

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Lewes on 11 March 2024.

PRESENT Councillors Charles Clark, Anne Cross, Penny di Cara, Kathryn Field, Nuala Geary, Johanna Howell (Chair), Stephen Shing, Colin Swansborough, and John Ungar (Vice Chair) and John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative)

LEAD MEMBERS Councillor Bob Bowdler, Lead Member for Children and Families
Councillor Bob Standley, Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND)
Councillor Carl Maynard, Lead Member for Adult Social Care and Health joined the meeting remotely.

ALSO PRESENT Ben Brown, Consultant in Public Health
Alison Jeffery, Director of Children's Services
Mark Stainton, Director of Adult Social Care and Health
Rachel Sweeney, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser
Peter White, Vice Chair of SACRE joined the meeting remotely

27. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 13 NOVEMBER 2023

27.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 13 November 2023 as a correct record.

28. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

28.1 The Chair confirmed the change to the Committee membership since the November meeting and thanked Councillor Maples for her work and welcomed Councillor Cross.

28.2 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Webb, Maria Cowler (Diocesan Representative) and Nicola Boulter (Parent Governor Representative).

29. DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

29.1 There were no disclosures of interest.

30. URGENT ITEMS

30.1 There were no urgent items.

31. LONELINESS STEWARDSHIP GROUP

31.1 The Consultant in Public Health introduced a report and presentation on Connecting People and Places, an Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) commissioned project to combat loneliness in East Sussex. The presentation included the Department's work with Collaborate on forming recommendations to develop a system led approach to combatting loneliness. The Committee heard that these recommendations were detailed in the 2022/23 East Sussex Director of Public Health Report.

31.2 The Committee heard details of one of the recommendations which was to develop a stewardship approach. This involved moving away from traditional performance management towards shared learning between organisations, including voluntary, community and social

enterprise (VCSE) partners. A newly formed Stewardship Group would be led by the Sussex Community Development Association and East Sussex Community Voice would be the lead on evaluation. The Stewardship Group was first due to meet in spring 2024.

31.3 The Committee heard about other planned work in response to the recommendations, including developing a communication strategy; evaluation and research; creating a Connection Test to increase connections between people through policy; ongoing community engagement; training; and developing Connect the Connectors (volunteers who would connect people with the community). This work would support other existing council strategies, including social prescribing, community networks and Family Hubs.

31.4 The Chair thanked the Consultant in Public Health for the presentation. The Committee asked questions and made comments on the following areas:

- **Loneliness Champions** - The Committee sought clarification on the role of Loneliness Champions. The Consultant in Public Health responded that although details of this scheme were still being planned, Champions would have a role in educating people about loneliness, as well as community activities and the support available. The Consultant highlighted the importance of using considered language when discussing loneliness to reduce potential stigma.
- **Work with the private sector** - The Committee recognised the importance of the VCSE sector in this work and enquired about the role of the private sector in developing this system approach to loneliness, including if delivery drivers could help identify people in the community who may need support. The Consultant informed the Committee that ongoing training was designed to equip more people, including those in the private sector, to recognise the signs of loneliness so that they could signpost to support. He noted positive examples that were already helping people in the community which they were seeking to learn from and build on, including recent work with a men's mental health project which was training local business to identify men who may need support with their mental health. The Lead Member for ASCH commented that this was an innovative approach to working and emphasised the importance of engaging with and working collaboratively with a range of partners.
- **Training** – The Committee asked for more information about the planned training. The Consultant responded that training was still being developed but that it would focus on the concepts of stewardship and human learning, as well as understanding loneliness and how to support people in the community.
- **Evaluation** - The Committee asked about how the system led approach would be evaluated and what the expected outcomes were, for example if the Department was expecting to see fewer referrals to its services. The Consultant responded that some aspects of the work, for example changes in mindset, were difficult to measure, but they could measure engagement through activities and events, including training. East Sussex Community Voice would be leading on evaluation, and it would be the responsibility of the Stewardship Group to hold each other to account. The Director of ASCH added that the Department was hoping to see a reduction in referrals as a result of this work, although it was difficult to attribute these outcomes to specific initiatives. The Director noted as well as engaging with partners on measuring outcomes from this project, the new stewardship approach could potentially address current wider challenges, including a changing demographic, increase in need and a reduction in funding, and was a key part of prevention. The stewardship approach allowed for co-production with organisations that know and work with communities which would bring in wider expertise and a sharing of resources; the success of this approach would be evaluated to see if it could be used elsewhere.
- **Sustainability of the programme** – The Committee sought clarification on how the programme was funded and the anticipated timelines for the Stewardship Group. The Consultant informed the Committee that ASCH had provided funding to establish the stewardship approach and take forward the recommendations. He clarified that this

funding would not support specific projects on loneliness but would focus on establishing a collaborative system. There were projects already in place in the county seeking to address loneliness and part of this work would be to understand and evaluate what was working well and communicate these to communities. The Consultant informed the Committee that evaluations were planned at 12 and 18 months which would include developing a case for further investment.

31.5 The Committee discussed the importance of tackling loneliness, noting that it affected a wide range of people. The Committee recognised the challenges with engaging with people who do not want support as well as those that are not online. The Committee noted good practice in local areas, including GP surgeries and VCSE organisations, and offered to share local examples of this work with officers.

31.6 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report and request a further update in 6-12 months time to understand how work was progressing.

32. RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES (RPPR)

32. 1 The Chair introduced the report which reviewed the Committee's input into the RPPR cycle for the 2023-24 financial year and provided an opportunity for the Committee to review the priorities on its work programme.

32.2 The Director ASCH informed the Committee that scrutiny input would be welcomed in the Department's ongoing work on preventative programmes, in particular Public Health's work on healthy ageing in response to an increase in demand from a growing older population. The Committee heard that soon 30% of the population in East Sussex would be over 65 and over the next 15 years projections showed an increase of 20,000 single households aged over 65 and a growing number of people with complex needs.

32.3 The Committee discussed and asked questions on the following areas:

- **RPPR process** –The Committee welcomed the information as part of the RPPR process, although noted concern about the challenging financial position and the difficult decisions that were likely to be needed, including responding to increasing pressures in Children's Services. Opportunities for Members to engage in and contribute to the process were queried and a Member suggested that this would benefit from a Star Chamber style process, especially in relation to any decisions on future savings. There was also a request for Cabinet to share details of how the budget proposals were developed. The Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND) and the Lead Member for ASCH responded that there was a current transparent process which sought to engage all Members through scrutiny from an early stage. They noted the financial challenges ahead and the need for innovative approaches, although also noted that the Council, having made previous savings, was in a better financial position than many other local authorities, and both welcomed the important role of scrutiny in the RPPR process.
- **Healthy Ageing** – The Committee agreed that responding to a growing older population was a priority, noting that East Sussex was a desirable retirement location and parts of the county had the largest proportion of over 85 year olds in the country. Whilst this was positive, it was resulting in an increase in demand on ASCH services and supporting people to age well would benefit individuals, as well as reduce service demand.

32.4 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

33. WORK PROGRAMME

33.1 The Chair introduced the report which outlined the Committee's latest work programme. The report included an update on the Attendance Review which had been delayed until July 2024 to allow the impact of work underway in the Department to be assessed. The Chair noted that this delay provided the Committee with an opportunity to undertake another scrutiny review and suggested that a review of healthy ageing, in light of the comments made by the Director of ASCH, would be an appropriate topic.

33.2 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the updated work programme and include healthy ageing as an item for scoping for a scrutiny review with membership of the Scoping Board to be agreed outside of the meeting.

34. INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY CHILDREN'S SERVICES (ILACS) REPORT

34.1 The Director of Children's Services introduced the report on the recent Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection of East Sussex Children's Services. The Director noted the positive comments in the report and that although some of the areas, as well as the overall judgment, had moved from 'Outstanding' to 'Good', the report highlighted continuity since the last inspection.

34.2 The Director addressed the areas of improvement outlined in the Ofsted report, including the quality of supervision notes and concerns about children experiencing neglect. The Director informed the Committee of work in place to address these, as outlined in the Department's Action Plan, including an audit on supervision notes and development of the neglect toolkit. On the issue of neglect, the Director informed the Committee that work was being done to monitor this process, however noted the difficult decisions involved and officers' priority to support families, where possible and safe to do so, to stay together, as this was often in the best interest of the child. She also noted that in view of the Ofsted feedback there would be a change in procedure for conducting home visits for families hosting foreign language students (all students would be visited in their host homes even if those host homes have previously been visited when used by other students).

34.3 The Committee welcomed the positive feedback in the report. The Committee thanked officers for their work and welcomed the Department's transparent way of working and openness to scrutiny.

34.4 The Committee discussed and asked questions on the following areas:

- **Neglect** – The Committee raised questions about Ofsted's approach to neglect, noting officers' expertise and professionalism as well as the significant impacts for children taken into care. The Committee noted the need to look at the wider context when comparing statistics and that fewer children in care could highlight effective outcomes from prevention rather than an underperforming service. The Director responded that Ofsted had delivered its inspection in a very fair way, listening to officers and focusing on evidence, including individual cases. The Director informed the Committee that figures for children coming into care in East Sussex had been static for a year, although there had been an increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The Lead Member for Children and Families commented on the extensive support offered to families to prevent children going into care. The Committee enquired about the neglect toolkit, including what support was in place for children experiencing neglect and if it was based on national guidance. The Director responded that the toolkit was drawn from national models but had been adapted to reflect East Sussex; the toolkit was thorough, had been recently reviewed and was delivered effectively by the Principal Social Worker. The Director outlined the support offered to children experiencing neglect which focussed on understanding the lived experiences of children.

- **Foreign language students** – The Committee noted that the change in the procedure for conducting home visits for families hosting foreign language students would place some additional pressure on the Department’s resources.

34.5 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

35. SEND PRESSURES

35.1 The Director of Children’s Services introduced a report on SEND pressures which included a briefing note prepared for MPs and the Department of Education (DfE) on a number of proposals for changes to SEND policy which would help address pressures in the system. This briefing was raised in the House of Commons by Sally-Ann Hart MP during a debate on SEND funding.

35.2 The Director highlighted the Department’s work with the DfE on a change programme, trialling a new format for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP), multi-agency governance and multi-agency panels.

35.3 The Committee thanked officers for the report and discussed and asked questions on the following areas:

- **SEND legislation** – The Committee asked about any planned changes to SEND legislation from 2014, which had lowered the threshold for SEND support and increased pressures on local authorities. The Director outlined the historic lobbying for the rights of SEND pupils, which was supported by the House of Lords, and noted that it would be very contentious if legislation was changed to increase the threshold for SEND support.
- **Special schools in East Sussex** – The Committee asked about the timeline for the opening of a new special school which had experienced problems with contractors towards the end of completion. The Lead Member for Education and ISEND noted that pressure had been put on the DfE to resolve this issue and the school was now operating with the use of temporary classrooms, however the Council did not have any control over this issue.
- **Number of SEND pupils in East Sussex** – The Committee enquired about the higher number of SEND pupils in East Sussex compared with the national average. The Director responded that although there had been an increase in the number of families seeking EHCPs, partly due to legislation currently allowing families to appeal at various stages, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) was now in line with the national average of pupils with an EHCP. There was a higher proportion of special school placements in the county than other authorities, with a number of well known independent special schools, and some families moving into East Sussex to attend these. The Director outlined the challenge with creating more placements to meet the needs of SEND pupils, as well as supporting mainstream schools to be more inclusive. The Lead Member for Education and ISEND noted the high expectations from parents as well as significant pressures on the budget, however commented that ESCC was in a stronger position than some other local authorities due to previous funding decisions.
- **Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP)** – The Committee asked if the Department was able to provide EHCP reviews in the prescribed time. The Director responded that they were able to produce the reviews on a timely basis and had invested in additional staff to support this, including ensuring quality and well informed EHCPs for pupils transitioning from primary to secondary school. A recent number of staff vacancies had impacted on some of these timelines, but this had been reviewed in the recent Education restructure. The Department also monitored comments from parents as part of its efforts to understand how well the process was working.
- **Attendance** - The Committee recognised the complexity of providing support to children with SEND and noted the resolutions provided, including support for attendance and with alternative provision. The Director highlighted the additional investment in attendance

- including monitoring attendance of pupils on part-time timetables and noted that they were working with schools to ensure these were only in place for a short period of time.
- **Funding** – The Committee sought clarification on funding, including details on a graph in the report which showed ESCC receiving less funding for SEND than the national average. The Director said the Department would provide a more detailed answer after the meeting.

35.4 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report and asked for further information on the Department's work on the school run projects and involvement in national programmes.

36. STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (SACRE) ANNUAL REPORT

36.1 The Vice Chair of SACRE introduced the annual report which outlined the work of SACRE for 2022-23. The report included updates on the SACRE membership; the syllabus, which was in its second year of implementation; collective worship; school visits and SACRE finances.

36.2 The Vice Chair highlighted that the new syllabus, which had been developed from RE Today, had been widely welcomed by staff, including the supporting resources and training on offer.

36.3 The Vice Chair noted the current Ofsted focus on collective worship and that some schools were reporting this a challenge due to a lack of space and resources; SACRE was providing governor training to support schools with this.

36.4 The Vice Chair confirmed that there had been no applications from parents to withdraw their child from collective worship or Religious Education (RE) lessons.

36.5 The Vice Chair outlined SACRE's current priorities for consistent funding and increasing the diversity of its membership.

36.6 The Committee thanked the Vice Chair for the report and discussed and asked questions on the following areas:

- **Membership diversity** – The Committee asked what had been done to recruit more members to SACRE and increase its diversity. The Vice Chair responded that there was a vigorous recruitment process, including inviting members to open meetings with an explanation of their faith, however noted that some people were put off by the bureaucracy and process. He informed the Committee of the current vacancies, due to recent personal and professional circumstances, but highlighted that recruitment was a challenge in other areas of the country and welcomed any input from councillors to help with recruitment.
- **Collective worship** - the Committee noted the importance of children learning about other faiths and welcomed that no parents had asked to withdraw their children from education or collective worship, although sought clarification if this option was known to parents. The Vice Chair clarified that the procedure involved SACRE setting up a determination sub committee and that this information should be on school websites; SACRE was in the process of reviewing information on school websites and would ensure this was included. The Committee also enquired if collective worship still had a broadly Christian focus which the Vice Chair confirmed that it did.

36.7 The Committee RESOLVED to note the work of SACRE in the implementation of the Local Agreed Syllabus, raising the profile and importance of religious education and supporting the high-quality teaching of Religious Education in East Sussex and academies.

The meeting ended at 12.50 pm.

Councillor Johanna Howell (Chair)