

Minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee Meeting held on 8 June 2018

Present: John Francis (Chairman)

Attendance

Ann Beech	Natasha Pullen
Mike Davies	Paul Snape
Syed Hussain	Conor Wileman (Vice-Chairman)
Jason Jones	Mike Worthington

Apologies: Trevor Johnson and Mark Sutton

PART ONE

5. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest at this meeting.

6. Welcome

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Ann Beech and Mr Mike Davies to the Select Committee following the membership changes made at the 24 May Annual Council meeting.

7. Minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee meeting held on 23 April 2018

RESOLVED- That the minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee held on 23 April 2018 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

8. Staffordshire's Children's Centres

Every Local Authority in England was required to deliver Children's Centre's. Staffordshire currently had 11 children's centres with a unique delivery model, with the County Council operating the buildings themselves but the fundamental model of working through integrated delivery around the family, with greater collaboration across partnerships to meet the needs of families and their young children more effectively.

The Select Committee heard that over the last three years significant improvements had been achieved under this new model of working, in particular that there were more families accessing children's centres and services available from the centre, within the community and in the family home. Good levels of development continued to rise, being above the national average, with the majority of children starting school now being ready to learn and with 75% achieving a good level of development.

The Select Committee received details of progress following the 2015 changes made to establish a new integrated approach to early years in Staffordshire. The new approach had a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families to help reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness, supporting improved parenting aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills.

Members received details of the governance and leadership of the Children's Centres, including the role of the Family Strategic Partnership Board (FSPB). They also heard details of the Best Start Pathway which had enabled a better understanding of, and response to, any gaps which the Children's Centres should seek to deliver. There were currently two commissioned services across Staffordshire to address this, these being the Early Years Coordination Service and the Family Support Service.

Members received details of the number of families engaged with the Children's Centres and the increase in use across districts. Members shared examples of work within their division through the Children's Centres. They agreed that leadership was key to ensuring an effective centre.

In 2014 the Select Committee had considered the Best Start in Life programme which examined the approach to Early Years, including a stakeholder engagement exercise. As part of the engagement process Select Committee Members visited over forty Children's Centre sites and made recommendations to the then Cabinet Member for Children and Community Safety on their future use. Four years on from the significant changes to this service, and following on from the work the Select Committee previously undertook in 2014, it was proposed that a working group be established to consider how the changes had been implemented and the impact created. To aid consistency Members suggested that they visit two centres each, one of which should be in their own division. This would help comparisons to be made across centres. Members also suggested that a set of questions should be produced to ensure some consistency in information gathered.

It was intended that the visits should take place before the end of this academic year to avoid difficulties with attendance during school holidays.

RESOLVED – That a working group be established to consider the current work of the Children's Centres in comparison with the findings of the 2014 Select Committee Review, and the impact of the significant changes made as a result of the 2014/15 Best Start in Life consultation.

9. Elective Home Education Review

The Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) had made a referral to both the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee and the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee in respect of their concerns over potential vulnerability of Elective Home Education (EHE) pupils in Staffordshire. Following this referral the Chairman and Vice Chairman of both Select Committees gave consideration to whether there was value in considering this issue again after elements of EHE had been considered as part of the Children Missing Out On Education Working Group in 2014. As a result of the significant increase in EHE numbers, changes to many of the reasons for pupils becoming EHE, and changes to the EHE Policy, they felt a review would be beneficial.

Mr Paul Snape, the EHE Review Group Chairman, introduced the report. He thanked all those who had been involved and in particular those who had attended the inquiry day to help inform their considerations.

Members noted that the Review Group had been impressed by the time, resource, level of commitment and dedication shown by the parents they met who had elected to home educate their children. However they noted that those choosing to home educate for lifestyle/cultural/philosophical reasons, such as the parents that attended the inquiry, had reduced over the last three years. At the same time the number home educating to avoid risk of prosecution as a result of poor attendance had increased significantly, seeing a 27.4% rise over the last five years. There had also been a rise in the number home educating as a result of near exclusion (1.2% increase) and from emotional or behavioural difficulties (1.6%).

These changes were mirrored nationally and had prompted Ofsted's National Director (Social Care) to comment that for too many children and families home education was not a positive option and led to children not receiving an effective education. The Review Group acknowledged that the majority of Staffordshire schools act in the best interests of their pupils, however they had received anecdotal evidence of parents being coerced into "choosing" to home educate to avoid prosecution and/or exclusion. They had also received case studies which evidenced instances of coercion. To help mitigate this one of their recommendations was to request the Cabinet Member make representations to Ofsted with regard to a mechanism being developed to take account of the reasons for de-registration and, where there was a disproportionately high number de-registering to EHE, consider more closely the reasons behind this.

The Review Group also considered the issue of unregistered schools. Whilst the local authority was not currently aware of any such schools within the County, they felt everyone had a responsibility to be aware of and report any concerns over potential unregistered schools.

Members noted the support given by EHE parents in helping produce the parent handbook for potential EHE parents and in training events for LA staff. They also noted and supported the County Manager, Targeted Services, in his proposal to develop an annual event to celebrate the achievements of the EHE community.

The Review Group Chairman shared his concerns over the reduced officer resource for EHE when compared with the significant increase in EHE numbers. EHE numbers had increased by two thirds whilst the officer resource had decreased by two thirds. Whilst acknowledging the financial constraints within which the County Council currently worked, the Review Group had felt that there was a need to consider ways to increase the resource to help address the significant increase in EHE numbers.

Members also noted the support for a national registration scheme for EHE pupils. Registration had been supported by the 2014 working group and was again a national issue with the current Private Members Bill introduced by Lord Soley on Home Education.

The Select Committee considered services to prevent children falling through the gaps in Early Years, looking at midwifery and health visitor services. Personal experiences were shared over how effective these services could be.

The Select Committee congratulated the Review Group on their report and endorsed the recommendations for submitting to the appropriate Cabinet Member. As this was a joint review the report needed to be considered by the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee prior to being submitted to the Cabinet Member for his response.

RESOLVED: That the Select Committee endorse the final report and recommendations of the Elective Home Education Review and agree its submission to the appropriate Cabinet Member.

10. Work Programme

The Select Committee considered their work programme. A number of items had been suggested for inclusion following the 29 May Triangulation meeting which would be incorporated into the document. Further suggestions were made around:

- Health visitor service from a safeguarding perspective; and
- KPIs and the possible re-introduction of quarterly reports to help inform work programme items.

RESOLVED That the work programme and suggested amendments be noted.

Chairman