

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 23 April 2024

Update on the Priority Action Plan Report of Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendation, or until they are is completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and its recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. At its meeting on 18 January 2024, the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee received an update on the Priority Action Plan (PAP), which was written following the Local Area SEND Inspection.
4. Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet member for SEND Improvement, and Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, attended to present the report. They were accompanied by Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People; Lisa Lyons, the newly-appointed Corporate Director of Children's Services; Kate Reynolds, Interim Deputy Director for Education; Jean Kelly, Deputy Director for Children's Social Care; Ian Smart, the SEND Transformation Programme Director. The

Committee would like to express its thanks to all those who attended and answered the Committee's questions.

SUMMARY

5. The Priority Action Plan (PAP) was written after the Local Area SEND Inspection report, dated 15 September 2023, to address the five areas of priority action and four areas of improvement. It had been approved by Ofsted on 12 December 2023 and was published by the Council on 18 December 2023.
6. This was the first opportunity members had to scrutinise the PAP. The discussion was therefore very wide-ranging and dealt with a great number of aspects of the PAP as published. At the opening of the meeting, members had heard from four different public speakers, three of whom addressed reservations about the PAP. The Committee was grateful to them for sharing their concerns and the Committee agreed with those concerns, particularly, as will be set out below, in relation to the restoration of trust and effective governance and accountability.
7. The Committee was advised that the work arising from the PAP was not simply a response to the Local Area SEND Inspection, although it arose from that. Instead, it was seeking to ensure that issues that had arisen and developed over a number of years were remedied. Whilst recognising that some issues were negative, the Committee was reminded that there was also a great deal of excellent work happening and that good work would be publicised too. A commitment to openness and transparency demanded sharing of both bad news and good.
8. The Programme Director advised the Committee that, whilst the PAP was a key document, the intention of the transformation programme relating to it was to implement and embed a fundamentally transformative approach, around schools, Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), specialist provision, and with pathways into employment. There were some areas where action could be taken immediately but it was important to ensure that any changes implemented were sustainable and that they would deliver better outcomes. It was this that would lead to increased confidence on the part of parents and carers as well as on the part of children and young people. Levels of trust and confidence would be surveyed and monitored on a regular basis.
9. The Committee made two observations and two formal recommendations. All of them essentially relate to communication, seeking to ensure that all stakeholders are both involved and heard.

OBSERVATIONS

10. Given that the PAP was not published until 18 December 2023, and given that the first meeting of the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for 18 January 2024, it is unsurprising that this was

the first opportunity for the Committee to scrutinise the PAP. The Committee recognises that some members were involved in drafting the PAP but considers that communication to members about it were sub-optimal during the drafting process and thereafter. Open communication to all members about such an important issue, and such an important document, would enable members to have confidence that issues of concern were being addressed. The danger of limited communication is that it can be inferred that there is a lack of confidence in what is being done or proposed. Openness and transparency, on the other hand, implies a confidence and a trust in members to enable their engagement.

Observation 1: That the Council should improve its communications to members generally and specifically in relation to the Priority Action Plan.

11. One of the things that members of this Committee have heard repeatedly from residents is that responses to complaints have too often lacked both clarity and empathy. Members of the Committee who sat on the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee before the introduction of the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee were pleased to hear from the Executive Director of People about the work being done to improve responses to complaints. The Committee was reassured by the emphasis being placed on empathy in communications with parents and carers. This not only avoids complaints escalating but also makes them less likely in the first place. Parents and carers often simply want a response and to know what is going on; they do not actively want to complain. Continued improvement of communication and responses to complaints will be welcome.

Observation 2: That the Council should continue to work to improve empathy and clarity in its response to complaints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. There is a recognition within the PAP of the importance of hearing from children and young people. Priority Action Area 1 states that “Leaders in the local authority, ICB and education, health and care providers should urgently prioritise systems to gather the views of children and young people with SEND effectively. Leaders should use these views to inform their strategic planning for, and evaluation of, SEND services that improve the outcomes and experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families.”
13. The PAP does explicitly refer to the voice of children and young people but the Committee is strongly of the view that this should be amplified and increased. There was a recognition within the meeting that some of the language within the PAP did not speak from a perspective shared by children and young people themselves. This was seen, for example, in references to increased parental confidence which omitted reference to confidence on the part of children and young people. This was also a point made by the young person who addressed the Committee directly. Within the Committee, the point was made that there are organisations that represent the views of young

people themselves but there are also children and young people who are more than happy to express themselves and to share their views. Parents and carers will inevitably have their own views and these may accord with the views of their children but there is no guarantee of that being the case. The importance of taking into account the views of the service user cannot be over-emphasised. Whilst it may not be appropriate always to implement the views of children and young people – or, indeed, those of parents and carers – it is imperative that those views are sought and taken into account.

14. The Committee was advised that the PAP was a live document and so, given that changes and improvements could be made, the Committee, therefore, calls on Cabinet to ensure that hearing and facilitating the voice of children and young people should be a priority for the Council when revising the PAP and in all work arising from it.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should ensure that the voice of children and young people is sought and heard more clearly and consistently within the Priority Action Plan and within the work arising from it.

15. The second recommendation to Cabinet arises from a discussion within the Committee around the Task and Finish Groups which were to be established “to deliver the actions identified in the PAP, jointly chaired by individuals in Local Authority and NHS Organisations.” The PAP explains that the groups will draw on “a variety of stakeholders that will include Local Authority; health, schools; parents/cares; and voluntary, community, and faith sectors.”
16. As an action point, the Corporate Director agreed to consider how members of the Committee being included in the Groups could work. The Committee is grateful for this consideration being undertaken but is keen for it to be implemented. The Committee is of the view that members being included would be of benefit to all key stakeholders: parents and carers, children and young people, Group members, and the Committee itself. Their being included would create alternative avenues of communication through which parents and carers, and children and young people, might feel more confident to interact and engage with the work of the Groups. Equally, it is easier for Scrutiny members to engage at a strategic perspective, meaning feedback is pitched at a useful level. Furthermore, it would be more time-efficient if Committee members are enabled to act as envoys on behalf of the Committee, they will engage at an earlier point than would be possible were they not to be included. The benefits to good scrutiny of there being a clear line of sight from the Committee to work being undertaken would provide assurance. It would thus avoid unnecessary procedural time being wasted as members would be aware of issues at an earlier stage than at a quarterly Committee meeting.

Recommendation 2: That the Council should arrange for members of the Committee to be invited to sit on the Task and Finish groups.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

17. The Committee anticipates that the 2024/25 Committee will continue to consider the work arising from the Priority Action Plan.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

18. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
19. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley
Director of Law and Governance

Annex:	Pro-forma Response Template
Background papers:	None
Other Documents:	None
Contact Officer:	Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk April 2024