

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION & SKILLS SCRUTINY BOARD - 10 March  
2021**

**MINUTES**

Present: Councillors: M Gough (Chairman), K Blunt (Vice-Chairman), M Allen, S Ashraf MBE, M Brain, J Butler, J Hamilton, R Holt, A Mackenzie, L McCarthy, A Rebeiro, P Thomas and Mrs K Wild

Officers:

Apologies: Councillors:

**27. APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies.

**28. DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR CONFLICTING INTERESTS FROM MEMBERS**

There were no declarations of interest.

**29. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS**

There were no questions or deputations.

**30. MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2021, were presented.

**RESOLVED**

That the minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record.

**31. UPDATE ON SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES DURING COVID-19**

The Board received an update on the challenges and responses from the Children's Services Directorate in supporting children, families and schools during Covid-19.

The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs provided an update on the following points:

- Continuing support for schools and early years settings during Covid-19.
- The ongoing communications with the school community throughout the pandemic.
- The comprehensive range of measures to support remote learning.

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- The volume of outbreaks and school attendance levels recorded during the third lockdown, as well as at the return of school on 8<sup>th</sup> March.
- Members were also informed of the measures undertaken to step back up vulnerable children's tracking arrangements, as well as providing free school meal options.

Members raised the following queries and observations:

- Members queried what extra support could be provided to pupils with additional needs, including anxiety, to encourage their return to school. Members also expressed their concern about children wearing masks for extended times, especially pupils with additional needs.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs confirmed that support for pupils with anxiety had been a major area of focus. It was explained how a school refuser pathway had been established, where they had funded the Educational Psychology Service and Specialist Inclusion Support Service to provide a broad range of different support offers, based on the needs of individual children and families. They had refocused the role of the Education Enforcement team, whereby they were supporting the attendance of vulnerable pupils and putting in place individual support, where required, to encourage them back into a school setting.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained that, in regards to children wearing masks, they had to ensure adherence to national guidelines, whilst also taking into account the individual needs of the child. It was recognised that children may need to take breaks from mask wearing, outside in a safe environment.
- Members queried the mental health support in place for School staff and questioned whether there were any ongoing issues.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained how there was a comprehensive support package in place for Schools – the Human Resources team sent out updates and a bulletin each week, detailing how to access mental health support. This was routinely monitored; which demonstrated the support was being accessed. Support for staff was also considered at the weekly schools cell meetings with head teachers.
- Members highlighted the impact of the lockdown upon pupils with additional needs, including for their families. They queried how the SEND community was feeling at the moment and also questioned the access to Educational Psychology support.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained how the pressure on these families was recognised and it was emphasised the increase in demand for SEND support was a national issue. Officers were developing a roadmap – to support both the immediate return to school now, as well upon an ongoing basis. There was also evidence regarding the social and emotional impact of the lockdown on children – the Council was participating in national discussions about the type of support packages that could be established. It was also explained how the local mental health service for children and young people, delivered

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via Solar, had continued throughout the pandemic and had been highly effective. The Kooth service was also provided, where young people could access online counselling, advice and support.

- Members queried the information sharing arrangements with the further education providers and independent schools during the pandemic.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained how they had maintained communication with the further education providers and independent schools – this had included the tracking and monitoring of pupils following any outbreaks, to ensure they were able to self-isolate. They had also monitored all pupils across the Borough, to ensure they were receiving an education offer – where necessary, officers were contacting families to provide additional support, or identify alternative education arrangements, where necessary.
- Members expressed their thanks to Schools and the Local Authority for all the work undertaken to introduce remote learning. Members noted that, whilst the instances of remote learning they had seen had been excellent, some children may have found it difficult to engage in this style of learning. They queried how this could be taken into account, going forward.
- The Education Improvement Team Manager confirmed all local schools had tracked and monitored online engagement in remote learning, throughout the pandemic. As the pupils returned, schools were focusing upon identifying any potential learning gaps – schools were undertaking informal assessments with pupils to help inform potential changes to the curriculum. It was also noted an ongoing remote learning offer was being focused upon for pupils who may be unable to attend school for medical reasons.
- Members noted that, during the third lockdown, there had been 132 school staff cases. They queried whether there was any information on the severity of these cases, including any hospital admissions. It was agreed it would be checked with the Public Health team whether this information was recorded.
- Members highlighted the particular anxiety currently being experienced by pupils in Year 10, who may be facing exams during the next academic year. They requested clarification regarding the extra support being delivered in schools for this group.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained how Central Government had made a broad package of support available, including 'catch-up' funding with flexibility to allow head teachers to determine how this could be used. The Government had also announced the appointment of an Education Recovery Commissioner, to oversee a comprehensive programme of catch-up aimed at children whose learning may have been impacted during the pandemic.
- The Education Improvement Team Manager detailed how a recent update provided by the Department for Education advised that assessments of pupils due to sit GCSE and A-level examinations in summer 2022 were likely to be adapted to take into account the

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disruption to their studies caused by the pandemic. A National Tutoring programme had also been established, which schools could access.

- The Director of Children's Services and Skills expressed concern over the term 'catch-up' noting how it could add to pupils concerns and anxieties. Members agreed, emphasising how children had had to cope in extraordinary circumstances and they needed to be praised for the efforts they had made.
- Members noted there had been an increase in safeguarding demand and complexity of need during the pandemic – they queried what risk assessment criteria was used by schools to identify any potential safeguarding cases.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs confirmed effective safeguarding arrangements with the schools had been continued throughout the pandemic. These practices were well embedded in schools, where they escalated issues through the established routes, to ensure the children and young people received the necessary support. It was noted this included the implementation of safeguarding arrangements to track vulnerable children and pupils with an EHCP.
- Members highlighted instances of parents who had kept their children at home despite being key workers. They expressed concern that, in some instances this had been recorded as a failure to attend school.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained that any child accessing remote learning should have been recorded as in attendance, irrespective of whether their parents had been key workers. It was confirmed that any individual cases could be look into.
- Councillors queried whether the use of remote learning could be considered for pupils being home educated because they had previously struggled in mainstream or specialist school environments.
- The Assistant Director for Inclusion and Additional Needs explained how they were currently reviewing all alternative provision across the Borough and considering whether this could include an online offer for children unavoidably unable to attend school.

Local head teachers Louise Minter (Streetsbrook Infant and Early Years Academy) and Jacqueline Nicholls (Dickens Heath Community Primary School) joined the meeting, to update the Members on their experiences during the pandemic, including the arrangements for the re-opening of schools. Jacqueline Nicholls raised the following points:

- The support for children and families during the pandemic had been the result of a close collaborative effort between Schools and the Local Authority. Strong relationships had been built with key individuals, both within the LA as well as across the whole Schools community.
- A key challenge Schools had faced had been continuing to work face-to-face during the pandemic. This created additional pressures, especially for staff members who had to cope with their own personal circumstances.

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- There had been significant focus upon supporting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils and staff members throughout the pandemic.
- A further challenge going forward for the Schools community was how some Schools did not have the infrastructure for child and family support workers to undertake outreach work.
- High anxiety was being seen in both the children and parents, during the return to School. The financial, as well as emotional, impact of the pandemic on families was emphasised – support for families would be a key focus for Schools going forward.
- It needed to be recognised how Schools were not necessarily returning to the way things were – for instance, they would have to hold remote assemblies for some time. A key focus would be supporting a sense of belonging and community, in these circumstances.
- There were certain personal development activities that children may not be able to undertake for some time – for instance, residential placements. Schools were considering how to create the same kind of experiences, to support pupils to develop life ready skills.
- Certain pupils with additional needs, including SEND, had been able to continue in a very quiet school setting during the pandemic. Schools staff had focused upon supporting this group of pupils, during the initial return to school, to help prevent them being overwhelmed.
- Funding was a challenge for schools – additional funding had been provided by the Government, as part of the ongoing pandemic response. However, Schools ability to generate their own income had been impacted during the pandemic, such as via lettings and childcare provisions.

Louise Minter highlighted the following points:

- The School community, in collaboration with the Local Authority, was focusing upon developing a Borough-wide mental health and wellbeing strategy.
- The full re-opening of schools had been hugely positive, for both pupils and staff.
- Children would have lost out on the opportunity to interact with one another during the pandemic. Schools were focusing upon the development of communication and social interaction skills.
- It was emphasised how the Local Authority had provided highly efficient, responsive support throughout the pandemic, which had given great assurance to local head teachers.

The Chairman expressed his thanks to Jacqueline Nicholls and Louise Minter for joining and contributing towards the meeting. The Board agreed to put on record their thanks to schools and officers, for all the work they had undertaken, to support children and families throughout the pandemic.

The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families also provided an update upon the following points:

- The Social Care response during Covid-19.

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- The ongoing impact of Covid-19 upon Children's Social Care services, which included:
  - An increase in the number of children needing to be looked after by the Local Authority – since the start of Covid-19 this had risen from 461 in March 2020 to 537 in March 2021.
  - There had been a continued reduction in the availability of local placements, meaning increased reliance of out of borough placements.
  - Social Work caseloads increased during the pandemic, but were now starting to stabilise.
- Support provided to the workforce throughout the pandemic.

Members raised the following queries and observations:

- Members queried the ongoing work being undertaken to recruit potential foster carers across the Borough, noting how some families may have re-evaluated their circumstances following the pandemic.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families detailed the work on this being led by the Head of Service for Looked After Children and Adoption – it was recognised as essential, with the increase in the number of children needing to be looked after. It was also explained how they used existing foster carers to support recruitment, so they could convey their real lived experiences and share the positive outcomes. The Assistant Director also confirmed there was ongoing engagement of the BAME community, recognising the increasing diversity of the Borough.

### RESOLVED

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

- (i) Agreed to put on record their recognition of the outstanding work of officers and schools in the way they have responded throughout the pandemic.
- (ii) Endorsed the support provided for children, schools and families during Covid-19

## 32. UPDATE ON MULTI-AGENCY SAFEGUARDING ARRANGEMENTS

The Independent Scrutineer presented the report, which updated on the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership in Solihull, since the last report received in March 2020.

The report updated Members on how the LSCP had had to revise its ways of working, due to the pandemic, with the use of virtual platforms to hold multi-agency meetings. The Board was also informed how, since June 2020 the LSCP had had to complete six Rapid Reviews, which concerned serious incidents where children had been seriously harmed or had died in Solihull.

Members were also updated on how the LSCP's anticipated priorities for 2021/22 were Exploitation; supporting implementation of the All-Age

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Exploitation Reduction Strategy and Neglect; improving outcomes for children and young people.

The Chairman detailed how a member had submitted a number of detailed questions, upon the work of the LSCP, in advance of the meeting. It was explained how it had been agreed for these questions to be shared with the 3 Safeguarding Partners, inviting them to respond.

The Chairman noted it would be the last time the Independent Scrutineer joined a Scrutiny Board meeting, following 4 years in the role – he requested to put on record his thanks to the Independent Scrutineer for all the work he had undertaken on behalf of the Borough.

Members raised the following queries and observations:

- Members highlighted the All-Age Exploitation Reduction Strategy, requesting clarification as to whom this included. They also asked for confirmation regarding the different types of exploitation this Strategy covered.
- The Independent Scrutineer explained how the Strategy covered all types of exploitation – including child sexual exploitation (CSE), as well as criminal exploitation, such as county lines and modern day slavery. There was also a significant focus upon children making the transition into adult services and support. It was also explained how a Safeguarding Adults Review (SAR) had previously been commissioned, following the death of a 20 year old – the findings of this review had underpinned the development of the Strategy.
- Members queried the introduction of the new Exploitation Reduction Procedures and Toolkit.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families detailed how the Exploitation and Missing Team was sited within the Family Support Service, and considered children, young people and families that might require multi-agency or social care support. It was explained how cases were considered by the Solihull Exploitation Panel, who reported to the Exploitation Reduction Board. It was explained how the Assistant Director, as well as the Director of Children's Services and Skills were represented on this Board, to ensure clear oversight and governance arrangements. The Board had recently approved the new Exploitation Toolkit and this was being launched to coincide with the national child exploitation awareness day on 18<sup>th</sup> March. This was being accompanied by the Exploitation Reduction Capability Framework, which was intended to help organisations to assess the training, learning and development needs of their staff.
- Members queried the use of the Graded Care Profile tool, Solihull's endorsed tool for assessment of neglect, by frontline services that worked directly with children and families.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families explained how this tool could be used by any agency working with children, where neglect may be a concern. As part of the development of

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the Neglect Strategy, officers from the Children's Services Directorate and the Communities and Partnerships team were considering how use of the tool could be recorded and monitored. Work had also been undertaken by the LSCP to support the development of a multi-agency performance scorecard. It was noted this scorecard would include indicators for exploitation and neglect – it was anticipated the scorecard would be introduced by the start of the 2021/22 business cycle.

- Members highlighted how the report stated that, since June 2020, there had been a number of serious incidents where children had been seriously harmed or had died in Solihull and requested further information on this.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families detailed how, sadly, 3 children had died during the pandemic, due to significant harm. It was explained how this had been formally reported to and reviewed by the LSCP. The Assistant Director also detailed how there had been 3 other serious incidents, where children had been seriously harmed – again, this had been formally reported to the LSCP. It was noted that reports, from bodies such as the Children's Commissioner, detailed how, tragically, there had been a national increase in the number of children killed or seriously injured during the first sixth months of the pandemic. Members expressed their particular concern about mothers who had children during the pandemic and may not have had the usual levels of face-to-face contact with certain services and wider family members, due to lockdown restrictions.
- A Member questioned the volume of children who had died during the pandemic, as a result of serious harm, explaining how they believed it to be different – it was agreed for these concerns to be investigated by officers as a matter of urgency.
- Members queried the arrangements with the NHS and other agencies to flag up potential safeguarding risks. They also queried at what stage the support arrangements in place for parents were checked.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families explained how there were clear, established arrangements for the NHS and other partners to escalate cases to Children's Social Care, where children had suffered serious injury or harm, or there were concerns about the safety and wellbeing of the child. Partner agencies had continued to work in close collaboration with Children's Social Services, throughout the pandemic, for assessments, Child Protection Plans and Child in Need Plans. In addition, Schools had been supporting vulnerable children throughout the pandemic – this included safeguarding arrangements to track vulnerable children not attending school.

### **RESOLVED**

The Children's Services, Education and Skills Scrutiny Board noted the update on the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership in Solihull, since the last report received in March 2020.



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8.30 pm