

FULL COUNCIL

DECEMBER 2020

REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

1. COUNCIL UPDATE REGARDING DECISIONS

1.1 Purpose of Report

1.2 To advise Members that decision making sessions were held remotely by video meetings on 21st October and 30th November 2020.

1.3 Background

1.3.1 This report highlights some of those decisions which have been made, but not all. Member <http://eservices.solihull.gov.uk/mgInternet/mgListCommittees.aspx?bcr=1>

1.3.2 Attached to this report is a list of decisions made.

1.4 Decisions

1.4.1 At the meeting on 21st October I authorised a period of non-statutory consultation to increase the pupil intake of Cheswick Green Primary School by 210 places from September 2022 in order to accommodate children from building within the village and new housing that is being developed at Blythe Valley. Following failure of a Free School application to receive DfE approval, a feasibility study concluded that Cheswick Green is the only school within a reasonable distance that has scope to expand and where the site can accommodate extension of buildings. The outcome of this initial consultation with parents, other schools and the wider community will be reported at a future meeting and if approved will then move to the statutory consultation phase.

1.4.2 I also approved a new 2020-2024 Placement and Sufficiency Strategy for Looked After Children and Care Experienced Young People. This identifies key priority areas of work including support for children who are cared for being placed with connected carers, and mainstream carers where appropriate and to move to permanent arrangements in a timely way. We will continue efforts to increase the availability of local foster carers to enable more local family based placements and also increase the availability of local residential placements for those children and young people who need a residential placement for a period of time. In addition. The strategy will clarify the housing options for our care experienced young people, particularly by working in partnership with Solihull Community Housing and the Adult Care and Support Directorate.

1.4.3 The meeting on 30th November considered and approved the updated School Organisation Plan 2020/21 which reflected demographic changes based on the latest pupil number census, health data on births and forecasts relating to new housing developments. Rising demand from an increasing birth rate has led to an additional 1,349 permanent primary school places and as reported above, a further 210 are planned at Cheswick Green for new housing at Blythe Valley and the Dairy Mount development. Birth data is reviewed annually and account taken of identified future housing sites ahead of the finalised Local Development Plan. Over the next seven years school rolls are forecast to rise by 6% but most of this can be accommodated within existing capacity as a substantial number of pupils live outside the borough and future places will be filled from within Solihull. Several secondary schools have empty places at present so should be able to absorb foreseeable future growth.

- 1.4.4** There is increased demand for SEND provision and with a 59% rise in EHCP referrals this year, this is likely to continue. As previously reported, a programme is under way to increase SEN provision within the borough and as part of this we have been consulting on proposals to create an Additionally Resourced Centre (ARC) for pupils with Autism at Mill Lodge Primary School and to expand Reynolds Cross Special School. I received the outcome of the consultations which showed a high level of support for both schemes and approved that officers moved to the statutory process for the proposed and much needed provision.
- 1.4.5** An update was provided on progress regarding the planned Free School approved by the DfE for pupils with Autism and associated High Level Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) pupils. This will be operated by the Forward Education Trust which has been appointed by the DfE and has chosen 'The Heights' as the name for the new school. The timetable for completion of the school is also determined by the DfE and whilst we would have wished this to be delivered quickly, I am pleased that instead of 2023 it has been agreed that the school should now open in 2022 and it has also been proposed to increase potential pupil capacity. If demand requires additional places.
- 1.4.6** I considered and noted the Revenue and Capital Monitoring report as at 30th September 2020 and as expected, this illustrated the challenging financial situation resulting from increased service demands. For information I also received the latest performance reports for the range of services and responsibilities across Childrens Services and was pleased that generally these showed that high levels of performance are being maintained and it was particularly pleasing to learn that despite the increase in referrals for Education and Healthcare Plans the percentage completed within the 20 week period had reached 90%, which is higher than that achieved by many councils.

1.5 Council Plan and Priorities

- 1.5.1** The policies, current services and future plans are all designed to support the council Plan and its priorities for children, young people and families, with a particular focus on ensuring equality of opportunity and meeting the needs of vulnerable children and disadvantaged groups.

1.6 Good News and Issues of Interest

- 1.6.1** Solihull has an outstanding record in its care for young people leaving care through the commitment of our 16 plus Team and many continue in touch with team members for many years, even though we no longer have any formal responsibility. This drew considerable praise from Inspectors when we had a focussed Ofsted inspection of the service and a subsequent comment from an official was that 'If I was in care this is the team I would want looking after me'. This record of excellence is very much down to the Leadership of Darren Bishton who has managed this area headed up the team for over 15 years but sadly will be leaving us at Christmas to take up a post as the National Practice Lead with the Catch-22 charity. We are extremely grateful to Darren for the valuable contribution he has made to our Children's Services but more importantly the difference he has made to the lives of so many young people. We of course congratulate him on his new national position and recognition of his knowledge and skills in this area but he will be very much missed.

- 1.6.2** In October I attended the on-line Empathy Summit organised as part of the Care Leavers' Covenant to which Solihull is a signatory. It was hosted by TV presenter Sue Perkins and included uplifting contributions and a moving film from young people who have been in care as well as discussions on creating employment opportunities, apprenticeship and facilitating entry to Higher Education. It is planned to hold further Summits on a regular basis.
- 1.6.3** Following considerable activity over the past year the government has announced a £16.5 million Youth Sector Covid Fund to support youth work activity as well as the promised £1.4 million Youth Initiative Fund. This will be particularly welcomed by the many youth organisations that have been struggling to survive during the Coronavirus restrictions and on whom we depend for delivery of vital services to young people. Having been involved in the campaign as a Trustee/Director of the National Youth Agency I am grateful to Solihull's Julian Knight MP for lobbying to secure release of the Youth Initiative Fund to promote youth work schemes and training.
- 1.6.4** 'Art at the Heart' is a successful series of innovative programmes created by two residents of the borough to help young people to grasp basic concepts in key educational subjects, support pupils with Special Educational Need and Disabilities, promote good mental health and inspire children and young people to achieve success. It has been working with a number of schools and a Saturday Art Club was established at The Core that has proved popular with children and families, but with the onset of the Coronavirus restrictions it is now operating virtually and has attracted support from the Arts Council and a grant from the National Lottery it. It has also been recognised for its works also works to celebrate diversity and encourage community cohesion and I was pleased to learn that Art at the Heart was included in this year's Solihull Community Awards.
- 1.6.5** The number of children in our care continues to rise and at the time of writing has reached 506, the highest number on record. This in part reflects the family pressures that have been exacerbated by the frustrations and stress of the Covid lockdowns and rising referrals are being experienced in most areas across the country. Court restrictions have also limited the number of children that could be discharged from care orders or moved on to connected family placements. The increased numbers places additional workloads on social workers but they have risen to the challenge of ensuring the safety and welfare of children through face to face visits and I am proud of their commitment and efforts that are often above and beyond reasonable expectations.
- 1.6.6** Concerns about neglect and exploitation have been particularly highlighted nationally during the Covid restrictions and is also linked to increased report of Domestic Abuse. At the recent meeting of Solihull Local Safeguarding Children Partnership neglect and exploitation were confirmed as our priority areas for the coming year and these were also the themes discussed in the Joint Development Day held by the LSCP, Adult Safeguarding and Community Safety Partnership. Exploitation has also been announced as an area for Ofsted Targeted Area Inspections and officers are working to ensure that we have the necessary evidence to show that partners are working effectively to identify instances and intervene appropriately..

- 1.6.7** On similar themes there are a number of national and regional initiatives and Government launched a new '[Something's Not Right](#)' campaign on 17th November to help secondary school children who may have suffered a range of harms, such as sexual and physical abuse, during lockdown. It aims to build awareness of the support services available to victims and encourage disclosure of abuse to a trusted adult and has been developed in close collaboration with the NSPCC, Barnardo's, The Children's Society, Internet Watch Foundation and Marie Collins Foundation. The campaign includes social media entries on Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook and a campaign webpage www.childline.org.uk/somethings-not-right that has been developed with Childline and is hosted on the website. The page helps children identify different forms of abuse, signposts a variety of online resources and provides guidance on how to seek support, either from a trusted adult or Childline's services. In addition there are lesson plans for Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 that have been created in collaboration with the PHSE Association, Barnardo's and the NSPCC which focus on children's rights to safety, reinforce key messages and encourage disclosure of abuse.
- 1.6.8** Members will have received an invitation from the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit to an awareness session on Spotting the Signs of County Lines that is being held virtually on 1st December at 5.30 pm or repeated at 10.30 am on 16th December. This is again on the theme of exploitation and intended to help raise awareness following the worrying increase in this criminal activity that is involving vulnerable children and young people. It and also feature the work of the St Giles' Trust and intervention with young people presenting at hospital Accident and Emergency Departments.
- 1.6.9** The Covid-19 epidemic restrictions continue to impact on the delivery of Children's Services by Local Authorities and from discussions with colleagues from other councils it is clear that concerns about the effect of Lockdown on children, young people and their families are similar across the country. The restriction on face to face contact, lack of social interaction and confinement has placed particular strain on parents and most areas have seen a rise in Looked after numbers. That is also something we are experiencing in Solihull, whilst restricted court activity has made discharge and placements within wider families difficult. Our staff across all services have shown tremendous dedication and initiative in maintaining contact and protecting children.
- 1.6.10** The council provided support to children and families in need throughout the autumn half-term break and following the government's recent announcement regarding children entitled to Free School Meals we will be utilising the new funding throughout the Christmas period and considering a scheme for 2021. Details will be provided when the arrangements have been finalised.

1.6 Future Decisions

- 1.6.1** In these times of constantly changing scenarios and increasing demands combined with challenge of the ongoing Covid-19 emergency, the priority will be to ensure that children are safe and that services are maintained despite the financial pressures and additional demands on staff.