

CHILDREN & FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting: 5 March 2025

At: 6.00 pm

PRESENT

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

1. MINUTES

The Minutes (copies of which had been circulated) of the meeting held on 22 January 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Director of Education, Works & Skills informed the Committee that a report relating to the 'End of Year Impacts and Outcomes on the Recovery Proposals' would be submitted to the June meeting.

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

| <u>Councillor/Co-opted Member</u> | <u>Interest</u> |
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| Dr Chris Gordon | Agenda Item 6 – 'Stockport Attendance Strategy' as Chair of the Stockport Disability Forum. |
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3. CALL-IN

There were no call-in items to consider.

4. PRESENTATION - STUDENT EQUALITIES COUNCIL

Members of the Student Equalities Council comprising students from Stockport College, Cheadle College and Marple Sixth Form College attended the meeting and provided a presentation to the Scrutiny Committee in relation to breaking down barriers for young people in Stockport, living independently and neuro-diversity and disabilities.

Members of the Equalities Council highlighted a number of issues and concerns associated with each of the chosen topics and provided possible solutions and actions.

Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunities for Young People in Stockport

- social barriers prevent individuals from achieving optimal mental health and feeling safe within their communities and could include mental health, stigma, discrimination & social exclusion;
- psychological barriers could include negative attitudes, fear and beliefs and lead to anxiety and stress and not seeking help or support;
- young people suffering with low self-esteem dealing with negative self-prescriptions, social media and leading to feelings of worthlessness and suicide attempts;
- Solutions could include raising awareness among young people about mental health together with campaigns with families and the older generations; and
- Public awareness campaigns could involve social media and online platforms with community events using available resources that should be accessible to all.

Living Independently

- Experiencing difficulties with housing accommodation due to cost of living and rising house prices and lack of opportunities;
- Cost of living has had such an impact on young people including rising energy bills, single grocery shops being more expensive and unemployment;
- Many young people are held back by the weight of financial stress and trying to make ends meet;
- Stockport Council has the power to change the narrative by offering fair wages and supporting young people into work and housing accommodation; and
- Entry level jobs, should become a real stepping stone to a bright future for the young people.

Neuro-diversity, Autism, ADHD & Physical Disabilities

- Struggling with disabilities meant not being given additional support and not being able to achieve full potential;
- Only 30% of SEND children only achieve grade 4 in maths and English;
- School attendance can also decrease due to being anxious and physically unwell;
- CAMHS and social services suggested that an EHCP be pursued, but the school refused;
- Schools need to listen to the students and parents to provide opportunities for SEND children as this is important for children who struggle with their studies due to a diagnosis;
- Schools also find it difficult to understand how it works with disabled children and this results in students not achieving their full potential;
- SEND teams need to listen to the students and parents and support them based upon their needs and what the child wants to achieve;
- Under normal circumstances children with SEND only get support if they are falling behind, but it should be changed and support should be provided from the outset;
- There should be more training for teachers to recognise the early signs that affects children's learning;
- EHCPs are not always the answer, but support can be provided to children who need it and for those who don't have a diagnosis;

- Teachers should improve their communication with each other, but also with the child and parents; and
- Improving and increasing transparency in lessons could improve support for SEND children through educating and understand the needs of the child.

The following comments were made/issues raised: -

- Members welcomed and congratulated the young people for their individual presentations relating to their experiences and personal lives.
- It was noted how much of an impact Covid had on this generation of young people including isolation, social media and the lack of support.
- It was highlighted that young people, adults, teachers and parents should be understood, supported, communicated with, made aware and become adaptable to the issues and concerns raised today.
- It was commented that the older generation could be made aware through awareness campaigns through libraries and charity shops with posters and leaflets promoting the understanding of what young people are going through.
- Safe spaces should also be created for young people to feel free to speak up and share experiences both positively and negatively.
- More wider subjects areas should also be offered in schools to support young people with job opportunities, management of money, understanding life and experiences to help them prepare better for life after school.
- Young people are resilient and get through things with other support networks involving young people and professionals.
- It was noted that teacher training needed to be improved and involve more support, help and guidance for young people involving those with SEND.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee thanked the representatives of the Student Equalities Council for highlighting their concerns and also providing possible solutions and actions to be considered.

RESOLVED – (1) That the members of the Students Equalities Council be thanked for their attendance and presentation.

(2) That the Director of Education, Works and Skills be requested to look into the issues and concerns raised together with the proposed solutions to improve the opportunities for young people in Stockport.

5. PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2024-2025

The Executive Director for People and Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on the protected characteristic implementation plan for care leavers seeking to redress the inequalities that they can face.

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

Care Leaver representatives attended the meeting and provided a presentation to the Scrutiny Committee in relation to the six key priorities to redress inequalities for the care leavers.

The Care Leaver representatives highlighted a number of concerns associated with the six key priorities as follows:

- Adopting the Protected Characteristics to redress inequalities.
- Bus Pass to be extended up to 25 years old to provide more financial support, reduce isolation and support in education, employment and training.
- Accessing dental services can be challenging and impacts health and emotional wellbeing.
- Accessing and sustaining tenancy agreements could be challenging. Stockport Homes Group will be adopting the Greater Manchester care leaver housing pledge for priority need.
- Accessing and sustaining education, training and employment opportunities.
- Accessing cultural and leisure facilities to connect with the local communities to improve social and emotional wellbeing and help with finances.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Members welcomed the presentations, the updates to each key priority and the shared experiences.
- It was noted that protected characteristics should be welcomed for the care leavers.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

6. EMPOWERING PARENTS, EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES (EPEC) STOCKPORT

The Executive Director for People and Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) marking the 6th anniversary of the Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC) programme in Stockport and highlighting the key achievements and progress over the past six years.

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 the positiveness and empowerment of the content together with the lived experiences.
- Members enquired about the availability of EPEC across all wards and how it could be accessed. In response, it was noted that it was offered across all of Stockport as a universal course and depending on availability. The sessions were for 2 hours per week and could be 8-10 sessions in each course. It was also stated that it could be accessed via Facebook, social media, relationships with schools and early years settings and parents' voices being shared in the community.
- Clarification was sought relating to paragraph 13.3 and the reference to "good enough parent". In response, it was noted that recognition could be offered through expenses,

childcare costs, access to family training on 'learning pool' and supporting volunteers and individual pathways.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

7. STOCKPORT ATTENDANCE STRATEGY

The Director of Education, Works & Skills submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing details of the Strategy which was a celebration of our strong ambition that children and young people of Stockport will grow up happy, healthy, with confidence, surrounded by love, care, kindness and belonging.

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 the level of detail including the parents who were not aware of the law relating to school attendance.
- It was noted that there was a 398% increase since 2020 in the number of children who have been electively home educated in Stockport.
- Clarification was sought regarding any trends relating to returning to pre-covid levels for secondary school attendance. In response, it was noted there has been improvements in secondary school attendance and there has been intentional recovery to get it back to pre-covid levels of attendance in the long term.
- It was stated that there were some parents who were still not aware of the legal implications for school attendance and together with homeschooling and the new 'bill' there would be more accountability and a register created. It was highlighted that a more strategic approach needed to be taken to put the right type of support in place that should enable schools to do a better job regarding attendance.
- Members enquired about specialist attendance in Stockport. In response, it was noted that there was a difference between the national and local figures relating to specialist attendance and that medical appointments were a cause for the low attendance. However, it was highlighted that work was being done with schools and health colleagues to ensure that children with the most complex needs and their medical appointments were not happening during the school day or the medical appointments could be held in school.
- It was commented that there was no reference of 'young carers' within the report. In response, it was noted that it would be amended before submission to Cabinet.

RESOLVED – (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Director of Education, Works & Skills amend the report to include school attendance for 'young carers' before submission to Cabinet.

8. FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER (FASD)

The Executive Director for People and Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing a brief overview of the causes and impact of Foetal

Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and describes Stockport's response to the FASD NICE quality standards published in 2022.

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.
- Clarification was sought regarding paragraph 2.6 and the reference to 1.8% of children in Greater Manchester being affected by FASD that equates to over 5,000 children and young people living with FASD. In response, it was noted that the information would be checked and corrected in the report.
- Members enquired about supporting parents and preventative methods being put in place to address the issues being raised e.g. through EPEC before it happens, rather than reacting after the issues are raised. It was noted, that there was a multi-disciplinary board with representation from across various sectors who put in place preventative measures including with parents through raising awareness.
- It was commented that there was an opportunity to empower and raise awareness with parents through EPEC and teaching parents about FASD and school attendance and the legal implications.
- Clarification was sought regarding how children diagnosed and what age were children at when it was discovered that they had FASD. In response, it was noted that diagnosis could happen at different stages and would be done by a paediatrician through a complicated assessment process or when a parent presents with other health issues including medical.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

9. CABINET RESPONSE - SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The Executive Director for People and Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing details of the Cabinet Response to the Children & Families Scrutiny Review relating to the "Services for Young People" and providing an update to the three recommendations in the original scrutiny review.

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

Members welcomed the report and the measures being take to date in response to the recommendations.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

10. SEND UPDATE

The Director of Education, Works & Skills submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on the current position and context of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Stockport and updating on Education, Health and Care Plan

(EHCP) volume of demand, timeliness and communication and the position about preparations for the next SEND inspection.

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:-

EHCP Demand

- Members welcomed the report and the comprehensive details in the report.
- Clarification was sought regarding the 50% target for the end of this year and whether it would ever reach 100%. In response, it was noted that it was the aim to get to 50% by the end of the year and for the numbers of planned assessments below 300 to address the backlog. It is the compliance measure within the statutory timeframe for assessments to be completed within 20 weeks, however, with demand, lack of resources it was a challenge.
- Members enquired about the backlog of EHCPs and the prioritisation plan and process in place. It was noted that there was a detailed plan in place to address the backlog through prioritising children who were in transition, in care and with poor attendance. It was agreed that this plan would be shared with the Committee following the meeting.
- It was commented that there was an issue with culture and practice rather than process and procedure relating to children with special educational needs and funding and performance. Stockport was in the lowest funding position because of the way the funding formula works, but it did not take into account and recognise the inequalities in the borough.

SEND Inspection

- Members enquired about 'waiting well' and communication with parents relating to referrals. In response, it was noted that 'waiting well' referred to setting an expectation for communication and not waiting for support, but improving communication and making support available.
- It was commented that the intention was to move the model over to a 'needs led' model rather than diagnosis led model and being able to plan better.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

11. CHILDREN'S THERAPIES COMMISSION

The Director of Education, Work & Skills submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) setting out the arrangements for the procurement of contracts to fulfil our statutory responsibilities in relation to providing Speech, Language and Occupational Therapy services for children and young people of school age with additional needs.

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:-

- Clarification was sought regarding the 4-year contract and the £7m budget. In response, it was noted that the contract has not yet been negotiated, however, growth is expected and will be a consideration for providers when going out to the market.
- It was noted that just under a million pounds was spent each year on speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, with a 4-year contract extending for up to 3 years which gives a £7m budget.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

12. AGENDA PLANNING

A representative of the Assistant Director for 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.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 9.15pm.