

Minutes of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

**Monday, 14th March 2022 at 6.00 pm
in the Council House, Priory Road, Dudley**

Present:

Councillor P Bradley (Chair)

Councillors C Bayton, D Bevan, R Clinton, R Collins, P Drake, S Greenaway, M Hanif, K Lewis, N Neale and S Ridney.

Officers:

M Abuaffan (Head of Adults and Older People's Public Health), H Ellis (Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions), S Jones (Head of Family Solutions), J Mupombi (Matrix Project Manager Social Care), J Wood (Integrated Commissioning Performance and Partnership), A Wright (Head of Dudley Virtual School) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer).

42. **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors R Body, B Challenor, P Lee and T Reid.

43. **Appointment of Substitute Member**

Councillor S Greenaway was appointed to serve as substitute Member for Councillor B Challenor for this meeting of the Committee only.

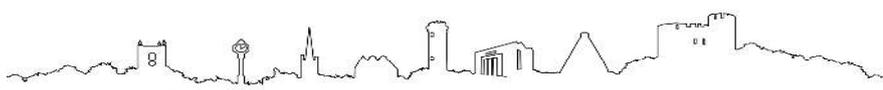
44. **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor S Greenaway declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Member of the Appeals Committee.

Councillor K Lewis declared a non-pecuniary interest as an Early Years provider.

Councillor N Neale declared a pecuniary interest as an employee of the Dudley Group of Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Councillor S Ridney declared a non-pecuniary interest as the Chair of the Management Committee of the Virtual School.



45. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20th January 2022, be confirmed as a correct record, and signed.

46. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

47. **Home to School Transport Policy**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children's Services detailing changes proposed to the Dudley Metropolitan Council's approach to the Policy on the provision of Home to School Transport to children and young people with a specific focus on:-

- Increasing the independence of pupils and students.
- Ensuring that the transport support provided for eligible children and young people of compulsory school age, between the ages of 5 and 16 years of age by the Council's Policy would not exceed the statutory minimum, rationalising the Council's Home to School Transport Appeals process.
- Achieving efficiency savings and the use of available resources.

Members considered the background information in relation to Home to School Transport support nationally and how the proposed changes aligned with the Council's wider Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) approach in Dudley.

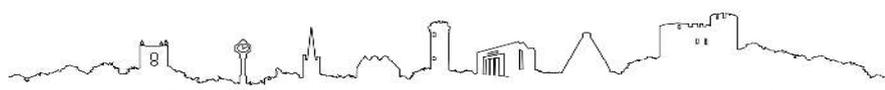
It was noted that the Cabinet had recommended that the report be submitted to the Committee as part of the consultation exercise on the proposed new Policy.

The Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions circulated a presentation to Members in relation to the Transport Policy Consultation and summarised the purpose and overview of the consultation. The Committee welcomed J Wood, the newly appointed Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Lead, who would be joining the Commissioning Service in April 2022.

It was stated that the consultation process had commenced on 8th March 2022 and would take place over an extended 90-day period.

The revised Policy and Post 16 Statement would provide more clarity to the whole system on transport eligibility, changing some of the policy wording, in order to remove any areas that were open to misinterpretation.

It was stated that the key areas of focus were the Local Authority providing statutory transport and providing travel solutions and not a transport offer.



The impact of the proposals would be on post 16 home to college and early years under 4's nursery placements.

It was noted that the Post 19 transport offer should be an assessed need as part of a Care Act Assessment.

It was confirmed that the Local Authority had no statutory duty to provide travel assistance to young people from the age of 19 to 25.

Although the current policy noted that pre-school aged pupils were not normally eligible for travel support, it stated that support may be granted for some children aged 2 years and over, however the revised Policy deleted that exception, and no travel support would be provided to that age group.

The proposed area of change to students over the age of 16 was referred to and it was noted that responsibility for providing transport would remain with the student and/or their carers' with a clearer explanation of when students, especially those with disabilities, would be provided with travel support.

There were also proposed changes to the appeals process with the panel no longer consisting of Elected Members but comprising of senior officers in other Directorates or areas of the Local Authority who were not involved in making the original decision.

As part of the consultation process a wide range of stakeholders would be consulted, with targeted sessions in five Wards identified in the Equality Impact Assessment, as having higher impact for young people and their families, as a result of the changes in Policy, and it was understood that Members in those Wards had been engaged in order that they could provide their constituents with details of the consultation process.

There would be a range of physical and online meetings and in addition a 'Survey Monkey' exercise had been identified.

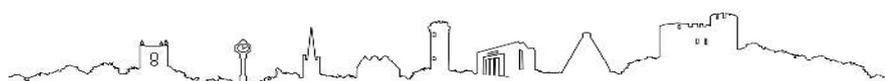
Translation into community languages and easy read consultation documents were available.

Details of the consultation stakeholders were provided together with a summary of the engagement plan.

It was noted that the proposed new Policy would not affect those children and young people currently receiving travel assistance and it was proposed that the new Policy be implemented in September 2022.

Members were requested to advise the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions of any further community groups or stakeholders that should be consulted on the proposed Policy.

In relation to five Wards identified and referred to above the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions would provide details of those five Wards to Members.



In responding to a question from the Chair, the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions stated that it was unusual for Home to School Transport Appeal panels to consist of Elected Members, and the Strategic Executive Board supported the proposal for the Appeals process to be conducted in line with other Councils.

In responding to a question from Councillor C Bayton in relation to the rationale for the preferred options for the appeals process, as contained in the report submitted, the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions undertook to provide Members with further details.

The Chair raised concerns in relation to appeal panels no longer being independent should appeals be determined by officers within different Directorates of the Local Authority, and Councillor S Greenaway believed that the current process was independent as Councillors were elected by local residents.

In responding to a question from Councillor J Clinton, the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions stated that there was no guidance in relation to how long former officers should be retired prior to dealing with appeals and undertook to provide Members with further information on that proposal.

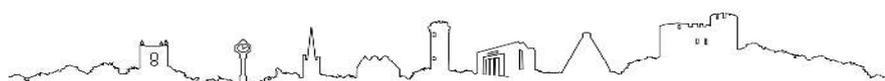
Councillor S Ridney referred to the Council funding 25 children under the age of 5 within nursery settings at a cost of £0.153m, and the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions reported that the amount covered a wide range of support for extremely complex needs and could provide equipment and/or a chaperone for those children, however there was no statutory duty for the local authority to provide that support for children under the age of 5 and therefore that provision would be reduced, whilst continuing to examine methods to support those families and provide the correct support.

In responding to a question from Councillor N Neale it was confirmed that those families with disability mobility vehicles, in order to transport their children to and from nursery/school had also been considered.

The Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions, responded to a question from Councillor S Ridney stating that there remained specialist nursery provision for children and referred to the process of re-modelling the Early Years Service stating that part of that remodelling entailed reviewing specialist nursery provision. There was the ambition to provide that provision in all nursery settings, which would enable children to remain within their own communities.

It was noted that good practice in other authorities had been investigated and work had been undertaken with the Local Authority's legal and communications teams to inform the Consultation process and in particular to determine the position in relation to proposed new Policy.

Members of the Committee were in agreement that the appeals process should continue to be determined by Elected Members.



Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report on the Home to School Transport Policy and as reported on at the meeting be noted.
 - (2) That, as part of the consultation process, the Committee recommends that Home to School Transport Appeals should continue to be determined by Elected Members.
 - (3) That the Members be requested to advise the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions of any further community groups or stakeholders that should be consulted in relation to the proposed new Home to School Transport Policy.
 - (4) That the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions to be requested to advise Members of: -
 - (a) The five Wards identified in the Equality Impact Assessment, as having higher impact for young people and their families, resulting from changes in Policy.
 - (b) The rationale and further details for the preferred options for the appeals process, as contained in the report submitted.
 - (c) Further details in relation to how long former Officers should be retired prior to dealing with Home to School Transport Appeals.
-

48. **Early Help in Dudley**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children's Services on the progress of Dudley's Early Help partnership arrangements focusing specifically on Early Help delivery throughout 2021. The report included work encompassing the launch of the refreshed Early Help Strategy 2021/2024, early help demand, delivery and the impact of support across the partnership throughout the previous 12 months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Head of Family Solutions presented the report submitted referring to the two key elements, the new Early Help Strategy and details in relation to refocusing work around partnerships.

A key element of the Early Help operating system was cluster based working as the delivery methodology for Early Help Services across the Borough and Family Centres existed in each of the cluster areas in Brierley Hill, Halesowen, Stourbridge, Dudley North and Dudley Central.

The Family Centres Early Help was supervised by a Family Centre Manager and involved a wide range of staff.

It was reported that intervention work had provided a positive impact on Children's Services.

The formal development of the Early Help offer in Dudley commenced as a direct result of Ofsted's inspection in 2016 that resulted in regulatory criticism around service fragmentation and the under development of assessment processes that could identify children and family's needs during the early stages.

The Early Help offer had been strengthened, being described as well developed.

There had been an increase in demand on Early Help services during the pandemic and Ofsted described how those demands had been responded to effectively in supporting children and families who were adversely affected during lockdowns.

The vision for the 2021 strategy and the five themes as contained in the report submitted were referred to, together with the next steps aligned to the vision and the clarification of governance arrangements to maximise strategic capacity and oversight to drive the work forward.

A much clearer understanding of the Early Help Strategy in terms of building the capacity of colleagues involved in cluster Centres was acknowledged.

The Activity in relation to recruiting volunteers, in order to support families was referred to, together with the ambition to ensure work was completed regarding joint commissioning arrangements in order to ensure that information in relation to support services were available to children, young people and families and was easily available and accessible.

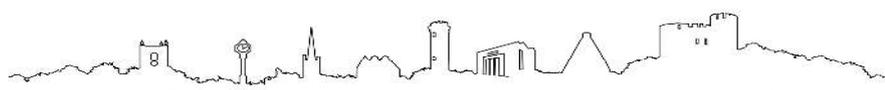
Feedback from families would be utilised to inform Early Help services.

The launch of the Early Help Strategy 2021-24 which would involve an event at DY1 in Dudley and a film event were referred to.

It was noted that in terms of demand during the pandemic 7,500 contacts had been made with the five Dudley Family Centres and a target of 200 early help assessments per month had been set for Dudley, with 187 each month being carried out as at the end of 2021.

Details of who had conducted the early help assessments as contained in the report submitted were referred to and it was noted that the Local Authority remained the predominant agency undertaking assessments in 2021.

The graphs referring to those stepping up to Level 4 from Level 3 assessments during 2021 were referred to and it was noted that the graphs highlighted that demand was slightly higher in relation to stepping down arrangements.



In relation to the Strengthening Families data, the outcome indicators included improving school attendance, reducing incidents of domestic abuse, supporting families into employment and ensuring families had sustained progress and during Quarter 3, 83 families had been supported within those areas.

There was a National Supporting Families Programme led by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities which provided a three-year commitment to 2026 from the most recent spending review. Supporting families was an outcomes based programme, funding would be through a payment by Results Grants and the Local Authority were on track to meet 100% of their 447 families outcomes by March 2022.

The Head of Families Solutions referred to the key measure of the impact of Early Help focussed on families, who would require a Level 4 service within 6 months of support ending in Early Help, and during the previous 12 months 93% of children had not required support at Level 4 within 6 months of their Early Help services ending.

Details of the Early Help Strategy 2021-24 consultation, representation process, the significant level of engagement to inform the new strategy and timeline as contained in the report submitted was outlined to Members.

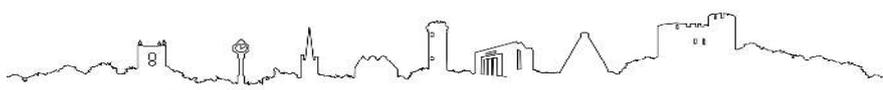
The Chair referred to his visits to the Family Centres and echoed his appreciation for the work conducted with children, young people and their families by the Early Help Service.

It was noted that work would continue with the Head of Midwifery at Russells Hall Hospital to provide Health Scanners and engagement with maternity services would continue as that work had been hindered by the pandemic.

In responding to a query from Councillor C Bayton in relation to the Early Help effectiveness key performance indicators for the Dudley Central Family Centre Cluster, the Head of Family Solutions referred to the continuing work on the first 1001 days of a child's life, with the work concentrating on the health and equality and casual links, and the opportunities to building on community assets to ensure there was every opportunity to access local services. It was stated that the Cluster Connect model to develop early help services for children, young people and families being an outstanding model.

In responding to a question from Councillor S Ridney in relation to the financial pressures now on all families, and particularly in those areas of the Borough that had not previously been affected, the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions agreed that families who were now presenting early help needs were not necessarily those families previously on the radar, referring to the funding available to distribute to schools in order to help to identify those families and confirmed that demands on those services would increase in the future.

Councillor K Lewis referred to referrals in relation to Early Help Services that she had made during the pandemic and the Head of Family Solutions encouraged Members to discuss those specific cases outside the meeting with either himself or the Family Solutions Service Team.



The Chair welcomed the report, referring to the prevention strategy and confirmed that the delivery of the Early Help Strategy 2021-24 would be supported.

Resolved

- (1) That the detail in the report submitted on the early help activity that has been delivered across the partnership during the preceding twelve months, be noted.
- (2) That the delivery of the Early Help Strategy 2021-2024, with particular reference to the five pillars of delivery contained in the report submitted, be supported.
- (3) That the re-calibration of the contribution of the partnership to early help in the Borough, be supported.

49. **Social Care Improvement Update**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children's Services on the continued improvement of Children's Social Care including: -

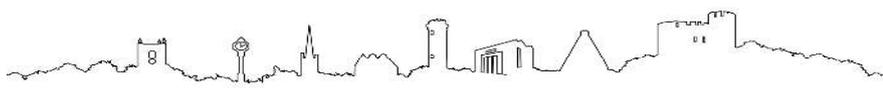
- Progress on the Improvement Plan 2022/2023 and the five key priority areas in line with the Restorative Practice model approach to working with children and families and relationship-based practice.
- An update on the continued work with Section Led Improvement Partners from South Tyneside with an emphasis on early and robust permanency planning for children and young people.
- An overview of the quality social work practice
- An overview of the workforce and the key challenges impacting on social work practice and work with children and families.

Members were provided with an opportunity to seek clarity and raise questions whilst providing ongoing assurance that Children's Social Care, along with the wider partnership were making improvements at pace to improve the quality of services being provided to the children and families of the Dudley Borough.

The Matrix Project Manager Social Care referred to updates to sections of the current Improvement Plan and the restorative model of practice, making particular reference to the Edge of Care service which was designed to support more children and young people to safely live with their families.

Increasing and improving timeliness of assessments to those children subject to a Child Protection Plan and the Head of Service and Service Manager liaising with other Local Authorities to ensure that measuring assessment timeliness was in accordance with other Local Authorities practices.

There remained a commitment to increase and improve timeliness of visits to children subject to Child Protection Plans, with figures relating to timeliness continuing to increase and percentage rates being greater than those of statistical neighbours and the national average.



The key feature of the refreshed Improvement Plan was the commitment to being a learning organisation that was underpinned by reflection, challenge and quality assurance activity including feedback and innovation. The updated quality assurance framework had been launched in January 2021 and throughout November 2021 there had been a focus on audit activity on performance planning.

Work continued with the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and joint working arrangements with all partners. A key piece of work would be joint working arrangements with Housing colleagues and specifically in relation to young people presenting as homeless and meeting their needs and outcomes.

The positive work in relation to Family First would hopefully result in fewer children entering the care system.

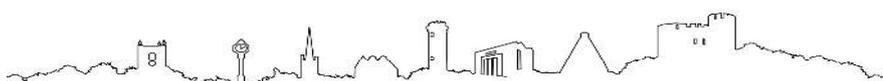
The 'No Detriment Policy' that resulted in young people remaining with their foster carers following leaving care which would have no detriment upon foster carers was outlined and the number of those young people remaining with their foster carers was increasing.

The Matrix Project Manager Social Care responded to a question from the Chair in relation to those audits which were reviewed by South Tyneside, who were the Authority's Sector Led Improvement Partners and agreed with 80% of the gradings. Those gradings that they did not agree with related to areas where management required confidence building and work had subsequently been conducted with managers.

In response to a query from Councillor D Bevan it was also reported that the timeliness of assessments and the reasons for delays would be discussed with parents and carers should the timeliness of assessment relate to a child or young person being on holiday or there were concerns in relation to the content of the assessment. Delays could also occur should families become disengaged with services.

In response to a question from Councillor C Bayton in relation to those young people presenting as homeless and the work intended with housing colleagues, the Matrix Project Manager Social Care reported that the Local Authority's Housing Section were currently undertaking a restructure, however work was intended to take place as currently those young people who had become disengaged with their parents and were presenting as homeless were initially being brought into care and then transitioned through Housing Services in order to gain support to re-house them.

In responding to concerns and questions raised by Members regarding recruitment and retention of staff within Children's Social Care, it was noted that following meetings with procurement colleagues other Authorities were being examined in relation to their best practice models. There was specific mention of the Hertfordshire model whereby the Authority had reduced the number of children and young people allocated to each Social Worker, which had impacted on staff retention, however salaries would not be the only factor in relation to recruitment and retention, and Officers would continue to monitor the Hertfordshire model of retention in the future.



Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the Social Care Improvement Plan, progress made to date against the Plan and the quality of practice, be noted.
- (2) That it be noted that Corporate Leaders have been provided with an understanding of progress made to date.

50. Dudley Virtual School (DVS) Annual Report 2020.

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the developments of the Dudley Virtual School.

The Head of Dudley Virtual School presented the report submitted and Members also considered a presentation that was circulated at the meeting.

The highlights and developments of 2020/21 were outlined and in particular it was reported that there had been an upward trend of outcomes for children at Key Stage 4 in the preceding three years; there was a maths and numeracy targeted offer; an Ofsted visit in November identified that the Head of Dudley Virtual School had put in place good systems that ensured effective support to children, and there continued to be no children or young people who are in permanent care excluded from their educational setting during the 2020/21 academic year.

In the post 16 cohort there had been a downward trend in those Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) for years 13 and 14.

The Children in Care Council had been involved in the development of Personal Education Plans (PEP's) process. There had been the introduction of PEP Champions from the Children in Care Council who had enhanced the development of children and young people's voice in PEP's.

The Virtual School had also piloted the introduction of the Cultural Entitlement section within the PEP on behalf of the West Midlands Region and to inform national development.

During the preceding three to four years there had been improved relationships between the Borough's school and pupils, relationships had been strengthened by a strong Virtual School Management Board to ensure that information was shared and connections were made.

In relation to the children in the care cohort, 50% were supported in Borough and 50% out of Borough.

The challenges in relation to supporting children were outlined and in terms of the Special Educational Needs cohort work was conducted closely with that cohort of children in relation to the development of their Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP) documentation, and schools were encouraged to ensure those plans were as detailed as possible.

Improvements to certain elements of the EHCP'S had continued and reporting on expanding data collection, should pupils have a number of school moves during their academic years, it would be imperative to include that data in order to ensure that the correct intervention and support to respond to education outcomes and challenges were made.

There was currently no national data for Key Stage 2, however it was evident that further work was required in relation to PEP's

Work had been conducted closely with the Education and FUND Pilot Project on literacy work with similar progress being made on numeracy work, and sustainable systems were being built upon to engage the Department for Education (DfE).

The number of young people with no qualifications in the two previous academic years had been a real concern. There was a focus during 2019/20 on that concern with a 44% reduction in young people in that category. In 2020/21 there were three young people in that category, all of whom had experienced a change in residential placements which adversely affected their academic progress and outcomes.

The Pathway Programme in partnership with the Juniper work-based training provider, had targeted those disengaged young people in Years 11 and 12 to be supported by tuition leading to Functional skills qualifications.

Post 16 data was improving term by term with those achieving A levels at 100%, however it was noted that there were three young people in that cohort, with the aspiration that those young people would proceed to tertiary education, however work would continue with all levels of qualifications for young people.

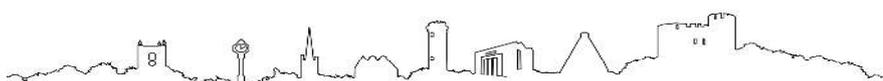
In relation to exclusions and attendance, young people continued to be well supported with 94% maintaining attendance during the current term. Engagement in learning generally had continued with no permanent exclusions. Hard work would continue to ensure that incidents in schools would not result in permanent exclusions. It was noted that the exclusions would be referred to suspensions in the future.

Work continued with colleges on how to support schools with the needs of those children in the care system and provide guidance on a Leadership Policy approach.

There continued to be a downward trend in relation to NEET's, however some NEET's had been young adult parents who were enrolled on courses to commence in September 2022. Some NEET's were ill and could not attend education, employment or training. The Virtual School would continue to work with Connexions who would assist young people post 16.

In relation to emotional health and wellbeing, the Virtual School continued to commission a range of services to support that cohort of children and young people including: -

- Educational Psychology Service
- Dudley Counselling Service
- Dudley Lighthouse Links
- Evolve
- Dare2Dream



- Barnardos
- Attachment and Trauma Informed Schools
- Nurture and Resilience Programme.

The Arts provision continued to be a focus for the Virtual School, with a regional arts and cultural offer for all children and young people in care, their carers and foster families across the region.

There had been a new focus upon Arts projects in the three children's homes across the Borough. Workshops and sessions had been provided within three of the four children's homes and evaluation meetings with care home managers were planned for 2022 to discuss the impact of the sessions together with ways they could be improved and built upon.

The Layers of Legacy Project had been developed to celebrate important figures in Black History.

The Summer School which had consisted of five days of arts to a group of children aged 9 to 16 years at the Source Youth Centre had taken place during 2021. Full details of the arts offer were included in the report submitted, as that also included music, poetry, rapping and animation.

A nurture and reliance programme had also been provided with that programme being recognised nationally.

A Development Programme to support Foster Carers was also outlined.

Details of the Dudley Virtual School Annual Conference – Nurturing Educational Success for Children in Care were outlined in the report submitted.

The Dudley Virtual School also continued to work closely with the Youth Offending Service.

The Chair commented positively on the Dudley Virtual School Annual Report recognising the significant work undertaken during the 2020/21 academic year.

Resolved

That the information contained in the Dudley Virtual School Annual Report 2020/21, be noted.

51. Corporate Quarterly Performance Report – Quarter 3 (1st October 2021 to 31st December 2021)

The Committee considered a report on the Quarter 3 position for Children's Services for the 2021/22 financial year covering the period 1st October to 31st December 2021.

Resolved

That the Corporate Quarterly Performance Report for Quarter 3 (1st October to 31st December 2021) be received and noted.

52. **Feedback from the Joint Children and Young People and Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committees Working Group**

The Committee considered a Joint report of the Working Group providing feedback from their meeting held on 14th February 2022.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, be noted.
 - (2) That subject to the reappointment of Working Groups in the 2022/23 municipal year, the Consultant in Public Health, Head of Service for Healthy Communities, Places and Workforce be requested to present the highlights of the 0 to 19 Needs Assessment to a future meeting of the Working Group.
 - (3) That the Director of Public Health and Wellbeing be requested to submit two separate reports on obesity and child poverty to a future meeting of the Joint Working Group, to include the actions proposed to deal with both issues and the service currently provided Borough-wide to deal with child poverty; data in relation to the National Childhood Measurement Programme; details of the work conducted with partners and peers in order to reduce child poverty and obesity and definitions of those in poverty and apprenticeships; evidence of work conducted with other Authorities that had a positive impact on reducing child poverty and identifying partners to be interviewed by the Joint Working Group.
-

53. **Closing Remarks of the Chair**

As this would be the last meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee for the 2021/22 municipal year, the Chair thanked all Officers for the informative meetings that had taken place and Members for their contributions.

The meeting ended at 7.55pm

CHAIR