

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Friday, 16 February 2018 at 9.00 am at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Neill Young (in the Chair)

Councillors David Tompkins
Paul Godier
Suzy Horton
Will Purvis

Education Representatives Present:

Rob Sanders, Anglican Diocese
Sara Denham, Governor Forum Representative

Officers Present

Neil Stevenson, Admissions, Attendance, Exclusions & Reintegration Service Manager

5. Apologies for absence (AI 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ben Dowling, Helen Reeder (TLP representative) and Alison Jeffery (Director of Children's Services).

6. Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 2)

Councillor Godier declared a personal interest as his Sister in Law works for Portsmouth Youth Offending Team.

7. Minutes of the previous meeting - 12 January 2018 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Education, Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel held on 12 January 2018 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

8. Review into school attendance and reduced timetables in Portsmouth (AI 4)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made around the table. The chair gave a brief summary of the review and asked if the parents could talk about their reasons why they had chosen to home educate. The Chair advised that the panel had also received three written statements from other EHE parents which had previously been circulated to the panel.

Ms A is parent who had been home educating her two children for the last eight years.

Mrs B is a parent whose children had never attended school and were home educated up to the age of 16.

Mrs A explained that one of her sons was diagnosed with Aspergers however he was not diagnosed straight away. He is a very bright child who started reading aged two and when he started at school he was reading books from the junior school as there was nothing at infant level that would challenge him. He attended Willows which is a special nursery and he was very happy there as they understood his needs. He started at school however Mrs A felt there was no support at the school although they had tried and there are a lot of things for the school to manage. She explained that for a child with Aspergers the school environment can be very loud and hectic, especially having 30 children in a classroom. The teachers were not able to give him the support required. Mrs A was told they were waiting for staff training on the Makaton system which her child and another in his class were due to use. As Mrs A's Son was verbal and his friend was not, her son became a translator for him.

Her son attended school for five weeks part time and begged her not to go back. He was trying his best to hold it together whilst at school but was very upset at home. When they spoke to his teacher, their assumption was that there was a problem at home as he 'seemed fine whilst at school', which was very frustrating. This is something Mrs A hears often from other parents choosing to remove their child from school. Mrs A therefore made the decision to remove him from school and home educate him and it took him a year to get back to his normal, happy self. Her son is now 13 years old and has no desire to go to school and when asked replies 'why would I want to?' Her son would like to take GCSEs however he wants to do GCSEs that are not available in school such as Law. Her reasons for continuing home education are now more ideological.

Mrs A felt that better communication between the LA and home education community was needed. She explained that EHE parents receive letters from the LA Attendance Service which immediately makes these parents angry as they have chosen not to send their child to school - there is not an issue with attendance. She said the LA would get a better response from EHE parents by simply sending these letters out on different headed paper so they do not feel they are being treated the same as parents who do not send their child to school. She felt this would create a much better response. She added that Portsmouth LA is known nationally as not having a good relationship with its EHE parents. The EHE parents had asked Portsmouth City Council to add details of the EHE groups on the website, however they said they could not as the groups had not been CRB checked, however most other LAs do this. This would give the children and parents the opportunity to socialise with other home educating families and that it would mean the children are seen by other adults within the group.

In response to questions from the panel, Mrs A made the following points:

- It was very difficult to describe an average day of home educating as it depends on a number of things such as their child's interests. Activities

they do include swimming lessons, trampolining, attending STEM group (Science, technology, engineering and maths) once a week. It was sometimes dependent on the weather, for example if it was a sunny day they will go out exploring. One EHE parent's day would be completely different to another. Some EHE parents have a strict timetable so their children are learning from 9am until 3pm and some choose to teach in accordance with school term times. Some bring tutors in to teach their children. Other home educators choose to completely step out of timetabling structure and every day is completely different depending on events and activities and their child's interests. Home educated children meet up regularly during the week.

- In terms of support for GCSEs, she explained there is lots of support from the home education community but none from PCC and EHE parents must pay for exams themselves. Hampshire County Council is known to be one of the best LAs for supporting EHE parents and they provide funding for each child to take up to five GCSEs. Fareham and Gosport home education group have an exam centre and can assess a child to see if they require extra time to complete exams if they have a SEN. EHE parents will often get a group of people together and pay for a private tutor.
- When asked what the LA could do to improve the relationship, Mrs A said it would help if the LA does not send letter from attendance team as it immediately frustrates EHE parents as their children are not missing school. Attendance officers have little understanding on how home education works and will ask EHE children if they want to start school 'like normal children'. Some attendance officers are better than others. EHE parents would like better communication with the LA and have tried.
- Mrs B added that she had chosen to home educate her children right from the start and never volunteered this to the LA as there is no legal obligation to do so. PCC later found out though through consent forms for her child to perform in a show. She received a call from an officer asking why their child was not on their books. She accepted an attendance officer visit and the first one was very damaging. They came in with the attitude 'wouldn't you rather be in school?'. This upset her son as he felt he had been doing something wrong and was very inappropriate. Future visits were from a different person who had a completely different attitude and had acknowledged their choice to home educate. Visits were really positive as she was interested to see what her child had been doing, and this really helped. Her son used the sessions to show what he had learned and was proud to show this. Mrs B thought that if more of the attendance officers took this approach this would make a huge difference in the relationship with EHE parents and the LA. Some EHE parents are reluctant to let the LA in as they do not want comments about their house for example, as this has nothing to do with their child's education. Mrs A added that pushing to meet children straight away if they have come out of school can also be damaging as the child may have been so damaged from school they are frightened that they will be made to go back to school.

- EHE children mix with other EHE children regularly and it is a common misconception that they do not socialise. There is a huge EHE community with many organised activities they can attend. Parents also regularly meet and socialised. They are always meeting new children as there are always new children coming out of school to be home educated. EHE children also mix with children of different ages. Mrs A explained that her son mixes with older children academically and then children his own age socially. There is also more interaction with adults and the older children are very protective of the younger ones. There is less division between girls and boys playing together. Mrs A also explained that her children socialise with children who attend school through after school clubs such as Taekwondo and Scouts.
- The two EHE parents said it was difficult for them to represent all EHE parents. Some EHE parents will never want to engage with the LA whereas some parents would be willing to engage if the experience was much more positive.
- With regard to the LGA Policy around setting up a national register for home educated children to keep track of numbers, Mrs B said that there is still a lot of hostility between the LA and EHE so many parents would not want to be added to this list. She personally would not mind being registered but other EHE parents have had negative experiences so would not welcome that. Mrs A said that she would not want to be included on the register and if/ when they move house she would not inform the LA of their new address. Mrs A said many parents would be worried that once they have their names what would happen next. Mrs A added that they advise EHE parents not to ignore letters received from the LA but to keep the LA at arm's length. Mrs B added that her son had picked up on the negative experience with the first attendance officer and was terrified that he would be taken away into care if he was not performing well.
- The two EHE parents felt that training of attendance officers may help. If they were all much more positive and understood EHE this would make a huge difference in improving relationships.
- Bullying of older children is becoming more of a reason for parents to remove their children from school, for younger children it is often due to a child having SENs. A lot of parents have said they tried their hardest to keep their child in school but they have felt their child has been neglected and the situation is getting worse.
- A councillor raised the point that whilst EHE children are not more at risk of safeguarding issues however there is less opportunity for this be picked up by the LA, and asked how the LA could balance it so it has a positive experience with those EHE parents who want to engage but what mechanism is the right way to engage with the two thirds who do not engage. Mrs A said that if they see a child at risk they will always take the appropriate action. Abusive parents will not care about a compulsory register so felt for some children unfortunately this would

not make any difference. Those EHE parents that are on the register are those who are doing a good job by their child.

- When asked what they felt could be done to improve the situation for EHE if the funding was available, Mrs A said training to ensure people understood EHE and the reasons parent choose to do this e.g. if their child has a SEN, Financial help towards GCSEs would also be welcomed as would help towards music lessons. Also help towards a venue, such as a church hall that has storage space to store educational materials, where they can hold different activities. Currently parents must pay for this themselves. This would help as all different home educators could use this space and all share the educational materials.
- With regard to foreign languages, they hired a French tutor to hold lessons for a group of children. They also learn Spanish online via skype with a tutor.
- Council owned attractions such as Staunton Country Park, all have a 'carer goes free' ticket. If the Council could arrange for council owned attractions to have an EHE parent goes free this would be great. In addition she said that most swimming pools in the city will not let children in during school hours so asked if this could be reviewed.

The panel noted that there are currently barriers between EHE parents and the LA but if home education becomes more popular and more understood these may start to break down. The panel agreed that the LA does need to do more sharing of information.

In response to a question regarding the remit of the LA, Mr Stevenson explained that when a LA is asked to judge what is suitable education, broadly they are asked to measure this in the same way across the board e.g. whether it is a suitable age, aptitude and ability but with home education the LA are not given authority to look at progress over time and judge in the same ways as schools, which is right as it is a different type of curriculum. Ultimately it is key that children are thriving and doing what they want to be doing. There are stories around the country where parents are home educating their children but the child would much rather be in school. On the other hand some excellent home educator stories have been heard today.

The Chair thanked the two EHE witnesses for attending the meeting today and sharing their experiences. He felt that the biggest issue is that there is suspicion on both sides. Home educating parents think the LA does not understand home education and that the LA are trying to push their own agenda and from the council's perspective they need to ensure that children in are adequately safeguarded as two thirds of EHE are not known to the LA. Until the barriers of them and us situation are broken down, no progress will be made so the LA needs to look how to bridge these barriers and compromises are needed on both sides. The panel noted that every child learns in a very different way, whether it be in schools or EHE; it is about finding the best way of learning for each child and that may not be in a school.

Mrs A added that it would be great for EHE parents and the LA to have a positive meeting. They can go back to the online EHE community to say they've had a really positive experience this will help break down barriers. Mrs A added that Hampshire has a very good relationship with their EHE parents, as do Cambridgeshire, Sunderland and South Wiltshire so suggested that the panel may wish to look at what they these LAs do.

The Chair then asked Neil Stevenson to present his report on education penalty notices report.

Mr Stevenson said it is important to say that it is not the LA who initiates education penalty notices but the school who make the request of the LA. The LA will review the case and then take it up with the Magistrates Court.

The report breaks down in 2015/16 and later in March the report for 16/17 will be available and this will be circulated to the panel once available. It is fair to say there has been an increase. The only fluctuating figure is the one around leave of absence. Persistent Absentees are those below 90% and schools have a realisation that in order to improve their overall attendance they need to focus on this group in order to meet the national targets. Schools are obliged to report those who attend irregularly. Every 6 weeks the LA review all schools and ask what they are doing about that. Schools issue penalty notices, most schools choose to and attendance does improve. It is important to have the continued pastoral support coupled with the legal framework.

In response to questions, the following matters were clarified:

- We know the number of penalty notices that are issued due to leave of absence when applied in relation to regular attendance. In January for regular attendance there were 35 penalty notices issued for irregular attendance and 54 for leave of absence. In 2016/17 there were 1,042 issues in terms of leave of absence and 418 issued in relation to irregular attendance.
- With regard to impossible to find out whether it is proportionate. Sometimes prosecuting both if live with both parents and sometimes the LA does not have the details of who the child is living with.
- With regard to penalty notices and how many are given to repeat offenders, Mr Stevenson said the LA has this data and could circulate this. It is of more concern when a child is frequently away on a Friday and Monday. If their attendance throughout the rest of the year is high and they go on holiday during term time it could be said there is another type of education going on by going on holiday.
- Schools have got the right of discretion on whether to issue an education penalty notice, there is not a blanket policy on whether to issue an education penalty notice or not.
- With reference to the graph showing that White Europeans were most likely to have been involved with prosecutions, Mr Stevenson said he was not sure of the reason. Rob Sanders added that some cultures have a different attitude to education and this could be a factor.

- With regard to the LA staggering school holidays, members commented that some countries such as France stagger this around the country, so there is not the same net effect of everyone going on holiday at the same time. If Portsmouth were to consider this would need to be done in conjunction with Hampshire County Council as some children in Portsmouth but attend school in Hampshire CC. Members discussed that Flying Bull Academy decided to use all their inset days at the end of the Summer holidays so that parents can take their children away for that week at a lower cost. Although the parents find this useful, from a professional development point of view this may not be as usual as teachers need professional development throughout the school year.

The panel agreed to hold an informal meeting in March to look at the evidence received to date and to decide on the way forward for the review.

The meeting concluded at 10.25 am.

Councillor Neill Young
Chair