

People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Thursday 12th October 2023

Present: Councillors Helen Taylor, Devon Davies, Mandy Brar, Suzanne Cross, Carole Da Costa, Jack Douglas, Julian Sharpe, George Shaw and John Story

Also in attendance: Mark Jervis (Co-optee)

Officers: Lin Ferguson, Kevin McDaniel, Lynne Lidster, Lucy Kourpas, Nikki Craig and Mark Beeley

Achieving for Children Annual Reports 2022/23

Lucy Kourpas, Chief Operating and Finance Officer at Achieving for Children, explained that the annual reports were being presented to Cabinet as the council was a joint owner of Achieving for Children. The annual report was made up of the impact report, the equalities report and the accounts. The impact report outlined the strategic priorities, values and key impacts on families. Good progress had been made against these priorities with independent inspections showing positive results. A number of case studies were included, particularly around supporting families in the cost of living crisis and strengthening the local offer of support for those with SEND. There had been an escalation in mental health need and a programme of support had been rolled out across schools.

The equalities report provided information around the approach as an organisation, infographics about the workforce and residents who used Achieving for Children's services. There had been a focus on improving training and development for staff and awareness around the protected characteristics. A mentoring programme had been introduced and this had been popular, while a virtual support hub had also been introduced.

The accounts contained information on the financial performance and position for Achieving for Children and followed national reporting standards. Independent auditors had audited the accounts and they had concluded that it reflected a true and accurate financial performance. The overall value of Achieving for Children had improved by £73 million but the net worth was -£5.3 million. This was because the local government pension scheme was offered to all employees who worked for Achieving for Children.

Councillor Story asked if it was normal for the value of the pension fund change to be reflected in the accounts of an organisation.

Lucy Kourpas said that the pension fund was valued every three years and this informed employer contribution rates. The last valuation had come in from 1st April 2023 and there had been a small increase in the employer contribution rate. Achieving for Children was a community interest company, therefore it was likely that it always owed more than it owned and this explained why there was a negative net worth. There was an asset lock in place, so if Achieving for Children was ever wound up, the three joint owning councils would have access to these assets. The organisation had not been set up to deliver a profit, it had been set up to deliver services on behalf of the council.

Councillor Story noted that the families first scheme had over 100 families being supported in Kingston and Richmond, but there were only 11 being supported in RBWM.

Lin Ferguson, Executive Director of Children's Services and Education, said that Achieving for Children had been running the families first scheme in Kingston and Richmond for a number of years. Funding had recently been secured to run this scheme in RBWM and had only been run since July.

Councillor Story asked if staff had to attend all of the training sessions which were listed in the report. He questioned whether this was taking up too much time.

Lin Ferguson said that there were a number of specialist staff who needed to receive regular and specific training on certain matters. Not all sessions were mandatory for all staff, this would be a discussion within the team about which training sessions were appropriate. The training offer was extensive, staff often joined Achieving for Children as the support package was good.

Councillor Story commented on the attendance for training sessions being low, it had increased from 10% to 14%.

Lucy Kourpas clarified that there was one equality, diversity and inclusion module which was mandatory for staff and this took about an hour to complete. Staff were asked to refresh this every couple of years. For mandatory sessions, the target was 100% but this was currently around 60%. It was difficult to determine how many staff should attend each training session as training needs were different. Places on the sessions were also sold to other local authorities.

Councillor Story felt that this figure was portrayed negatively, he suggested to officers that this could be rewritten to clarify that not all staff needed to attend every training session to help explain and justify the low attendance figure.

Councillor Shaw said that RPI had been assumed as being 3%, he asked if this figure was higher what impact it could have on Achieving for Children.

Lucy Kourpas explained that this was a financial assumption over time on the pension fund, this was a long term average.

Councillor Shaw asked if the recommendations which had been highlighted as part of Ofsted inspections were achievable.

Lin Ferguson said that there was an action plan in place as a result of the inspection, this was monitored quarterly. There was an action plan from the last full Ofsted inspection which had taken place in 2020. Both action plans had been reviewed recently and the team were happy with the progress being made.

Councillor C Da Costa picked up the points made on mandatory training attendance. In her experience, mandatory training meant that unless it was completed, staff were not able to do their jobs.

Lucy Kourpas agreed that mandatory should be mandatory, this was the case for new starters. Managers had strongly encouraged staff to complete mandatory modules.

Councillor C Da Costa commented on recruitment and retention, she felt that the training offer in place would be attractive to potential staff. She asked if there had been thought given to try and improve retention rates or to bring in agency staff long term to try and save costs.

Lin Ferguson said that social worker recruitment was a national issue, many signed up to agencies where they could earn more money and were not fixed to a specific place. There was a recruitment and retention strategy in place which made comparisons with other Berkshire authorities. A good benefits package was offered. There was a good rate of agency staff who then joined Achieving for Children on a permanent basis. This was not just an issue with social workers, it was across the board.

Councillor C Da Costa said that she in her previous job there had been a bank trust, this meant that the worker got paid a little bit more and could attract staff from agencies. She asked if this had been explored in Achieving for Children.

Lin Ferguson said it had been considered but it was tricky to do, particularly as it was important that staff built up a relationship with the children and families that they worked with. She hoped for national support to help with retention.

Mark Jervis, Co-optee, said that there had been an increase in children's mental health issues. He asked for any comment on waiting times for mental health issue appointments and key strategies for tackling mental health.

Lin Ferguson agreed that there had been a spike in the number of mental health issues reported amongst young people and children. There was a waiting list for core Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) but not all children needed this. The team had been working on prevention activities, for example self-esteem groups, a youth counselling contract, a getting help team and a wellbeing team. The waiting list had remained relatively static, Lin Ferguson was happy to confirm this information.

ACTION – Lin Ferguson to confirm the waiting list time for CAMHS referrals and share this with the Panel.

Councillor Sharpe asked what Achieving for Children had done in the Ascot area. He asked if there was one thing that could be changed to help children achieve more, what would it be.

Lin Ferguson said that she would need to clarify examples in Ascot with the family hub team. The holiday activity fund had been put on for children with free school meals and there had been activities taking place in the Ascot area.

ACTION – Lin Ferguson to speak to Danny Gomm about the activities which had taken place in Ascot from Achieving for Children.

Lucy Kourpas said that life circumstances should not determine life outcomes and that all children should be able to achieve what they wanted to achieve in life.

Kevin McDaniel, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Health, said that for many children days at school were being taken away due to personal circumstances. He wanted to see more done to ensure that school days were not lost.

Lin Ferguson agreed, education was key for all young people. Children just starting school were often not school ready because of the impact from the pandemic, school needed to be a good experience. Work was also done with those who refused to attend school due to emotional wellbeing and anxiety.

Councillor Sharpe asked how many children were currently not attending school due to anxiety.

Lin Ferguson said that the borough was not in a bad position but she wanted to improve the numbers. It was important to understand why the child did not want to attend school and each child had slightly different circumstances.

ACTION – Lin Ferguson to share report on the number of children not attending school across the borough with the Panel.

Councillor Brar asked how many children in the borough were educated at home.

Lin Ferguson said it was around 180 children.

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and submitted the discussion and comments on the item to be considered by Cabinet as part of the agenda pack.