

County Council – 19 March 2024

Written Question under Council Procedure Rule 9.2

1. Question from Councillor Simon Bywater

As a concerned corporate parent and mentor of our care leavers, I am reaching out to inquire about the steps taken by the Children and Young People's Committee under your leadership over the past three years. Specifically, I am interested in understanding the efforts made to ensure accountability among senior officers in the management of children's services.

Could you kindly provide insight into the following:

1. What actions have been taken by the committee to hold senior officers accountable for their responsibilities in managing children's services?
2. How many Chair/Vice Chair meetings have occurred to challenge officers regarding their performance and adherence to best practices? Are there any minutes to corroborate these.
3. In what ways have you encouraged officers to streamline casework and reduce the number of children entering the care system?
4. Given the decrease in the number of annual CYP committee meetings, what strategies has the committee implemented to address this decline and ensure robust oversight of children's services?

Your responses to these inquiries would greatly contribute to fostering transparency and trust within the community regarding the management of crucial services for our children and young people.

Response from Councillor Bryony Goodliffe, Chair of Children and Young People Committee

1. What actions have been taken by the committee to hold senior officers accountable for their responsibilities in managing children's services?

The Committee, as do all Elected Members as Corporate Parents, have a key role and responsibility in providing oversight, scrutiny and seeking assurance from officers that arrangements within Children, Education and Families are being effectively discharged.

The Committee has a cycle of well-planned meetings, with agendas and reports being published well in advance, enabling all Councillors to raise issues, not only those who are members of the Committee. Given the importance of the role of the Children and Young People Committee, there are a range of standing items and frequent reporting on issues such as Children's Social Care and Education data and performance reports and the regular scrutiny of the Directorate Risk Register, elements of which are reflected appropriately in the Corporate Risk Register, which is subject to additional scrutiny by the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee.

In addition to the formal meetings of the committee, which is also well supported by the Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee, there are an extensive range of performance, governance and improvement meetings which involves the Chair, Vice Chair and other members of the Committee, including Opposition Spokes, as appropriate. These arrangements include:

- the Children's Services Improvement Board;
- the Education Achievement Board;
- the SEND Improvement Board;
- the Children's Safeguarding Board;
- Childrens Service Performance Management; and,
- the Virtual School Management Board.

Leading upon senior officer accountability is not solely the responsibility of the Children and Young People Committee. The Council has a clear officer leadership structure, whereby the Chief Executive and through him the Executive Director for Children, Education and Families as the Council's Statutory Director of Children's Services is both held to account for and holds to account and scrutinises the work of the Children, Education and Families Directorate.

2. How many Chair/Vice Chair meetings have occurred to challenge officers regarding their performance and adherence to best practices? Are there any minutes to corroborate these.

The Chair and Vice Chair of the Children and Young People Committee meet with the Executive Director for Children, Education and Families informally on a weekly basis.

Cross Party Spokes meetings also occur regularly for the Children and Young People Committee.

As previously mentioned, there are a range of formal governance meetings held which involve formal records and decisions involving elected members, not only the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee.

The Committee Chair also meets frequently with individual Service Directors and Assistant Directors within Children, Education and Families on an informal basis.

Members are also reminded that, in accordance with the Council's Constitution and approved scheme of delegation and management structure, the responsibility for the management of officer performance is a matter for the Chief Executive and through him the Executive Directors. Service performance and delivery is appropriately and properly scrutinised through Committees and governance groups, but individual officer performance is not managed by elected members directly.

3. In what ways have you encouraged officers to streamline casework and reduce the number of children entering the care system?

Cambridgeshire County Council has the second lowest number of children in its care in the Eastern Region. This figure is 12.8/10,000 compared with a regional figure of 17/10,000.

The Children and Young People Committee's approved and independently chaired Children's Improvement Board and the new directorate leadership team within Children, Education and Families is driving forward improved outcomes for children and young people and ensuring they can remain at home wherever it is safe to do so. Children enter the care system only when it is right and necessary to keep them safe and prevent significant harm.

In addition, given the well managed cessation of legacy shared service arrangements with a neighbouring authority, the leadership capacity and capability within Children, Education and Families has been strengthened to ensure that officers are also driving improvement and ensuring focus and rigour, as well as supporting our workforce.

4. Given the decrease in the number of annual CYP committee meetings, what strategies has the committee implemented to address this decline and ensure robust oversight of children's services?

As clarified in earlier responses, the Children and Young People Committee is only one part of an overall range of governance, oversight and scrutiny arrangements that exist to both support and challenge the work of Children, Education and Families.

In particular, although referenced previously in these responses, the Committee decision during 2023 to create an independently chaired Children's Improvement Board, provides for much greater oversight of work in these areas.