

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION & SKILLS SCRUTINY BOARD - 9 June
2020**

MINUTES

Present: Councillors: A Adeyemo, S Ashraf MBE, K Blunt (Vice-Chairman), J Butler, M Gough (Chairman), J Hamilton, R Holt, A Mackenzie, L McCarthy, A Rebeiro, P Thomas, Mrs K Wild and co-opted Member Mr B Hall

Officers: Louise Rees – Director of Children's Services and Skills
Tim Browne – Assistant Director - Inclusion & SEND
Frank McSheffrey – Assistant Director - Children, Young People and Families
Joseph Bright – Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Mrs J Hildreth submitted her apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR CONFLICTING INTERESTS FROM MEMBERS

There were no declarations of interest.

3. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

No questions or deputations were submitted.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the Scrutiny Board meeting held on 12th March 2020 were presented.

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th March 2020 were approved as a correct record.

5. COUNCIL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AND PUPILS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs presented the report, which updated Members on the Council's support for schools/early years and pupils since the closure of educational settings to the majority of pupils, as well as the recent announcement for the wider opening to more pupils. The points raised included the following:

- Following the Government's announcement, all education settings closed from Friday 20th March and from Monday 23rd March, they had been open for keyworker and vulnerable children only.
- The Assistant Director emphasised the breath-taking pace of change at the beginning of the closure of Schools and the Council's response developed rapidly. During the week beginning 16th March emergency meetings were held with officers from across the Council, and the Schools Cell was established, which led the response for Schools and Early Years. The Council engaged immediately with Schools and an emergency meeting was held with the Solihull Schools Strategic Accountability Board (SSAB).

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- An attendance system was established rapidly, to track the attendance of vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers. They initially had less than 600 pupils attending School during week one of the lockdown, including 75 vulnerable children. Schools quickly adapted to the need to track and monitor their most vulnerable children. Systems were established with the Council to ensure vulnerable children were provided regular welfare checks and supported by the relevant agency.
- The attendance of vulnerable children increased significantly – by week 8 there were 233 in attendance.
- From 27th April, the Schools Cell shifted focus to the issues arising from Schools and Early Years settings beginning a phased reopening. On 10th May, the Government introduced its roadmap towards recovery, which included plans for the extended opening of Schools for more pupils.
- In considering the phased reopening of Schools, the number one priority for the Council and its partners had been the safety of our Schools for pupils, their families and the workforce.
- In regards to the impact of lockdown upon children, it was detailed how the majority had fared well. However, it was emphasised that, for other children, it had been a different story. It was anticipated the pandemic would have a significant impact upon the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.
- In responding to the challenges of the pandemic, the Assistant Director commended the Schools Cell, and emphasised the considerable work undertaken by School head teachers and staff throughout. He also specifically highlighted the work of the following three Council Officers - Steve Fenton, Head of Access & Development, Claire McNeil, Education Improvement Team Manager and Denise Milnes, Senior Public Health Specialist.

Councillor Gough thanked the Assistant Director for presenting the report. He also requested to put on record his thanks to School head teachers, staff and Council Officers, for all of their work throughout the pandemic – Members confirmed they endorsed this.

The Assistant Director responded to a number of questions that were submitted in advance of the meeting:

- *Small groups or bubbles would be suitable for many year groups, but would it be practical for Years 10 or 11?* The Assistant Director detailed how the modelling for Secondary Schools was anticipated to be different from Primary Schools. It was also explained that Year 10 pupils were not accessing Schools for full days or full weeks. There was some face-to-face contact with teachers, with online learning their main source of education.
- *What happens to the bubble with a Primary School if the teacher gets a test and trace call? Could another teacher or teaching assistant step in, or is the bubble shut down?* The Assistant Director explained the guidance stipulated that small groups and their teaching staff should be kept together as far as possible. Where this wasn't feasible, other staff could move in and teach those groups, to ensure the bubble remained in operation. It was emphasised the bubble approach was just one of a range of protective measures being implemented by Schools, such as hand washing and social distancing.
- *Whilst masks are not currently recommended in Schools settings, is it the case that Government guidance could change at short notice? What could the Council and Schools do if that was the case?* The Assistant Director detailed

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how the Council had been supporting Schools to secure supplies of emergency Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in case any pupils became symptomatic on site.

- *Are Schools interpreting Government advice and guidance as optional?* The Assistant Director explained how guidance was non statutory; however, there was a requirement to evidence reasons for non-adherence. Schools were adopting a risk assessment approach and developing policies and procedures stemming from this.
- *Are health and safety procedures stringent on practical issues, such as cleaning, moving furniture and PPE?* The Assistant Director confirmed Schools had been encouraged to follow Government guidance, that covered all of the cleaning arrangements. Also, Schools were being encouraged to clean and wipe services every day that had been used regularly by children and young people.
- *Is the risk assessment equally applicable to Primary and Secondary Schools, or will additional risks need to be assessed and managed for Secondary Schools?* The Assistant Director detailed how the risk assessment checklist had been produced as guidance for all Schools – Secondary Schools were advised to follow the same principles, but also consider any additional risk that might be present. It was noted how Secondary School pupils were expected to be better able to follow social distancing rules.
- *What are the practical arrangements for Schools, given the majority may not have enough for pupil numbers?* The Assistant Director detailed how Schools were expected to review their risk assessments regularly to ensure they implemented a plan that was fit for purpose. It was emphasised how hand washing was the most effective practical method for reducing the spread of the virus.
- *How ready is the Borough for Track and Trace for teaching staff, children and members of their household?* The Assistant Director explained how the NHS Test and Trace programme had been in place since the 28th May, although key workers, including School staff, had been able to access via the online system since early May. The new system involved following contacts of cases, as well as providing advice and information on self-isolation, where needed. A Schools outbreak cell had been established, which met every morning to examine any outbreaks and respond accordingly – they would liaise directly with Public Health England and other local agencies to ensure they responded in an agile way to any potential outbreak.
- *Members have heard reports of different Schools being able to accommodate different volumes of children and queried whether there were any specific issues within the Borough.* The Assistant Director detailed how Schools, firstly, had to complete their risk assessments, taking into account the size of their classrooms, meaning there was variation from School to School. Some Schools had to adopt a part-time approach, whilst others were able to accommodate a greater volume of children and young people. It was noted that, as of that day, 3085 children were attending Schools, with approximately 30% of the total pupil population attending during each week.
- *Members had raised questions in regards to the mental health support for pupils and School staff.* The Assistant Director explained how there had been extensive mental health support for children, young people and their families.

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He detailed the campaign #werearethinkingofyou and how a range of support, advice and guidance had been issued.

Members raised the following questions:

- Members queried what measures were being considered to close the anticipated attainment gap. They questioned whether additional School time, such as Summer Schools, was being considered.
- The Assistant Director emphasised this was a major priority area and detailed how they were reshaping the Schools Cell to ensure focus upon the attainment gap. They were currently looking at the potential for a summer offer, particularly for the most vulnerable pupils. The Assistant Director also stressed the need to consider the welfare of School staff, taking into account the challenges they had faced throughout the pandemic.
- Members questioned whether any of the Borough's Primary Schools had required that pupils attend full-time. They also queried how many children who were eligible to return to School had been unable to do so, because the School may be unable to accommodate them.
- The Assistant Director detailed how some Schools did initially look at all pupils returning on a full-time basis – however, as confidence had grown and more people returned to work, demand had increased. In order to accommodate this and provide eligible pupils some form of offer, many Schools were operating on a part-time basis. The Assistant Director confirmed that demand was anticipated to be greater than supply, due to social distancing requirements. He explained how they were liaising with the Department for Education (DfE) on social distancing rules going forward.
- Members highlighted how a small number of Schools enabled a wider range of pupils to attend over the previous week. They queried how this had been received by parents, as well as the experiences of pupils and staff. The Assistant Director confirmed 15 Primary Schools and 2 Special Schools re-opened to more pupils and detailed how various meetings had been held with head teachers to share the learning. It was emphasised how the re-opening of the Schools had been a hugely positive experience for the pupils and staff.
- Members raised the issue of hand washing and toilets – they queried how this would be maintained, particularly taking into account some of the younger age groups returning to School. They also questioned the arrangements for cleaning the toilets and dealing with waste matter.
- The Assistant Director explained the advice from Public Health, was that incidental passing in corridors or toilets was believed to be low-risk. In regards to toilets, the advice was for Schools to undertake a thorough cleaning at the end of each day, prior to the next group of pupils and staff attending.
- Members highlighted the potential of a second wave and queried the arrangements in place if this occurred in September. The Assistant Director confirmed this was a major area of focus. He detailed how they would closely monitor the Government's advice and guidance on social distancing requirements in the run-up to the return to School in September. The Assistant Director also confirmed they were planning for all potential contingencies and were exploring the use of virtual learning platforms with Schools, if this may be required.

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- A Councillor highlighted how there was a 48-hour window within which an individual had Covid-19 symptoms to when they started spreading the virus. The Councillor queried what assurances the Director of Public Health had provided on the 48-hours track and trace capability, not capacity, available for the Borough, taking into account that the local R rate was close to 1.
- The Assistant Director detailed how the Director for Public Health had set up a Health Protection Board, which had representation from a range of partners, to ensure the response to any Covid outbreak was well-managed and capacity could be drawn in from a range of different agencies. It was explained how Public Health England was key to this, as they were the focal point for any outbreak and they would liaise with local agencies, to ensure resources were mobilised quickly. On the specific point in regards to local 48-hour track and trace capability, the Councillor was advised this needed to be raised with the Director for Public Health; however, it was emphasised that the local response took into account the timeline for children, young people and staff becoming infected and ensuring testing was undertaken at the right point.

RESOLVED

That the Children's Services, Education and Skills Scrutiny Board:

- (i) Requested to put on record their thanks to school leaders and Council officers, for all the work undertaken to ensure schools remained open for vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers throughout the lockdown.
- (ii) Noted the report and the challenges and successes of the council's response in providing support to educational settings and pupils.

6. CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING ARRANGEMENTS DURING COVID 19

The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families presented the report, updating Members on the Council's Children's Social Work, Youth Offending and Family Support Services response during Covid-19. The points raised included the following:

- The MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) services had continued to be delivered throughout the lockdown. There had been a decrease in some aspects of Child Protection work; however, there had been an increase in the complexity of cases received. The Family Support Services had seen an increase in the number of Children in Need – the response to this was supported by additional social work capacity from across the service.
- For all service areas, work had continued throughout the pandemic – however, they pursued the flexibilities the DfE and the Government had allowed, by undertaking the work virtually, such as video and teleconferencing. It was noted these changes in practice had been approved by the Local Safeguarding Children' Partnership.
- All statutory visits for children in care had taken place, usually virtually, however face to face visits had been undertaken, if required.
- Support and contact with Foster Carers had been maintained throughout the pandemic. The Council had focused upon maintaining existing placements throughout, with the agreement from both the child and carer.
- The Council had continued to offer support to its Care Experienced Young People, with face-to-face meetings and drop-in clinics for any young people that required help with food, clothing or money/allowances.

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- The Youth Offending Service had maintained services throughout lockdown, with virtual working where required.
- Overall, the Assistant Director confirmed that the Children's Safeguarding Social Work teams had maintained a safe and effective delivery of services during lockdown, ensuring statutory requirements were met.
- The Assistant Director emphasised the efforts of staff throughout the pandemic. He highlighted the impact upon employees emotional well-being and resilience, taking into account the challenges of the social work roles, especially whilst working remotely. Members were informed of the range of support for staff, which included additional one-to-one support virtually, as well as face-to-face meetings with line managers.
- It was recognised lockdown had a significant impact upon children's mental health and emotional well-being, especially for those already living in challenging circumstances. It was confirmed that psychology services for children and young people had been maintained. Kooth, the online counselling and support service, continued to be available and had been widely publicised by Schools and on social media.
- The Assistant Director explained how, across the service area, they were developing reset and recovery plans. They were looking at the planned and phased re-introduction of services, including face-to-face contact with service users. They were also working with the Facilities and Asset Management Team, to assess the safety of the buildings and facilities used.
- As part of the recovery and reset of services, they were expecting an increase in demand and referrals, as lockdown restrictions were lifted and children returned to School. The Assistant Director emphasised they anticipated an increase in domestic abuse referrals. He confirmed they were working across the service area and with key partners, including the police, to ensure there was sufficient capacity to manage this.

Members raised the following questions:

- Members expressed concern at the potential for vulnerable children not being identified during lockdown. The Assistant Director confirmed this was an issue the service and its partners had focused upon throughout the pandemic. He explained how colleagues in the Health service and Schools had been identifying and reporting concerns at the earliest opportunity, making referrals to the MASH.
- Members emphasised they recognised the severe impact the pandemic had had upon children and families across the Borough. They also queried whether there had been any learning from the lockdown, as well as new ways of working that might be explored further.
- The Assistant Director detailed how the use of IT and virtual working had enable them to make contact with children and families more quickly. As an example, he detailed how psychologists had found it challenging to maintain contact with children in out of Borough placements, due to restrictions on movement; however, these children had responded well to virtual contacts. Children and families had also responded well to virtual meetings, as they often found it a more relaxing way of engaging with staff. The Assistant Director confirmed that, going forward, they would still look to undertake face-to-face working where it was required, for instance Child Protection visits.
- Members queried whether children had still been moved or taken into care during lockdown, in cases of domestic violence. The Assistant Director explained that, in cases of domestic violence, where it was untenable for the

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child to remain in that environment, they would explore the potential for the perpetrator to move. If this wasn't possible they would look at the possibility of family members providing support and, following this, they would pursue a placement with a foster carer.

- Members queried the support offered to staff throughout the pandemic, taking into account the pressures encountered in social care roles. They emphasised how employees may miss the support network of their colleagues during lockdown. Members also noted it was likely that a significant volume of home-working would continue post lockdown and requested assurances about the safeguards in place to protect employees' mental health and wellbeing in such challenging roles.
- The Assistant Director emphasised that it was recognised that, across the service area, many employees faced complex and challenging circumstances, even when they had their team around them. It was noted this was particularly acute for employees relatively new to the service. The Assistant Director detailed how they had focused upon ongoing support through continued supervisory and virtual one-to-one meetings, as well as virtual team meetings. Employees had also been offered the opportunity to be in the office at times, to receive face-to-face support from a manager, whilst adhering to social distancing requirements. Psychological support had also been offered to employees, where required.
- Members queried the arrangements to ensure the ongoing professional development of staff, especially for those who had recently started in this service area. The Assistant Director detailed how they had looked at the arrangements for staff training and support, including for newly qualified Social Workers, with the Principal Social Worker and workforce development colleagues. He confirmed they had continued to provide virtual, online training, where required. The Principal Social Worker, with the advanced practitioners, had also provided one-to-one support to staff, who required additional input and guidance, especially those new to this complex service area.
- Members highlighted how children had been encouraged to go online more during lockdown, for schooling and social contact. They queried the measures in place to ensure safeguarding and whether there had been any increase in reported incidences.
- The Assistant Director explained they hadn't experienced an increase in safeguarding incidents stemming from children being online. However, he detailed how, nationally, there had been reports of perpetrators using online techniques to target vulnerable children. Whilst there hadn't been an increase in cases, there were still incidences and police colleagues continued to report these to the service.
- Members queried the arrangements in place to support young people adversely affected by Covid-19, particularly those not in employment, education or training (NEETs). The Assistant Director explained how the Education and Skills Team was continuing to identify opportunities for young people. There was also work across the Directorates, to focus upon social value work and ensure opportunities, especially for vulnerable young people. It was confirmed the 16+ Team continued to offer support for care experienced young people.
- Members highlighted the potential for children to experience food insecurity during lockdown. They queried how this had been identified and questioned whether any extra provision had been made for low income families. The Assistant Director confirmed there had been an increase in families experiencing hardship. It was detailed how the Family Support Service had identified cases of children in need and, where necessary, pursued Section 17

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support. There were also cases of families who didn't require statutory intervention, but needed support – here they worked with colleagues in the Communities and Partnership teams, to enable these families to access community support, including for food and shopping. It was also confirmed they had focused upon ensuring support for young carers and had linked in on this with the local Carers Association.

- Members detailed how schools setting were often the most likely location a child might report an issue, especially to a trusted teacher. They emphasised the potential for previously unknown issues to be reported, as lockdown measures were eased and pupils returned to School – Members requested assurances there was sufficient Social Worker capacity for this.
- The Assistant Director confirmed they were anticipating an increase in referrals as pupils returned to School. He detailed how they were working with colleagues across safeguarding networks, including Police and Housing, to anticipate and mitigate the risks to children. The Assistant Director explained that, within Children's Services, they had ensured sufficient capacity to manage the increased demand – it was noted that, through the Corporate Leadership Team they had secured funding for additional agency staff.

Councillor Gough thanked the Assistant Director for presenting the report. He also requested to put on record his thanks to the Children's Social Work Safeguarding Service teams for all of their work throughout the pandemic – Members confirmed they endorsed this. Councillor Gough requested for a future report to the Board, when appropriate, which set out the learning from the pandemic, that could lead to effective changes in service delivery.

RESOLVED

The Children's Services, Education and Skills Scrutiny Board:

- (i) Considered and endorsed the Directorates response to Covid-19, delivered within the Children's Safeguarding Social Work Services;
- (ii) Requested to put on record their thanks to the Children's Social Work Teams, Youth Offending and Family Support Services for all the work undertaken to ensure the continuation of safeguarding services during the pandemic.
- (iii) Requested to receive a report at a future meeting, which sets out learning from the pandemic, which could lead to changes in service delivery that supports better outcomes for children and families.

End time of meeting: 7.30 pm