

CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION & SKILLS SCRUTINY BOARD - 13
January 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, A Rebeiro, P Thomas, Mrs K Wild and A Adeyemo

Officers: Louise Rees – Director of Children's Services and Skills
Frank McSheffrey – Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families
Anna Stephens – Head of Service, Looked After Children and Adoption
Joel Desous – Head of Service, Referral, Assessment and Child Protection
Shelley Ward – Chief Business Officer for Children's Innovation & Development
Stuart McHale – Children's Services Finance Manager
Joseph Bright – Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were submitted by Councillor McCarthy (Councillor Adeyemo – substitute) and Co-Opted Member Mr B Hall.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR CONFLICTING INTERESTS FROM MEMBERS

There were no declarations of interest.

3. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

There were no questions or deputations.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 3 November 2020, were presented. It was requested for the following amendments to be made:

- That Co-opted Member Mr B Hall be recorded as in attendance.
- That resolution (iii) of agenda item 7 – Update: School Exclusions; Elective Home Education; School Attendance; Part-Time Timetables and Off-Rolling – be amended to read as 'Agreed for the minutes of this meeting, as well as the information submitted by Solihull Parent Carer Voice and the North Solihull Additional Needs Support Group to be shared with the Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills.'

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record, subject to the amendments detailed above.

5. CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING ARRANGEMENTS AND THE FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICE

The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families presented the report, which informed the Board of the challenges and learning from the delivery of children's

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social care during the pandemic, as well as the implications for staff wellbeing. The following points were raised:

- For Solihull Children's Service, they had decided not to introduce many of the 'flexibilities' permitted by Government at the start of the pandemic – they had continued to provide an ongoing safeguarding service via a combination of both face-to-face and virtual support.
- There had been excellent working across Directorates to ensure appropriate PPE and guidance was issued to staff.
- The Department of Education provided laptops and routers, which staff were able to distribute to vulnerable children and young people across the Borough.
- There had been a significant increase in the numbers of children in care, as well as a rise in complexity of needs. These trends were reflected both regionally and nationally.
- This situation was further exacerbated by children not leaving care as planned, due to the impacts of Covid-19 restrictions, including upon court processes.
- In regards to impact on staff during Covid-19, many employees found it difficult to maintain a boundary between home and work life. Many staff found a number of aspects of their work took longer than normal, such as the challenges around conducting visits.
- Further funding was secured to provide additional agency Social Workers for the most affected teams.
- Managers had increased the volume of one-to-one supervisory meetings held, in order to provide greater support to staff. Additional psychological support had been arranged for staff, where required.
- Social Workers were offered the opportunity to take a longer break over Christmas and New Year, with managers and agency workers covering the two days staff would normally be in over this period.

Members were also provided an update on the ILACS action plan – specific details of progress against each of the ten recommendations were provided in the action plan included as part of the agenda papers.

Members raised the following queries and observations:

- Members highlighted the ILACS action plan update, noting a number of deadlines had been identified for November and December 2020 – they queried whether it had been possible to adhere all of to these. The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families explained that, due the pressures stemming from Covid-19, it hadn't been possible in every instance. Where necessary, new deadlines had been identified and these were being regularly monitored by the ILACS action plan cell.
- Members raised the provision of laptops and 4G routers for vulnerable children and young people – they queried how many had been provided by the Department of Education and whether they had all been distributed.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families confirmed they had had enough laptops and routers to distribute to all the identified vulnerable children and young people. It was noted there were some spares, so these were offered to children placed with adopters within Solihull. They were also monitoring all newly identified vulnerable children and young people, to establish whether they needed this provision also.
- Members noted the new IT system that was introduced just prior to the initial lockdown – they queried the employees' experiences here.

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- The Head of Service for Looked After Children and Adoption explained how Liquid Logic, the new IT system, went live in March 2020. Training had been provided prior to this and, originally, it had been planned to provide supporting floor walkers for the first month. This help was provided virtually following the introduction of the first lockdown. Within each team a Liquid Logic lead had been identified, for further support. It was also intended to provide mop-up sessions, for any outstanding queries.
- Members highlighted how the lockdown led to delays in court hearings – they queried whether this had led to a delay in care orders and, in turn, impacted on the completion of Section 7 reports.
- The Head of Service for Referral, Assessment and Child Protection confirmed that, when the first lockdown was introduced, the Courts had to readjust their ways of working – as part of this they prioritised emergency hearings, meaning the Council did not encounter any delay in the issuing of Interim Care Orders. Emergency orders were prioritised first over long term orders – this meant the Council was not able to complete and implement long term care proceedings in line with the expected timeframes prior to Covid-19. This impacted on the completion of Section 7 reports also. Following the Courts introduction of new working practices, in particular greater virtual working, the Council was now able to complete these long term orders and Section 7 reports in greater adherence with the expected timescales. Considerable work by staff had been undertaken to help address the backlog of long term orders and cases that had been caused by the initial lockdown.
- Members raised the significant pressures Social Workers and Family Support Workers faced. It was emphasised this was exacerbated by increased workloads, whilst home working impacted on the boundary between work and home life. They queried the measures in place to help protect and support staff wellbeing.
- The Head of Service for Referral, Assessment and Child Protection emphasised how they had extremely dedicated Social Workers, who were very committed to their roles, at times to their own detriment. He detailed how they recognised, as managers, they had a duty of care to their staff – they had emphasised messages about the importance of taking breaks, as well as drawing a line between professional and home lives. He explained how they had also recently re-issued a wellbeing protocol to staff. Managers now held one-to-one meetings with their staff on at least a weekly basis - prior to Covid-19 these meetings had been held one a month. Colleagues had also supported each other, through the use of WhatsApp groups. It was noted how some of the Board Members had held a virtual meeting with Social Workers and Family Support Workers who reported how they felt well supported by their managers throughout the pandemic.
- Members flagged up how the report explained that the risks associated with the potential failure to meet statutory duties regarding children in need of help and protection and those in care and care experienced young people had already been identified on the Council risk register and it was officer's opinion they were being adequately managed. Members sought assurances as to how this risk register was managed.
- The Director of Children's Services and Skills explained how this risk was held at the highest level of the risk register, where it was reviewed corporately, by the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). As part of this, they reviewed all the actions that supported the fulfilment of this statutory duty, taking into account the likelihood and impact. This risk was reviewed regularly by the Directorate Leadership Team, in addition to CLT. The Director of Children's Services and

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Skills confirmed the Council had not failed to meet any of its statutory responsibilities for Children's Social Care, despite the considerable pressures of Covid-19. Alongside other Senior Council Officers, the Director had met with the Senior HMI for the region – the Inspector was reassured by the information provided by Officers concerning the fulfilment of this statutory responsibility.

- Members raised queries concerning how the report advised that children had not been seen by other services due to lockdown, especially early in the pandemic, meaning concerns were often critical at the point of referral.
- The Head of Service for Referral, Assessment and Child Protection re-emphasised that, at the beginning of the pandemic, they had decided not to instigate many of the flexibilities permitted by Central Government, due to the nature of their work in children's services. It was noted how partner agencies, including schools and health colleagues, had been unable to continue all services, due to lockdown restrictions, staff re-deployment, as well as the ongoing Covid-19 risks. He explained how they increased the support to the most vulnerable groups of children. For instance, the statutory duty in regards to children on a Child Protection Plan was for visits to be undertaken once every 28 days – here, officers held visits every 14 days and, in some Child Protection cases, they undertook weekly visits. Part of the rationale here was to help offset the impact of these children not coming into the usual levels of contact with other service providers.
- Members flagged up further challenges experienced during Covid-19 restrictions, noting how the report advised that officers encountered challenges in completing assessments due to social distancing requirements, the wearing of masks and lack of safe spaces away from the family home to have discussions with vulnerable individuals. Members queried what solutions had been found for these challenges and whether any were outstanding.
- The Head of Service for Referral, Assessment and Child Protection explained that, whilst there had been many challenges, Children's Services offices had remained open during the pandemic. Rooms had been set aside within the Bluebell Centre to act as virtual court rooms for Social Workers, to participate in court hearings. Agreement had also been established for Social Workers to use Council buildings for confidential meetings, where required. He confirmed it would be beneficial for Children's Services to have more spaces to meet with families – here they were actively working with colleagues to identify further spaces. Once identified, these spaces would be risk assessed and taken forward for use.
- The Head of Service for Looked After Children and Adoption explained that Chelmunds Place had remained open during the pandemic for Children's Service staff. This building had been used for face-to-face meetings, particularly with care experienced young people, as well as newly arrived unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- In regards to the provision of laptops and routers, a Member queried how many requests were made and how many were provided.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families confirmed that over 300 laptops and 150 routers were ordered. These were distributed to all children and young people who were identified as needing them. There were still remaining laptops that were being distributed to further vulnerable children.
- A Member detailed how they understood that Liquid Logic went live in August 2019. They also flagged up previous reporting on the introduction of Liquid Logic to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board. They queried whether they had been any presenting issues with the IT system and training beyond six weeks.

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- It was confirmed that Liquid Logic went live for Children's Services in March 2020, whilst it was introduced earlier for the Adult Care and Support Directorate. The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families also explained that, at the point of reporting to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board, Liquid Logic had been introduced in accordance with the implementation plan, including in regards to the ICT support and training. Covid-19 impacted almost immediately at the point of 'go live.' As previously explained, it had been originally planned to provide supporting floor walkers at this stage – due to lockdown this support was provided virtually, in addition to remote support from ICT colleagues. It was emphasised that, despite the pandemic, they will still managing the delivery of Liquid Logic in accordance with the original implementation plan.
- Members raised the issue of care proceedings, querying the average length of proceedings, as well as the proportion completed within 26 weeks.
- The Head of Service for Referral, Assessment and Child Protection detailed how the courts monitored the completion rate, as part of the quality assurance arrangements. They met with the court super users on a quarterly basis to review this data. He explained that, prior to Covid-19, Solihull had been completing proceeding at an average between 28 and 32 weeks, about which they were extremely proud. It was noted there were exceptions to the 26 weeks, which were considered by the courts. During Covid-19 they hadn't yet received the latest data on care proceedings – it was confirmed this could be investigated and, if possible, the data shared with Members. It was explained how courts proceedings were impacted by restrictions during the first lockdown, where emergency hearings were prioritised. Virtual hearings were held from June onwards; however Children's Services staff had to undertake a significant volume of work to help address the backlog of cases this created.
- A Member asked the current rate of sickness absence amongst the teams within Children's Social Care services.
- The Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families explained that, based on data from Human Resources, it was just under 10 days per worker, for the whole of Children's Services, taking into account both long term and short term absences. There had been instances of staff being affected by Covid-19, or having to self-isolate due to family members. Where possible, staff had been willing to move between teams to ensure work pressures could be effectively managed. In regards to the latest available data for front line Social Workers, it was confirmed this could be circulated to Members outside of the meeting.
- Members highlighted the 23.5% increase in the number of local children needing to be looked after by the Authority since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as the urgent removals of children who circumstances had become unsafe. They emphasised their concerns here, particularly in regards to youngest groups of children, who may not have been seen by other services, including Health Visitors. Members queried what proportion of this 23.5% increase concerned children under the age of 2.
- The Head of Service for Referral, Assessment and Child Protection explained there had almost been a 100% increase in the number of children under the age of 2 needing to be looked after by the Local Authority. It was explained how detailed analysis of all the cases would have to be undertaken to identify the underlying reasons for this increase – it was confirmed the results of this analysis could be shared with Board members. Members were also informed that all instances of children being subject to significant injury were reported to the Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership for further review.

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RESOLVED

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

- (i) Received the update on Children's safeguarding arrangements and the Family Support Service.
- (ii) Noted the increase in safeguarding demand and complexity of need, as well as the significant rise in the numbers of children in care.
- (iii) Noted the significant impact upon staff throughout Covid-19 and the serious challenges they face. Members requested to put on record their thanks to all Children's Social Care staff for all their commitment and work throughout the pandemic.
- (iv) Requested that Public Health provide a written update to the Scrutiny Board, detailing the updated work of the health visiting service in Solihull.
- (v) Noted the progress on the delivery of the ILACS action plan and requested for a further update to be scheduled for the first meeting of the next municipal year.

6. MTFS UPDATE – BUDGET STRATEGY 2021/22 – 2023/24

The Children's Services and Skills Finance Manager presented the report, which sought Members' views on the budget proposals identified for 2021/22 to 2023/24 within the Children, Education and Skills Cabinet Portfolio, to go forward to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board and the Full Cabinet in February 2021.

The Children's Services and Skills Finance Manager explained how, for that year, the focus of the strategy had been on reset and recovery, following the considerable impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. As part of this, Cabinet Portfolios had not been asked to propose savings to fulfil a corporate target, instead the focus had been upon identifying options for mitigating service pressures. The Budget Strategy Group, as part of their review of the MTFS, acknowledged the pressure in respect of Children's Social Care placements and had made recommendations for additional funding to be made within the MTFS.

Members were informed of the challenges and pressures facing the portfolio, as well as the proposed mitigations, as set out in Appendix A. The Children's Services, Education and Skills Finance Manager also detailed the on-going work for the delivery of the Recovery Plan to support the High Needs Block – here, additional funding of £2.5m had been allocated by government for 2021/22. Members were advised that, for the Troubled Families programme, the continuation of funding had been confirmed for one further year, into 2021/22, as part of the recent Central Government settlement. It was noted that individual Authority allocations were not yet known. In addition, the settlement had also allocated a further social care grant which equated to some £295,000 for the Portfolio in 2021/22. This would support the on-going service pressures.

Members were invited to consider the proposed fees and charges for the Portfolio, as set out in Appendix B. The report and Appendix A also set out the various impacts of Covid-19 on the portfolio's financial position, as well as additional funding allocated from Central Government to help mitigate various pressures.

Members queried that, if the mitigations as set out in budget proposals for the Portfolio weren't achieved, how any deficit would be supported into 2023/24. The Children's

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Services and Skills Finance Manager emphasised that, as part of the MTFS, the Council had an established budget strategy reserve – the purpose of this was to support Portfolios' budgetary positions over time as circumstances changed.

The Director of Children's Services and Skills expressed her thanks to the Resources Directorate and the Financial Operations and Planning team for all their support and commitment in preparing the Budget Strategy and particularly for taking account of the significant pressures currently facing the Children's Services and Skills Directorate.

RESOLVED

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

- (i) Considered and noted the pressures and mitigating actions set out in Appendix A.
- (ii) Considered and noted the budget proposals outlined in the report.
- (iii) Considered and noted the schedule of fees and charges proposed for 2021/22.

End time of meeting: 7.40 pm