches was also noted as a key area of work done by the partnership. Thanks were given to all staff working in this important area.

The Independent Scrutineer also made introductory remarks setting out his role and the plan in place for his activity. It was noted that the arrangements on scrutiny are good within the partnership and that there is real strength in

the work done on safeguarding in Leeds. The recent Joint Targeted Area Inspection on Youth Violence (previously considered by the Board) was noted as a good recent example of this. The skilled workforce in Leeds was also noted and the key role frontline staff play in delivering safeguarding in the city with education now also featuring in the partnership work. Supervision of staff was highlighted as a strength and features analysis of the key work being undertaken as opposed to just ensuring that things are done and submitted appropriately.

It was noted that Executive meetings and meetings within the partnership do feature robust challenge and working through resolutions where there is disagreement. Key challenges in Leeds and nationally on safeguarding are around the scale of domestic abuse and impacts on children, enhancing safeguarding of adolescents and ensuring that early stage intervention on neglect cases is as accurate as possible and identify which children need safeguarding and which families need more support. Work is ongoing on these key issues in Leeds.

In response to questions and comments from members the Board discussed the following:

- The Chair noted past consideration of a specific safeguarding case known as 'Ruby' has led to a number of improvements and new processes to provide assurance to scrutiny around safeguarding arrangements. This includes regular meetings between the Chair of this Board and the independent scrutineer as well as separate meetings with the Executive Board Member. In addition, the annual report is now a regular, annual feature of the scrutiny board's work programme.
- In response to a question on themes in the report particularly in relation to neglect and the role of parental conflict and the impact it has on children, the Board heard that during the pandemic instances of relationship issues increased due to the nature of lockdown and there was an increase in concern linked to this. The city does have a service called Relationships Matter which is an early help initiative aimed at identifying and supporting families where there are early indications of conflict this can be both one to one and online sessions. Feedback on this has been positive and that men in particular have accessed the online offer which is out of working hours.
- Witnesses were asked about utilising the experience of people who have undergone issues linked to neglect and parental conflict and more broadly those who have been involved in the care system, so those who have lived experience of the services provided. In response the Board heard that there is an active group of people who have been involved in this and key question are around what would have made a difference to them when going through difficulties and accessing family support and care services. Some of the parents who have experience of the care system are involved in service delivery to support families going through similar issues, the EPEC programme was highlighted which stands for Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities. In addition, some carers

and parents are involved in advocacy for people going through similar issues.

- Members asked about professional curiosity and welcomed the development of training to support that approach and asked if that was for all staff or just those involved in social work and safeguarding. In response the Board heard that it is available to all staff and has resulted from safeguarding practice reviews and needs assessments carried out by the service.
- In response to a question on bereavement and reductions in bereavement services the board heard that there has been a focus on the need to put in place training and support to staff dealing with bereavement when working with families. Bereavement has been a factor in two rapid reviews so it has been a focus at the Executive meetings.
- On supervision of staff the Board asked about the evidence base for positive comments about supervision of staff. The Board were informed that as part of the Independent Scrutineer's work he has met with staff directly across the partnership with general feedback being that they have regular supervision meetings and that in these sessions there is a focus on plans and analysis of cases they are dealing with. In addition, managers also feedback that they are managed on a regular basis with a similar approach taken to analysis and planning for cases they are working on. It was noted that trauma informed approaches are embedded in Leeds not just in social work practice but more broadly across the partnership, so there is a common language and understanding across professionals.
- The Board asked about domestic abuse and how it is being addressed, with Yorkshire having a particularly high rate when compared to national statistics. The Board believed that there was some good work to tackle issues such as misogyny with men and boys but wanted to know more about how this is being developed given the higher rates of domestic abuse in the region. By way of response the Board heard that it is a key priority to tackle and is a key factor in children experiencing hardship and vulnerability. It was also noted that feedback from a recent practitioner event which highlighted the concerns around domestic violence and the feedback that suggests that young boys living in that environment can also go on to be domestic abusers. Family Help hubs were also highlighted as an approach to tackled domestic abuse with third sector specialists involved to provide support and signpost towards successful interventions to tackle domestic violence and abuse. The already referenced Relationship Matters service is also involved in this work.
- On wider work to tackle domestic violence the board heard about cross cutting work with the Safeguarding Adults Partnership to tackle the issue and seek assurance on the work that is going on. If there is a domestic homicide or serious incident of that nature there is a statutory requirement for the Safeguarding Adults Board to examine and investigate the case, which leads to learning and changes in practice some of which are focussed on perpetrators of the abuse.
- From a Police perspective the Board also heard about the key focus they have in terms of additional resources deployed to tackle the issue. The Pol-Ed Programme is used to go in to schools and provide learning and

engagement with young people on the impact of domestic abuse and violence and controlling and coercive relationships. In terms of enforcement work done by the Police there has been a steady increase of remand cases associated with domestic abuse. Also 3,200 officers have been trained across West Yorkshire on domestic abuse with 36% of those working in Leeds.

- The Board emphasised the importance of bereavement and the impact it can have on young people. A suggestion being that more support could be done to tackle issues such as lack of confidence. It was acknowledged that loss and bereavement can have a major impact on young people in terms of development and well-being. It was noted that this could be the focus of a future work item for the board.
- In response to a question on links between frontline staff and management and the ability of staff to speak up on safeguarding issues, the Board heard that Leeds does have structures in place to speak up and raise issues without fear of detriment. In Leeds the process is to raise an issue in the first instance with managers and if that is not effective then there is an escalation procedure which is clear to staff and has various stages to it. Feedback from the Independent Scrutineer suggest that in most cases the issue is resolved through manager discussion by easing concerns through provision of additional information or in fact leads to further questions and enquiries. There are a small number of examples of escalation occurring to more senior levels.
- The Board asked about training to school staff on domestic abuse and whether this extends to school support staff. In response the Board heard that training is focussed on indicators of domestic abuse and that through section 11 returns done by schools information is provided to the LSCP Business Unit and analysis is carried out of training needs to identify gaps and given that domestic abuse is a priority this will be picked up through those processes and that reassurance is sought on the level of training on this and that it is effective. Audit approaches are also in place to look at whether training is making a difference.
- On the specifics of training the board heard that it is rolled out in partnership with Safer, Stronger Communities colleagues to provide training opportunities on a multi-agency basis and this is provided as interactive training either in person or on-line but is interactive and features lived experiences from young people.
- The Board discussed the Turnaround project and welcomed the impact it has in supporting children and families involved in the Youth Justice system. It was noted that funding for the programme is due to end in March but there is work ongoing, and a commitment to lobby, to secure alternative funding sources and the possibility that the existing funding will continue beyond that.
- The Executive Member welcomed the consideration of these issues today in particular the focus on domestic abuse and the impact it has on individuals in the city. The unseen elements such as coercion and control were also noted as key issues to tackle due to the damage that these can cause to children and families.

Resolved - the Scrutiny Board endorsed the work undertaken to further strengthen the safeguarding children arrangements in Leeds.

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

54 **School Attendance Update**

Members considered a report from the Director of Children and Families on school attendance which provided an overview of the national school attendance picture an overview of the Leeds school attendance data and the actions the local authority has taken and will continue to take to support schools in their work to improve attendance.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Dan Barton, Deputy Director – Learning
- Rebecca McCormack, Head of Service Vulnerable Learners
- Alison Finley, Children Missing out on Education Lead

To introduce the item the Executive Member for Children and Families emphasised the need to get this right in terms of increasing attendance levels as it is a safeguarding, life chances and education issue which is why it is a priority to improve attendance levels in the city. Positive work has taken place but more is needed to improve attendance in the city.

In response to questions and comments from elected members the Board considered the following issues:

- The Board asked about exclusions and whether these were classed as absences. The Board heard that suspension or exclusions are classed as authorised absences. Responding to further questions around some schools excluding more than others the Board were informed that the service does work with schools on behaviour policies and work where patterns develop in terms of additional support that can be provided. Ultimately, schools work in line with DfE guidance on suspensions and exclusions. Members asked for more detail on individual schools in terms of the number of suspensions. This was agreed to as an action for outside of the meeting and it was noted that officers were keen to hear about information linked to patterns in terms of suspensions. In addition, a ward by ward breakdown of data for schools was also considered to be a good idea and one that can be developed to provide information to elected members on attendance in their wards.
- Members asked about different types of attendance so in some instances a 1 hour or part time timetable is operated. The Board heard that this is the case when considered to be appropriate and that records are kept

where this type of timetable is used and inappropriate use of such measures are also monitored by both the service and the DfE. In addition, the Board were informed that new coding was introduced this year to highlight when part time timetables are being used. Work is done to ensure that the reasons for part time timetables are known and that they are only used temporarily with work done to ensure the timetable expands.

- In response to a question on home schooling and comparisons with other areas the Board heard that data is kept on these and that there is a strong link between exclusion, attendance and elective home education. It was noted that the local authority does not have a great deal of power in terms of interventions albeit this could change in the future following a recent consultation. In Leeds there are 1,377 children of school age educated at home. Powers are limited but identifying those that are not in receipt of a suitable education is one of them. Assessment of the learning plans that are sent in by parents and carers takes place to ensure that a suitable education is being provided. In terms of comparison the Board heard that Leeds is broadly in line with the national average.
- Safeguarding and additional needs and vulnerabilities are considered when home education is being carried out by families, though in a lot of cases home education is delivered successfully and is a positive for the children involved.
- Members were also interested in socio-economic groups and attendance levels and whether it was possible to provide data on that in future reports. This was agreed to, and it was noted that Indices of Multiple Deprivation overlays with attendance figures.
- The Board discussed attendance amongst the Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities in the city and the difficulties sometimes experienced in accessing schools, it was noted that work is done to support those communities to access schools.
- Members asked about absences linked to pupils awaiting places at special schools. The Board were informed of the work going on to provide more specialist provision and that it is prioritised to those who most need it and also resourcing and the need to provide placements in schools who can meet needs. Work is underway to go into schools to seek expressions of interest to work with the service on additional provision of this nature.
- On ethnicity and attendance and comparison with other areas the board heard that comparisons are not done as standard on this measure but that the same groups highlighted in other areas, through regional work, are also of concern in Leeds.
- Witnesses were asked about how the service is addressing attendance issues linked to those with child protection plans, particularly those aged 11 and under. In response the board heard about the work done by the virtual school in partnership with child protection chairs to address attendance in this cohort and to focus on school attendance and education issues. Education is considered to be a protective factor and multi-agency support is provided to support attendance and education. The board noted some initial improvement in attendance amongst CLA and those with child in need and child protection plans with a commitment to continue to work to improve those figures. The 3As strategy was also

noted in terms of the framework it provides on a city wide basis to make education 'everybody's business'.

- The Board highlighted the impact that suitability of school placement can have on attendance and how much flexibility there is to change setting. In response the Board were informed that there is due regard paid to professionals working with the children to determine the best setting for a child. There is the ability to call a review of the EHCP and name another setting taking account of a wide range of professional opinion. The directorate is still developing its approach in this area but it is possible to adjust settings to better meet needs.
- The Board were informed of early intervention and training being provided to support children and young people who are not regularly attending school due to emotional and mental health reasons.
- Members asked about the increase in penalty notices issued for unauthorised absences and the reasons for that. In response the board heard that penalty notices are issued by the Council on behalf of schools effectively on request from schools. A key increase has been on penalty notices for holidays and the service is keen to avoid issuing notices where families have additional vulnerabilities. On penalty notices other than for holidays the service is keen to challenge to ensure that families with additional vulnerabilities are not being targeted.
- Members were keen to hear more about 'invisible absence' where children and young people attend school but are not attending classes regularly. It was acknowledged that this remains a problem with schools developing their own approaches to deal with it and anecdotally the approaches being used are improving the situation. Targeted support meetings with schools are also used to share good practice. The Board noted that in some cases the children avoiding lessons are those who need additional support or who are awaiting a place in special school, albeit there can be other reasons for attending school but avoiding classes.
- The Board asked for more detail on family interventions for those with child protection plans to support attendance. In response the Board heard that support is provided tailored to the needs of the children and family involved. This support is provided on a multi-agency approach focussed on needs and aimed at reducing risk and improving outcomes.
- The Chair highlighted the data at page 5 in the report on unauthorised absence highlighting that in primary, secondary and special schools performance is in quartile D, adding that the hope was that this will improve over the course of the coming year.

Resolved – The Board noted the content of the report.

(This was proposed by Cllr Cohen and seconded by Cllr Edwards)

55 The Child Poverty Strategy for Leeds

The Board considered a report from the Director of Children and Families which provided an overview of, and a further update on the Child Poverty

Strategy for Leeds and the work that sits underneath the strategy. This included the range of work that has been done to address ongoing post pandemic and cost of living priorities. This item follows an update received in the 2023/24 municipal year and continuing interest from the Board in the impact of poverty on children and families in the city.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Farrah Khan, Deputy Director Social Care
- Julie Devonald, Head of Service Workforce Development & Change

The Executive Member for Children and Families introduce the report highlighting the links between child poverty and reduced mental health, physical health, poor financial health, life expectancy and lower grades in education. Therefore, it is important to tackle the issues highlighted and ensure a better future for children and young people in the city. It was also noted that children and young people had been consulted on the refreshed strategy and had inputted into it.

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

- Members emphasised the challenges faced by families in Leeds in dealing with poverty when housing costs are factored in at an average of £250 per week for a private sector property in the city. The impact of poverty is significant with 79% of school staff dealing on a daily basis with issues linked to poverty such as school readiness and uniforms, referrals to food banks and provision of key household appliances such as washing machines. The impact of hunger was also noted as a key area of concern. The Board acknowledged the clear links between poverty and increased rates of children looked after and statutory interventions.
- The Board discussed the impact of shame that can lead from living in poverty and how it can stay with children into adulthood, impacting on self-esteem, confidence and ability to fulfil potential.
- Members were informed of the successful uniform exchange programme which has been a real success with over 4,000 winter coats provided through the programme. The overall approach to tackling shame linked to poverty is a focus across the service. In December there will be a focus on poverty awareness on a multi-agency basis to raise awareness and enable families to access support.
- The Chair highlighted a recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that highlighted that child poverty has fluctuated but only to a small level going back 30 years to 1994.
- The Board asked about free school meal take up and why 8,435 children are not receiving free school meals even though they are entitled to claim them. In addition, take up of free nursery placements was also highlighted as a concern. In response the Board were informed that the directorate is looking at successful schemes operated in other areas on auto-enrolment

to free school meals which would be a straightforward way of addressing the statistics and those not claiming them. On free nursery places a scheme is being rolled out to encourage take up both to encourage parents to take up work opportunities and to provide early access to childcare which can be a protective and educational factor. In addition, targeted work is underway to ensure that issues such as mistrust or concern about handing children over to carers are tackled. The Board heard of the work going on with NESTA to encourage take up of early years provision and re-imagining the provision the council offers, this included surveys and data gathering with parents and carers and also sharing best practice from areas that are doing well.

- Members highlighted the healthy holidays programme and the hope that it continues in the future. In addition there was a question around how the funding is allocated with the hope that smaller organisations could access more of the funding that is available. On the funding allocations members heard that the Council awards the funding for schools to run the programme and working with the Leeds Community Foundation funding is allocated through a bidding process to third sector organisations a key principle is that each ward will have activity and activity is prioritised towards the wards that most need it, 37 organisations received funding through the programme in the last round.
- The Board highlighted levels of destitution or deep poverty and that they are on the increase so children and young people missing out on essentials not just non-essentials. The Board heard that to tackle these issues the service is working in communities on a multi-agency basis to harness the support available. The Family Help approach was also highlighted to provide wrap around support and focus on early years to tackle issues and deliver long-term strategies to improve outcomes linked to the three obsessions in the Children and Young People's Plan.
- A board member raised a concern about the impact of the ongoing service review of Little Owls Nurseries and whether any increase in childcare charges linked to the nurseries being operated by other providers would negatively impact on child poverty in the city. By way of response the Board were assured that the proposals due to be considered at Executive Board on 16 October are not a proposal to sell provision off, with 4 likely to go to the schools in which they are currently based and the remaining 8 subject to a procurement process with alternative providers. Part of that process will involve consideration of key issues linked to being able to provide additional support to SEND children, support to children looked after and also consider issues such as deprivation. If the Council is not satisfied on these issues, then the setting would be retained and operated by the local authority. The 9 remaining nurseries that are not part of this review and will be retained and operated by the local authority are located in the most deprived areas of the city. It was noted that other core cities do not provide as many nurseries as Leeds with Newcastle having 5 settings and Bristol and Sheffield having 2 each. The member remained concerned about EDCI assessment and the possible impact of childcare fees increasing on child poverty, following discussion it was accepted that this would be picked up in discussion at

Executive Board on 16 October when the proposals are scheduled to be discussed

Resolved

The Board:

- a) Endorsed the refreshed and ongoing strategic framework in place to mitigate the impact of child poverty, and the work being undertaken by the council and other partners in the key areas of activity.
- b) The Scrutiny Board acknowledged the need to promote the work of the Child Poverty strategy across the city and across council directorates and through wider city partnerships in order to highlight the impact of poverty on children and their families.

(Proposed by Cllr Cohen and seconded by Cllr Jenkins and passed unanimously)

And following a formally moved amendment to the recommendations proposed by Cllr Jenkins and seconded by Cllr Jones, Recommendation C was added as follows:

- c) That the Scrutiny Board urges the Government to consider a tax on excessive wealth to tackle child poverty and inequality.

(This was passed by a majority vote)

56 Working Group Summary - Children's Transport Policy: Proposed changes to transport assistance for post-16 learners with SEND

Board members considered a report from the Head of Democratic Services that provided a summary and conclusions from the Children's Transport Policy Working Group held on 24 September 2024.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Children and Families
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Dan Barton , Deputy Director – Learning
- Paul McGrath, Project Lead
- Rob Clayton, Principal Scrutiny Adviser

The Chair introduced the item and thanked attendees for the positive and helpful discussion that took place.

Resolved – The Board noted and approved the summary note of the Working Group into the proposed changes to transport assistance for post-16 learners with SEND held on 24 September 2024.

(Proposed by Cllr Cohen and seconded by T Britten)

57 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 September Executive Board minutes at Appendix 2.

Resolved - Members noted the Board's work programme for the 2024/25 municipal year.

(Proposed by Cllr Cohen and seconded by Cllr Stephenson)

58 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) will be on Monday 11th November 2024 at 1.30pm. (There will be a pre-meet for all Board Members at 1:15pm).

Meeting concluded at 13.35