

SCRUTINY BOARD (CHILDREN AND FAMILIES)

THURSDAY, 22ND FEBRUARY, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor D Cohen in the Chair

Councillors J Bowden, E Bromley,
Amanda Carter, R Downes, O Edwards,
Graham, C Gruen, J Heselwood, Khitou,
N Manaka, L Martin, K Renshaw, J Senior
and R. Stephenson

CO-OPTED MEMBERS (VOTING)

Mr E A Britten - Church Representative (Catholic Diocese of Leeds)
Mr A Graham – Church Representative (Church of England)
Mr A Khitou – Primary Parent Governor Representative

Co-Opted Members (Non-Voting)

Mr N Tones – School Staff Representative
Laura Whitaker – Young Lives Leeds

72 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no Appeals.

73 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There was no exempt information on the agenda

74 Late Items

A late item was admitted to the agenda by the Chair which was considered as Agenda item 9 and was a report on the ongoing inquiry work on the Provision of EHCP Support in Leeds. This was admitted as a late item due to time constraints on agenda clearance and was circulated to Board Members on Monday 19 February 2024.

75 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

76 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

The Board received the following apologies:

Cllr David Blackburn
Jackie Ward – Co-opted Member
Helen Bellamy – Co-opted Member
Kate Blacker – Co-opted Member

77 Minutes - 24 January 2024

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 November 2023, be approved as an accurate record.

78 Voice and Influence - Hearing the Voices of Children and Young People

The Board considered a report from the Director of Children and Families providing an update on the work of the Voice and Influence Team putting the voice of children and young people at the centre of the directorate's work.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Councillor Jonathan Pryor, Executive Member for Economy, Culture, and Education
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Farrah Khan, Deputy Director – Social Care
- Hannah Lamplugh, Children's Strategy and Influence Lead

The Executive Board Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships introduced to the report noting the excellent work done by the Voice, Influence and Change Team and the recognition that they had received in being nominated for a national award. The Executive Board Member highlighted the number of children that are reached through this small team for example the 25-26,000 children that complete the My Health, My School Survey, the thousands of children that vote for the Leeds Children's Mayor each year and the 80,000 children consulted with over a period of years to develop the 12 Child Friendly Leeds wishes.

The Executive Member also emphasised the growing feedback received through the Voice and Influence Team from children and young people that focuses on poverty and the associated worries they have linked to that issue.

The Children's Strategy and Influence Lead also provided introductory comments covering the statutory element of the Voice and Influence role, the universal offer that is made to children and young people in the city, the role in

working with social care colleagues to hear the voices of seldom heard children and young people and work with SEND children and young people.

The report recommendations also covered enhanced working between the Board, through the Principal Scrutiny Adviser, and the Voice and Influence Team to potentially include the Board being invited to an annual Youth Takeover event to enable the Board to meet directly with children and young people; more input into the Board's work programme to look at ways in which the voice of children and young people could be heard more clearly in the work the board is planning to do and also consider whether report authors could reflect on how each report considered by the Board meets the child friendly wishes or whether reports could specifically cover the voice of the child as standard. It was agreed that the scrutiny adviser would take this away and report back to the Board following further work with the Voice and Influence Team and taking account of any wider, relevant advice about the possible approaches.

In response to questions and comments from Board Members the following issues were covered:

- Members welcomed the report and were supportive of the wide reach of the Voice and Influence Team and the drive to ensure that the voice of children and young people is fully captured as part of the directorate's work.
- Members asked about formal links between the team and its work and the Executive and other bodies such as the Youth Council as well as frequency of meetings and a suggestion that the Voice and Influence Team could meet with newly elected members to set out the work that the team does and the connections they have in localities across the city. In response the Board were informed that the UK Youth Parliament are elected every two years and the Team meet with them on a monthly basis and depending on events this can be more frequent. An example of the activities of the Youth Parliament was provided through the 'make your mark ballot' which seeks to understand the key issues being faced by children and young people and ultimately determining their top priority and feeding that back to Children's Champions. The Leeds Youth Council meet every month on a Saturday and have expressed a desire to meet with more elected members in the future. The Youth Council has recently carried out work on mental health and exam stress which has been taken forward by the Voice and Influence Team. In respect of contact with elected members a quarterly newsletter is produced which is aimed at raising awareness on key news and key consultations. Moving forward there was a suggestion that a briefing could be provided to Children's Champions before taking on the role. In addition, a guide has also been produced in partnership with Children's Champions, which will be launched after the elections and shared with elected members with a local focus to provide local contacts and information to elected members and enable them to share this information with children and young people in their wards.

- The Board sought assurance about children and young people being listened to when there are serious issues in their lives such as abuse or neglect. Assurance was provided that in Leeds that is the case, despite funding reductions the directorate is committed to maintaining the voice and influence provision that exists in the city. Central to the work of staff is listening to the voice of children, parents and carers linked to the statutory responsibility to promote the welfare of the child and to safeguard children, listening to lived experiences is absolutely central to that. Leeds has a Think Family approach which not only involves listening to the voice of the child but also to parents and carers. Quality Assurance also takes place to test and ensure that services are enabling the voice of the child to be heard through developing trusted relationships, that listening does take place and how that impacts the work of the directorate and how that is evidenced. The inspection framework also covers this, a key feature of all inspections is to determine how well the voice of the child is captured. In the last Ofsted inspection, it was highlighted that the Voice of the Child was strong in Leeds, and this was based on the inspectors meeting directly with children and young people.
- The Board wanted to know more about impact of the work, to ensure that change is delivered through the work that is done and any examples of that. In response two examples were set out; children and young people have involvement in recruitment of the senior leadership team in Leeds with 25% of the final say meaning they have influence over senior management and leadership; and for children with SEND delivery of the Apprenticeship Fair has been impacted by feedback from that cohort through the delivery of an event SEND Next Choices specifically designed for those with SEND which has reached in the region of 2,000 young people each year, this responded to feedback that previous iterations of the event had not been fully suitable for the SEND cohort. On a related point the Board heard about a course called 'Mind Your Language' which focuses on language used by practitioners designed to ensure that children are not criminalised in cases involving exploitation. This has been developed in response to feedback from children and families. In addition, culture and identity was noted as an area where engagement with young people has led to a better understanding of culture and identity and what it means to children and young people in the city.
- The Board suggested that report summaries could be provided to children and young people in 'child friendly language' or a child friendly summary of the minutes from Board meetings.
- Members also commented on the ongoing 'Knife Angel' Project in Leeds. The Board felt that it was an excellent project that has had a real impact in terms of events for children and young people. However, the events designed for parents have struggled with low attendance and it was suggested that this should be reviewed and new approaches developed. In response the Board heard that this will form part of the evaluation of the work, and it was recognised that some events had been successful but others less so. In addition, the evaluation will also feature direct contact with parents and carers to understand what has worked and what hasn't in terms of engagement.

- The Board asked about how the team reaches out to children and young people who are not in school regularly. The Board heard that as part of this work there is a focus on parent and carer voice and influence and this is done through working with support groups for parents and carers with children and young people with SEND, which provides access to parents and carers of children who are not regularly attending school, this allows the work of the Voice and Influence Team to be shared amongst these groups. There is also work done in partnership with colleagues working with families who have chosen to educate their child at home (elective home education) and the Third Sector to ensure that the work of the team is shared as far as possible and that the team picks up issues through those channels.
- There was interest in whether the impact of the voice of children and young people is shared more widely across the city with other children through schools. The Board heard about 'You Said, We Did' approaches which shows to those raising issues that their voices have been heard and this has been done both through written communication and through social media. The main approach to feeding back to schools is through Leeds for Learning which is more staff focussed rather than directly with children and young people. It was noted that there might be more that can be done through schools and the PHSE curriculum that could assist in spreading the word on what difference the voice of children and young people has, it was agreed that this would be taken away with a view to developing a new approach in this area, perhaps an annual update to schools that can be shared with students.
- In response to a query on coverage on social media it was acknowledged that the team should aim to further increase the number of young people following and engaging with Leeds Youth Voice on Instagram and the team updated they are working on strategies to increase the number of followers.

Resolved

The Board:

- a) Noted and welcomed the work of the Voice and Influence Team in the city.
- b) Agreed that the Children and Families Scrutiny Board, through the Principal Scrutiny Adviser, should explore ways in which work with the Voice Influence and Change team can be enhanced to enable board members to stay updated on key issues and priorities of children and young people and have more opportunities to hear from and respond to the voices of children and young people.
- c) Noted that further engagement with schools would be a positive way to publicise the work of the Voice, Influence and Change Team with children and young people and could highlight the impact that the voices of children and young people is having in Leeds.

79 Leeds Child Poverty Strategy - Update

The Board considered a report from the Director of Children and Families that presented an update on Thriving: The Child Poverty Strategy for Leeds and the work that sits underneath the strategy.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Councillor Jonathan Pryor, Executive Member for Economy, Culture, and Education
- 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's Social Care and Health Partnerships introduced the report highlighting some key issues. These included; comments made by the Rowntree Foundation on the increase in destitution which relates to people who are unable to meet their basic needs and the importance of not normalising the issues that this raises such as the use of food banks; mortality rates and the links to increased child poverty; the refresh of the Child Poverty Strategy and the consultation that has taken place with children and young people on this, noting that it can be difficult to discuss this issue due to the stigma attached to poverty and the worries that children and young people experience as a result of poverty; housing issues and evictions from private sector landlords and the links to child poverty and housing as a health issue particularly respiratory health linked to damp and mould. The Executive Member added that there is now an additional focus on breast-feeding in the strategy due to the lowest rates being found in areas of highest deprivation, this is from both a health perspective and economic perspective in terms of the cost of baby formula.

The Head of Service Workforce Development & Change added some further introductory remarks focussing on; statistics and the fact that they were collected prior to the emergence of the cost of living crisis and that they reflect a 'moment in time' as opposed to an indication of trend; the impact of poverty on children and families at school in terms of material deprivation, mortality and destitution, overcrowding in housing, the North-South divide and the Leeds approach to child poverty being delivered through the thriving strategy and its seven work streams.

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

- Members asked about child deaths in areas of deprivation and whether there was any further analysis as to the causes or whether any statistics were available. In response the Board heard that this has been raised with the lead officer for children's public health and the key causes are overcrowded housing and co-sleeping, poor housing condition generally

linked to damp and mould, particularly in the private sector and poor maternal health. It was noted that co-sleeping is a key concern and is now part of public health messaging. The Board noted that Zarach (who provide beds to tackle child poverty and co-sleeping) have recently been invited to sit on the Child Poverty Board. The Board asked for more details to be provided to include statistics linked to child mortality and whether the causes can be broken down with analysis provided to assist with tackling the identified key causes.

- Members welcomed the impact being made by the Healthy Holidays Programme with positive benefits on transition between primary and secondary schools evidenced. It was further noted that the experiences delivered through the programme are hugely beneficial to those that participate who are often the most vulnerable. The Board linked this to past consideration of attendance issues by the Board and wanted to know if there was more information on the impact on attendance and attainment delivered through the programme in the future, if available. The Executive Member added that the Healthy Holidays programme has a moral imperative and one of the key issues raised through the programme has been access to food and there are established links between learning and hunger in terms of children learning more effectively having eaten.
- Members were supportive of the Healthy Holidays Programme and the quality of provision provided. Concerns were raised that the grant that funds may be ended in 2024.
- The Board also emphasised the impact that overcrowding in housing can have on learning. The Board heard that increased joint working between housing and children and families has led to some initial proposals on developing an Accommodation Strategy on a city wide basis. This will focus on a strategy for 16 and 17 year olds who are homeless, those with no recourse to public funds and families facing eviction. This will develop an integrated response to people in those situations, led by a cross-directorate steering group.
- The Director of Children and Families highlighted the links between poverty and increased rates of neglect and those at risk of abuse. In Leeds there has been an increase in the number of super output areas with the highest deprivation. In these areas there has been an increase in the number of children looked after, 20% of children entering care in Leeds live in the highest 1% in terms of deprivation nationally.
- The Board raised a query on the Household Support Fund and the uncertainty about that funding in the future, given the uncertainty there was a concern about the impact this might have on families in the city. In terms of an assessment of this possible impact the Board noted that this will need to be directed at the Financial Inclusion Team who have responsibility for the grant. The Board also heard that the withdrawal of that funding will have an impact on the work being done through the strategy, 18,000 households have received support in Leeds through the Household Support Grant with 75% of those having children.
- The Board referenced the Money Information Centre and whether the resources provided as hard copy can be provided digitally to schools. This was welcomed by officers as a possible future development.

Resolved

The Board:

- a) noted the 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) 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.
- c) noted that the responsible officer for the strategy is the Deputy Director, Social Care, Children and Families.

80 Inquiry Session - Provision of EHCP Support in Leeds

The Board considered a report from the Head of Democratic Services and the Director of Children and Families as part of the Board's Inquiry into the Provision of EHCP Support in Leeds. This provided a summary of an ongoing survey of parents, carers, children and young people accessing EHCP and SEND support in the city and other contextual information.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Jonathan Pryor, Executive Member for Economy, Culture, and Education
- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Dan Barton, Deputy Director – Learning
- Phil Evans, Chief Officer Transformation and Partnerships
- Sandra Pentelow, Projects and Programme Manager
- Leanne Knight, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC)
- Rob Clayton, Principal Scrutiny Adviser

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser introduced the report highlighting the scrutiny context to the report and that the report adds further depth to stakeholder feedback received at previous sessions of the inquiry and through working groups. The report specifically provided feedback from the survey and was not intended to provide an overview of the wider improvement work being undertaken by the directorate.

The Chair of the Board noted that previous feedback from the Board on the survey had led to the survey being sent out directly to stakeholders after concerns on coverage of the survey were raised.

The Deputy Director – Learning emphasised the importance of engagement with stakeholders and referenced the themes that are arising and that many of them were already known to the service and had been identified as areas to be addressed as part of the improvement work. Engagement has taken place

with a wide range of stakeholders in addition to this survey including the Third Sector, advocacy organisations, parents, carers, children and young people, head teachers and SENCOs.

Responding to comments and questions the following discussion points were raised:

- The Board wanted to place on the record the impact that EHCP delays can have on foster placement stability in terms of impacts on the young people and on the foster carers. It was noted that there is an impact on all of those waiting for an EHCP but potentially disproportionately so on children looked after. This was acknowledged as an important point and to be factored into the work on speeding up EHCP placement decisions.
- Members noted that the report highlights that parents and carers see EHCPs as the only solution they have to accessing funding and support for their children when in fact that is not the case. The Board suggested that improving communication and signposting on this was an important piece of work in improving the service, EHCPs are not in and of themselves the only thing that can be done to access support. This was acknowledged and that improved signposting is needed to other available services . In addition, enhanced training to colleagues in schools and education settings could also be considered as part of the answer to that issue.
- The Director of Children and Families emphasised the commitment within the directorate and partnership to early intervention and prevention at the earliest opportunity. An important element of this is working in partnership across the city to deliver support at the earliest opportunity to children with additional needs. Workforce development to identify additional needs as early as possible and developing the skills and knowledge to both identify and respond to them is also a priority. Mainstreaming the offer to SEND children through areas such as Family Help is also a potential opportunity through this work.

Resolved

The Board:

- a) noted and commented on the content of the report and appendices and noted that evidence taken from the summary provided at Appendix 1 will be used to inform the final Inquiry Report.
- b) noted the adjustment to the inquiry timeline and additional meeting planned for 18 April and the intention to provide a final inquiry report at that meeting.

81 Work Programme

The report of the Head of Democratic Services requested Members to consider the Board's work programme for 2023/24 municipal year.

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser informed the Board that Appendix 1 was the latest draft of the work programme for the year.

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser highlighted the following issues:

- There is now an additional meeting date for 2023/24 on Thursday 18 April at 1.30PM.
- The Youth Justice Strategy item will be deferred to the April meeting of the Board to enable colleagues in those services to focus on the ongoing Targeted Inspection on Serious Youth Violence.
- A report will be brought back to the Board on Co-opted member processes in this municipal year.
- The March meeting now has a further item on the Impact of asylum changes on children in Leeds, which is a follow up on a report considered in September 2023.

Resolved

The Board noted the Board's work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year and the adjustments set out by the principal scrutiny adviser.

82 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Board will take place on 27 March 2024 at 10.00am. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at 9.45am.

The meeting concluded at 15.45