

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 2.00 pm on Thursday, 29 November 2018

Present:

Members: Councillor M Mutton (Chair)
Councillor L Bigham
Councillor D Kershaw
Councillor J Lepoidevin
Councillor A Lucas
Councillor P Male
Councillor C Thomas

Cabinet Member: Councillor K Maton (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills)

Employees (by Directorate):

People P Barnett, J Essex, S Frossell, K Nelson

Place G Holmes, M Rose

Apologies: Councillors B Kaur, L Kelly, P Seaman and T Skipper
S Hanson

Invited: L Ellis (Volunteer at Allesley Library)
H Newell (Trustee of Earlsdon Carnegie Community Library
(ECCL))

Public Business

37. Declarations of Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

38. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st November, 2018 were agreed as a true record.

Further to minute 33/18 the Scrutiny Board (2) meeting had been rescheduled from 10th January, 2019 to 14th February, 2019 to allow the Board to consider the Improvement Board final report.

39. Implementation Update - Home to School/College Travel Assistance

Further to minute 27/17 the Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Deputy Chief Executive (People) which provided a progress report on the implementation of changes to Home to School Travel Assistance. The Council introduced a new Home to School Travel Assistance Policy (Statutory School Age) and Post 16 Home to School/College Travel Assistance Policy in September 2017. On 30th November 2017, the Scrutiny Board examined the process and took

evidence from parents on their personal experience of the system. It was determined that the Board would re-examine the progress and impact of proposed actions to improve the customer experience.

The reflective learning and feedback from parents, identified four key actions that would improve the service and customer experience. These were implemented in preparation for the 2018/19 academic year.

Action one was that the application deadline for 2018/19 be brought forward to ensure that applicants received a decision before the end of the 2017/18 academic year. All 600 applications received by the published deadline of the 25th June 2018, were processed before the end of the 2017/18 academic year. 575 were judged eligible, 25 did not meet the criteria on the basis of the information provided. Schools were consulted on any applicant that did not meet the eligibility criteria, to ascertain if there were any exceptional circumstances that needed to be considered before a decision was communicated to families. Strategies included personal phone-calls to families that had missed the deadline. Late applications were typically processed within three days of receipt. Consequently, the decision making process was strengthened by better information, thereby reducing the number of appeals and the inherent stress that placed on families. It was evident that customer satisfaction with the administration process in this area has much improved.

The second action was to revise the application form to assist applicants in providing all necessary information to inform the eligibility decision making process. This would be tested with the assistance of parents before the launch, to ensure that it was easy to understand and as simple as possible to complete. The application was revised and two consultation events were held to engage parents in the process of co-production. The events were promoted through the parent Facebook pages and One Voice. Whilst attendance at the events attracted minimal interest, the contribution made by parents proved invaluable and their advice was fully incorporated into the revised on-line application form.

The third action was that the application form would enable post 16 applicants to provide evidence of low-income eligibility at the point of application. This would ensure that contributions towards the cost of transport was assessed accurately at the point of first application, thereby avoiding the need to appeal. The application form for post 16 to 18 travel assistance had been separated from the statutory school age application process. The form provided a specific section to declare low-income against the criteria. The effectiveness of the form was reflected in the significant reduction in appeals from: 25 in 2017, to 4 in 2018 (a reduction of 84%).

The fourth action was the current Travel Assistance policies would be supported with an easy to follow parent/young person guide. The draft guide would be reviewed with and by parents to ensure that it provided all of the information necessary before publication. The information provided on the Council's website had been significantly improved to assist all users. A booklet had been designed, which incorporated illustrations provided by pupils from Sherbourne Fields School. This had since been reviewed and was in the process of being published on the website.

The briefing note contained tables which provided evidence of the impact. A comparison of activity in respect of the 2018/19 academic year and the 2017/18 academic year. In summary, it was evident that the number of children and young people receiving travel assistance had increased by 10% and the number of appeals had reduced by 37%.

Officers reported that independent travel training was encouraged and noted that the delay in updating the Scrutiny Board was due to legal proceedings.

The Board congratulated officers on delivering the actions that had improved the service and customer experience and particularly the challenge of responding to families before the schools closed for the summer.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The Scrutiny Board congratulate the team for their commitment to addressing concerns the Board had raised.**
- 2. The Scrutiny Board and the Cabinet Member agreed at the meeting that a joint statement should be communicated on the service provided.**

40. Social, Emotional and Mental Health in Schools Task and Finish Group

Further to minute 28/17 the Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) in Schools Task and Finish Group which was established on 30th November, 2017.

The briefing note recognised Members had reported concerns about the help available to young people and wanted to support Headteachers across the City who were desperate to see a better service to support pupils with SEMH issues, as without it, vulnerable young people risk not achieving their full potential.

Information on exclusions from Coventry schools was considered. The data showed that the age range of children being excluded was widening, to include key stage 1 (5 and 6 year olds) and violence was increasingly cited as a reason for exclusion. Whilst concerned that exclusions were steadily rising within the City, Members noted that Coventry's exclusion rates remained below the national average. The exclusion data included a range of case studies, which listed the number of services the young people had been involved with, before they were excluded, as well as the range of interventions schools and partner agencies had put in place before the exclusion occurred.

The data highlighted an inconsistency in the support being offered to young people in need by schools. It acknowledged that there may be many reasons for this differential practice including financial limitations, impact on attendance and academic progress measures and culture. It was noted that Coventry City Council in partnership with Headteachers had established fair access panels at both primary and secondary phase, which provided a peer support and challenge forum, aimed at negating the need to permanently exclude a child.

The Council's Children Missing Education Team (CME) had been established to offer an additional layer of support. The team, alongside other support services encouraged schools to exhaust all options before determining that a child should be permanently excluded. This was because an exclusion could have a lasting impact on a young person. A report published in 2017 showed that exclusions could amplify pupils' psychological distress and encourage behaviour it intended to punish.

The Task and Finish Group met with representatives from Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership Trust (NHS), who were responsible for the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in Coventry. They heard about the application (an app) which was being rolled out, called the Dimensions Tool. This tool was designed to help parents and schools identify needs early and signpost to the support available, including self-help for young people who may not yet reach the threshold for CAMHS support.

The Task and Finish Group decided to undertake visits to schools to understand the challenges they faced in an environment with diminishing financial resources and see some examples of practice in the City first hand. Members visited two schools who were recognised for their positive focus on supporting pupils with SEMH. They were looking for examples of good practice, which might be shared and encouraged elsewhere in the City. It was emphasised that these schools were not alone in demonstrating exemplary practice. They visited Spon Gate Primary and Lyng Hall Secondary School. The visits highlighted a number of similarities between the two schools in how they support, not just pupils, but also their families. Whilst the tools, techniques and strategies were not the same, the ethos of both schools was similar. Both schools were led by established Headteachers who drive the vision for the school, and had the support of the staff behind them. Both schools also use the resources available to them innovatively to fund additional support staff with expertise in supporting pupils with challenges and their families. They sought to understand and respond to the reasons for the young person's behaviour and to provide support wherever possible, rather than react to the behaviour. It was noted that both Headteachers were aware of the impact being 'inclusive' had on external progress measures and the pressure that placed on schools.

Therefore, the Task and Finish group recommended that a celebratory event was held to showcase the fantastic work Primary and Secondary schools were undertaking and use this event to facilitate some peer learning opportunities for schools who may like to further develop their provision for pupils with SEMH needs. Hosting a combined event for the City's schools would also enable schools to look at ways to support the successful transition of pupils as they move from Primary to Secondary school.

The Board thanked and commended all those who had contributed to the work of the Task and Finish Group including the Chair, members of the group, officers and schools.

The Board were keen that the approach become consistent and were impressed with the Dimensions Tool.

Officers reported on the new project called Thrive which would provide training for teachers on mental health.

Members asked about evaluating progress with SEMH in schools and officers responded that there were a number of ways of measuring wellbeing and that work was underway with Warwick University to establish a way to measure emotional resilience. Early intervention with improving emotional resilience was important in the aim of reducing CAMHS waiting lists.

Members recognised observing the positive contributions Thrive was making and agreed that prevention was better than needing to find a cure.

Officers agreed to provide a briefing note on Thrive for those who had not experienced it. Members asked about the high levels of children on the Autistic Spectrum in the City. Officers responded regarding working in partnership with health to holistically respond to the challenges of multi-disciplinary diagnosis.

The Board would consider a report from Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership Trust (NHS) in the New Year to address concerns the Board had regularly highlighted.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The Board formally thank the Task and Finish Group, Cllr Kershaw for Chairing the Task and Finish Group and all those who had contributed, including the schools visited.**
- 2. A further discussion to take place with the Task and Finish Chair, Cabinet Member and officers to establish the best way to celebrate and share the positive work taking place.**

41. Libraries Update

Further to minute 65/15 the Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Deputy Chief Executive (People) which provided a progress report on the current position of the Coventry Library and Information Service. The Board also considered a presentation which enabled members to view the activities and new developments in libraries via YouTube videos. The Board welcomed some library volunteers who had kindly agreed to contribute to the meeting.

The note included information related to the service transformation and delivery of savings associated with the Connecting Communities programme, along with updates on current performance and proposals for further budget reductions to be implemented from April 2019. The Board were requested to provide any feedback on the proposed further budget reductions to the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills who would be considering them at his meeting on 17th January 2019.

The Council introduced the Connecting Communities programme in 2015/2016. The programme was introduced in two phases with changes to Library Services introduced alongside changes to a number of other Council services. The main changes to Library Services included greater participation by the community in the delivery of library services along with reductions in opening hours, reductions in

the amount of money spent on library stock, a move to three library types (core, partnership and community-led) and the de-commissioning of the former mobile library.

Phase one of the changes resulted in budget reductions including property savings of £802k, phase two of the changes enabled a further reduction of £653k, total £1,445k. In line with the Medium Term Financial Strategy a final third set of proposals was currently being consulted on with staff and service users which would reduce budgets by a further £319k.

The current position regarding the 17 libraries which operate in the City was detailed in the briefing note including 3 community libraries, 5 core libraries and 9 partnership libraries. The usage of the libraries, partnerships, use of IT changes and any concerns were documented.

As well as considerable success in recruiting volunteers to support the delivery of library services in Cheylesmore, Earlsdon and Finham (over 130 people so far) the service had also offered volunteering opportunities for people in other library settings. Currently 60 volunteers had been trained and deployed in other libraries with on-going recruitment becoming part of the day-to-day operation of the service.

A snapshot of Coventry Libraries performance was appended to the briefing note. Overall whilst membership had dropped very slightly, there remained almost 70,000 members of the service. Visits to libraries were up year-on-year and for core and partnership libraries book issues had increased. Changes to the opening hours of community-led libraries had impacted on data for the last year and we would expect performance to increase in the future as library opening hours expand.

The Library Service had recently conducted a user satisfaction survey to establish a baseline for future work and to engage with users around the parts of the service they report working well and otherwise. With around 400 people participating 93% of users rated the service as good or excellent.

The briefing note also detailed other recent developments including 'loud in libraries' and the development of the cultural offer, health and wellbeing related initiatives and the digital offer.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy included a requirement for a further budget reduction of £ 319k. Proposals to reduce expenditure included:

- Reduce staffing in Aldermoor, Caludon, Canley and Coundon libraries to single staffing.
- Reduce staffing in Central Library by introducing a 'Library Express' model which would rely on self-service and limited staff supervision of the library from 9-11am Monday to Friday and on Sundays.
- End the provision of hard copy newspapers and magazines and support users to move to digital access either in the library or at home.
- Additional income from the introduction of a privately run café within Central Library and an externally funded Visa scheme.
- Reductions in other fixed library budgets and a review of management and non-front line posts.

A further change which would be proposed to the Cabinet Member, was to agree a change to library fines to move the age at which users were expected to pay fine from aged 8 years to 16 years. The proposals were currently subject to a short consultation with library users and staff. The final proposals would be considered by the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills at his Cabinet Member meeting on 17th January 2019.

Members expressed concerns regarding the lone working proposal and had been contacted by staff who shared their concerns. Officers gave reassurance that since 2017, when lone working had begun, risk assessments were carried out, unions had been consulted and there were safe working procedures in place. Where possible 'friends of the library' were used to provide support.

The Scrutiny Board recognised the financial constraints however, remained concerned about the compromise to the safety of staff and members of the public particularly in certain libraries in the city with a history of anti-social behaviour experienced.

The Board applauded the all volunteers who were an asset to the City and requested that this be conveyed to them. The Board also celebrated the success of all 17 libraries in the city and in particular new developments such as the introduction of a café and externally funded Visa scheme. The Board discussed links with the Universities in the City.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The Scrutiny Board commend those who had enabled all libraries in the city to remain open in the current climate and particularly thanked the volunteers.**
- 2. The Scrutiny Board acknowledge financial constraints but raise concerns regarding the safety of staff, volunteers and the public should the proposal to carry out lone working be implemented. They request that the Cabinet Member be advised of their concerns regarding the importance of risk assessments and that the Board felt there should not be only one person in a building and particularly in areas with Anti-Social Behaviour.**

42. Work Programme

The Scrutiny Board noted that School Based Police Panels on the work programme would now be considered along with a discussion on gang's at Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee.

The Scrutiny Board may need an additional meeting in March, 2019.

RESOLVED that the changes requested be arranged.

43. Any Other Business

Superkids: Breaking away from care

The Scrutiny Board applauded the programme Superkids: Breaking away from care on Channel 4, at 10pm last night and requested that congratulations and thanks be sent to the young people and a reassurance be sent to the Board that they were receiving support following the publicity.

RESOLVED that congratulations and thanks be sent to the young people involved in the programme and reassurance be sent to the Board that they are being supported following the programme.

(Meeting closed at 4.00 pm)