

CHILDREN & FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting: 16 October 2024

At: 6.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillor Colin Foster (Chair) in the chair; Councillor Rosemary Barratt (Vice-Chair); Councillors Shan Alexander, Angie Clark, Graham Greenhalgh, Helen Hibbert, Dallas Jones, Gary Lawson, Leah Taylor and Dr Chris Gordon (Church of England Diocesan Education Committee Representative).

1. MINUTES

The Minutes (copies of which had been circulated) of the meeting held on 4 September 2024 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors and officers were invited to declare any interest which they had in any of the items on the agenda for the meeting.

The following interests were declared:-

Personal Interests

Councillor/ Co-opted Member	Interest
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Dr Chris Gordon	Agenda Item 6 – Startwell Strategy as Chair of the Stockport Disability Forum.
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Leah Taylor	Agenda Item 5 – Expanded Childcare Policy as an employee in a local primary school.
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3. CALL-IN

There were no call-in items to consider.

4. PROJECT SKYLINE (GM CHILDREN'S HOMES)

The Executive Director People and Neighbourhoods (Director of Children's Services) and the Assistant Director Legal and Democratic Governance submitted a joint report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on Project Skyline, the Greater Manchester (GM) proposal to create a supply of children's homes to increase availability of placements for Children Looked After in the GM region for some of the most vulnerable young people and to approve in principle the entering into of a Partnership Agreement with the remaining Local Authorities in GM, GM Combined Authority and NHS GM for delivery of the project.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education (Councillor Wendy Meikle) attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Members welcomed the report and praised the ambitious project.
- Members enquired about the social care workforce and the challenges with recruitment. In response, it was noted that there had been an increase in the looked after population in Greater Manchester and that means, that there were more places required. The governance of Skyline includes the ten Director's of Children's Services across Greater Manchester with a clear workstream and it was a priority.
- Clarification was sought regarding the expenditure references and expectation of savings. It was noted that one of the key principles was a high quality experience and provision for the children and it also costs less based upon facilitating this ourselves as a local authority.
- It was stated that recruiting the right staff was crucial to the project including providing the right training and bringing in those with the right experience. It was stated that the issues around recruitment for good residential care has not really been a challenge in Stockport as it has excellent residential services with a strong leadership, based upon the culture and relationships that have been developed.
- Members enquired about the four areas that had been selected to purchase the homes and whether or not there would be any issues with underoccupancy. In response, it was noted that the four areas that had been identified does not relate to those local authorities having to make an investment to purchase that property, it was on a Greater Manchester wide basis, so it would not affect any underoccupancy.
- Clarification was sought on the tendering process and it being private. It was stated that there were three applications, but were unable to disclose any detail at this time.
- It was also stated that this process has been led by Greater Manchester Combined Authority and Salford City Council who are the lead commissioners and procurers based upon the procurement rules and legislation but it has been monitored by the Director's of Children's Services across the Greater Manchester Combined Authority area.
- It was noted that that there was a legal duty to have sufficient provision for the children in Stockport. There was a well established children's commissioning team and a placements team that work daily to know exactly what placements are available across the region and nationally.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

5. EXPANDED CHILDCARE POLICY

The Executive Director People and Neighbourhoods (Director of Children's Services) submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update of the programme of work that has supported the introduction of the expanded childcare policy which has two elements including 'an expansion of funded entitlements for working parents of children aged 9 months to 3 years' and the 'increased access to wraparound childcare for all school aged children commencing from September 2024.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education (Councillor Wendy Meikle) attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Members welcomed the report and thanked the officers for the level of details contained within the report.
- Members enquired about the ability to meet the potential demand for under 2s and the ratios for children. In response, it was stated that the changes came in with the early years foundation state requirements and allowed for flexibility for a 1 to 5 ratio for staff and 2 year olds.
- Clarification was sought regarding whether or not non-parents knew about the scheme and was there a way to advertise it. It was noted that non working parents were aware of the scheme and the 2 year old offer has been available for a number of years now and there has been a high take up of the offer.
- It was stated that across the country there would be an extra 3,000 classes created to deal with the demand for places.
- It was commented that a lot of work goes into ensuring the provision in Stockport meets the legal and regulatory requirements which was appreciated.
- Members enquired about the response rate for the surveys and was it represented across the community and what the 15 free hours really meant for a parent. In response, it was stated that providers were allowed to charge for consumables and various other things in the nursery and it was their right to do that, however, the DfE has picked up on the changes and are trying to respond to those changes. Parents can also enquire about the charges through the Council and it would be looked at through the individual cases depending on the provider.
- In relation to the survey, there was a statutory requirement to do an early years census and there is a requirement to respond as part of the funding agreement which equates to 100% response rate.
- Clarification was sought regarding the wraparound care provisions in Stockport. In response, if provision is registered with Ofsted it would be inspected by Ofsted, but if it was a school provision and linked to the school that it would be part of the school inspection. Wraparound provision does provide care and stimulating and exciting activities for children, it would not be school but operates as an extracurricular activity with refreshments and tailored to the interests of the child and children would be able to do homework as well as there are quiet spaces provided for that provision.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

6. START WELL STRATEGY

The Director for People and Neighbourhoods (Children's Services) submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing a refreshed version of The Start Well Strategy 2024-2027 that was previously launched in 2021.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education (Councillor Wendy Meikle) attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Members welcomed the comprehensive report and its excellent content.

- It was noted the difficulties being experienced with the EHC Plans with around 400,000 children in the UK waiting on an assessment as reported in the press. In response, it was noted that the data in the healthy mandate contact indicated the timeliness of assessment for children in the earliest years of life around their development.
- Clarification was sought regarding the delivery of the strategy and whether there were enough resources and staffing levels for delivery. In response, it was stated that the health visitor role was instrumental in supporting and targeting the resources across the borough. The strategy refresh was helping with the delivery and further enhancing the digital developments through an 'early year app' in partnership with Greater Manchester Combined Authority to support parents screen their own child development with support from the health visitor.
- It was commented that the strategy was an opportunity for parents to talk and get guidance from people who could help with childcare. It was noted that there was a holistic package of support for the successful take up for the vulnerable 2 year-olds with the team around the early years.
- It was stated that the references to 'Empowering Parents Empowering Communities' (EPEC) were quite good and what it achieves for the parent. It was requested that a briefing paper be submitted to a future meeting describing what it does and the outcomes.
- Members enquired about the reference to the 30% of pregnant women having mental health issues and how are those women supported. In response, it was stated that the support was provided by the midwife and the health visitor through building trusting relationships with parents and developing dad friendly practices.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

7. AGENDA PLANNING

A representative of the Assistant Director for Legal & Democratic Governance submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) setting out the planned agenda items for the Scrutiny Committee's next meeting and any Forward Plan items.

Members requested that a briefing paper be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee on "Empowering Parents Empowering Communities' (EPEC) detailing the take up of it and explaining what it is and how parents get involved.

RESOLVED – (1) – That the report be noted.

(2) - That the Assistant Director for Legal & Democratic Governance be requested to make arrangements for the following item to be programmed onto the agenda for future meetings of the Scrutiny Committee:-

- "Empowering Parents Empowering Communities' (EPEC) detailing the take up of it and explaining what it is and how parents get involved.

The meeting closed at 7.20pm.