

PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Thursday 12 October 2023

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

Also in attendance: Mark Jervis (Co-optee)

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Gosling and Tony Wilson.

Councillor Sharpe was attending the meeting as a substitute for Councillor Gosling.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor C Da Costa declared a personal interest as she voluntarily gave up a portion of her Councillor allowance to Kickback and children in care.

Minutes

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes from the meeting held on 6th June 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record.

Annual Complaints and Compliments Report 2022/23

Nikki Craig, Assistant Director of HR, Corporate Projects and IT, explained that there was a statutory requirement on the council to publish compliments and complaints data on adult and children's services but RBWM published complaints data for all service areas. In total there had been:

- 1,408 contacts made with the complaints team.
- 269 contacts were progressed as complaints.
- 16 were for adult services and 85 were for children's services.
- 50% of adult services complaints had been responded to within timescales.
- There had been 38 compliments recorded for adult services.
- The vast majority of complaints on children's services were partially upheld.
- 45% of children's services complaints had been responded to within timescales.
- There had been 69 compliments recorded for children's services.

The report included narrative on areas of improvement and lessons learned by service areas in response to complaints. The council was performing well compared to similar local authorities.

Lin Ferguson, Executive Director of Children's Services and Education, added that complaints in children's services could be complex and therefore took time to resolve. She was disappointed that timescales were not as good as they could be but the relationship between the social work team and the complaints team had improved. There was a lot of learning done from complaints and action was taken to make improvements.

Kevin McDaniel, Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Health, said that the vast majority of complaints in adult services stemmed from disagreements about the cost of care and contributions required from residents. Additional resource had been focused on improving communication around this to residents.

Lynne Lidster, Director of Commissioning – People at Optalis, explained that a debt prevention officer post had been created. This role looked at developing an ongoing financial awareness training programme, to hold surgeries with practitioners, to develop a secondary care dashboard and supporting residents from getting into debt with the council.

Councillor C Da Costa expressed her concern at the number of complaints which had not been responded to within timescales. She asked if the additional deadline was not being requested or was this deadline also being missed.

Lin Ferguson said that staff were not always requesting the additional deadline. Work was being done to change this and make sure that deadlines were recorded correctly. This was also important in ensuring that families were kept up to date and aware of why complaints could take time to be resolved.

Councillor Shaw noted that the response time to complaints in adult services had improved. He asked if there was any particular reason which could be associated with this improvement and if this could be used to improve response times in children's services.

Kevin McDaniel said that the team had ensured that complaints did not become stuck between different teams and that complaints were progressed through the system in a timely manner. Learning had been shared between the service areas and it was hoped that there would be improvements shown in future years.

Councillor Story noted that children's statutory complaints had gone from 79% to 45% of complaints being responded to within timescales. This was a big drop and he wondered if there was any reason for this.

Lin Ferguson said that there was no clear issue or theme which was causing this but a substantial decline had been noticed.

Kevin McDaniel said that children's statutory complaints were rare but were often very long and complex cases around children in the care of RBWM. There had been three complaints received in this area and two had been responded to outside of timescales.

Councillor Story referred to the long delay in responses from the Housing team.

Kevin McDaniel explained that the Housing team received some of the highest numbers of complaints with a strong demand being seen. However, a significant majority of these were based around positions on the housing register.

Councillor Brar asked what measures would be taken to make sure that residents who needed to pay for adult social care did not fall into debt.

Lynne Lidster said that the speed of residents receiving their first invoice could be improved, with the aim of this being within 30 days. If invoices were sent out late, this could make it

difficult for residents to budget effectively. Individual circumstances and understanding the level of care required was the main reason for a delay to invoices being processed.

Kevin McDaniel said that there were different payment plans that could be offered and the priority was making sure that families had enough money to be safe, warm and dry.

Councillor Shaw asked if there was any link between the increase in response times to children's services complaints and the number that were being fully or partially upheld.

Lin Ferguson said that staff were being transparent in their responses to complaints and were able to understand where things could be improved.

Councillor Sharpe asked if there was anything in the report which should be highlighted to the Panel as a concern and if there was an action plan to improve these areas.

Kevin McDaniel said that it was expected there would be more complaints around the cost of adult social care due to the cost of living situation. This was why the team had been ensuring that residents were aware of the cost of adult social care and what their options were if they had any issues in paying.

Lin Ferguson said that communication was an area of focus, making sure that parents and families were kept up to date on the progress of their complaint.

Councillor C Da Costa asked if it was possible in future reports if complaints about financial contributions could be separated to other complaints, as this could paint an inaccurate picture that the council was receiving more complaints.

Kevin McDaniel suggested that this could be done by reviewing how data was captured in the database on complaints.

Nikki Craig added that there was a drop down list which could be selected to highlight the reason for the complaint being made.

ACTION – Kevin McDaniel to work with Nikki Craig to explore if complaints could be separated out for future reports, to highlight how many complaints were made about financial contributions.

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the People Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and agreed:

- i) That the report was published on the council's website.**
- ii) That the annual report continued to be produced and presented at future Overview and Scrutiny Panels.**

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 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 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.

Children and Young People's Strategic Plan for RBWM

Lin Ferguson shared a video with the Panel which highlighted the Children and Young People's Strategic Plan and detailed the priorities which formed the plan. This was the first time a plan of this kind had been adopted by the council. On the 'be healthy' priority, there was an aim to improve access to mental health, increasing the number of children who were breastfed and increasing the number of child immunisations. On 'be safe', there had been campaigns on water safety and safety outside of the home. It was important that all children were ready for school and that attainment for vulnerable groups was increased. The partnership was a written commitment between a number of agencies and would lead to a number of positive changes for children and young people, with many benefits already being seen.

Councillor C Da Costa commented on the video which had been shared, this was well put together and clearly explained the plans priorities. She questioned the higher than average number of children with SEND in the borough, was there any reason for this.

Lin Ferguson said that in more affluent areas there was a trend of children with SEND being identified at an earlier stage.

Councillor C Da Costa said that 6.3% of young people aged between 16 and 17 were not in employment, education or training. This was a high figure compared to the rest of Berkshire and England.

Lin Ferguson said that the Deputy Director of Education was currently writing a report on the reasons for this figure which would be presented to the Schools Forum. The pandemic had an impact on children wanting to learn and staying in education.

Councillor C Da Costa said it was disappointing to see that there were no free drop-in breastfeeding clinics in the borough. Early help needed to be protected as it was a really important service.

Councillor Sharpe asked why this was the first Children and Young People's Strategic Plan which had been brought forward.

Kevin McDaniel explained that there was a statutory requirement to have a children and young people plan and the council had always had one. This plan had been developed in coordination with other teams and organisations which meant the plan was shared widely and was more prominent as a result.

Councillor Sharpe asked if there were any obstacles which officers could see getting in the way of priorities in the plan being achieved.

Lin Ferguson said that the biggest challenge would be finance and budget. All agencies were working together in collaboration on issues which were important to children and young people. There had not been many barriers experienced so far, with active workstreams complimenting the five key priorities.

Councillor Sharpe asked whether joining up with other organisations had decreased the cost of the service overall.

Lin Ferguson confirmed that it was too early to say, it was about thinking differently to achieve positive results.

Mark Jervis, Co-optee, noted that there were no Key Performance Indicators included as part of the plan.

Lin Ferguson said that these were part of the action plan, this could be shared with the Panel.

ACTION – Lin Ferguson to share the action plan for the Children and Young People's Strategic Plan.

Councillor Cross mentioned a training course run by Kickback called 'total respect', which she recommended to other Councillors. Something that came out of this training was that when children in care passed a certain age, they would be transferred to a different service area. Councillor Cross asked what the council was doing to ensure that this gap was bridged and young people were being supported.

Lin Ferguson said that in children's services there was a responsibility to support care leavers until the age of 25. For those children with SEND, the service provided support for the whole time that an Education Health and Care Plan was in place. To ensure the transition between childhood and adulthood was smooth, there was a 'preparing for adulthood' board and there were plans for a strategy to be produced along with additional guidance.

Kevin McDaniel added that conversations needed to happen with young people to set out a route for those who would not meet adult support for their whole life. Adult social care needed to work with colleagues in children's services and housing to ensure that there are places for young people to live.

Councillor Shaw asked how the strategy would look to target an increase in uptake of children's vaccines.

Lin Ferguson said that the main issue was parental choice, the council could not force parents to vaccinate their children. Work was done with parents to highlight the benefits of vaccinations.

Kevin McDaniel said that the public health team had a responsibility to drive the messaging and communications around vaccines and this done working closely with GPs and children's services.

Work Programme

Mark Beeley, Principal Democratic Services Officer – Overview and Scrutiny, updated the Panel on the work programme. He said that two scoping documents had been completed, on support for children with SEND and support for home educated children in the borough. The Panel approved both of the scoping documents.

Councillor Shaw commented on the impact of the government decision on support for asylum seekers, as this was in relation to the change from 28 days to 7 days to leave their currently occupied space. This had a knock on effect for asylum seekers and Councillor Shaw was keen to understand what support was in place.

The Chair suggested that it could be worth inviting the housing allocations team to present to the Panel at a future meeting.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 9.00 pm

Chair.....

Date.....