

Minutes of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

22 June, 2020 at 5.00 pm
Virtual Meeting

Present: Councillor Singh (Chair);
Councillor Preece (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Ashman, Carmichael, Chidley,
Costigan, Z Hussain, McVittie, Millar, Phillips,
Shackleton and C Ward-Lewis (Co-opted
member).

Apologies: Councillor and T Majid (Co-opted member).

In attendance: Lesley Hagger, Executive Director Children's
Services;
Chris Ward, Director of Education, Skills and
Employment;
L Paino, Head Teacher, Crocketts School.

6/20 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2020 be approved as a correct record.

7/20 Chairs Announcements

The Chair welcomed members and officers to the first virtual meeting of the Board. The Chair proposed that an additional meeting of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board be arranged in July 2020 to consider two items:

- Sandwell Children's Trust - monitoring report for 2019-20;
- Home - schooling arrangements in Sandwell (request of the Cabinet Member Best Start in Life).

Resolved

- (1) that a meeting of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board be arranged in July 2020.

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8/20

Children's Services and Education Update and Phased return of pupils to Sandwell schools

The Chair welcomed the Executive Director Children's Services and Director of Education Skills and Employment and thanked them, and all staff for their hard work and dedication under very difficult circumstances. The Chair welcomed the Headteacher of Crockett's Primary School who had joined the meeting to share her experience of managing her role during the pandemic.

The Board received a presentation from the Executive Director Children's Services and the Director of Education Employment and Skills to update the Board about children's services and education services and the phased return of pupils to Sandwell schools.

The Executive Director gave an overview of the increased communication and information in children's services during the Covid-19 Pandemic. She highlighted that good communication and timely information had been vital to manage well during this period.

The Board noted that:

- the Children's Trust and Council had met daily on the Sitrep Board and that safeguarding partners had met weekly to share business continuity plans, to ensure changes were monitored and that nothing fell through the gaps;
- joint partnership campaigns had been run to react to situations and ensure safety and wellbeing of young people and Directors had met with young people from the SHAPE programme;
- work with partners on surge planning was taking place to be ready to respond to expected surge in cases when coming out of lockdown.

In relation to additional focus and work with and planning for vulnerable children the Board noted that:

- there were daily meetings with Vulnerable Childrens Partnership Group and every day there had been contact made with every vulnerable child in Sandwell;
- there were more than 700 shielded children - children in care, those with childcare protection plans, children in need, children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and any child the Council or Headteachers may be concerned about;

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- detached youth work had continued and youth workers had met with new groups of young people, more of this work would continue;
- in relation to strategic commissioning, whilst contacts to social care front door had reduced, in some areas of work there had been an increase in demand such as mental health support, domestic abuse support and some other services;
- there had been weekly meetings with DfE and Ofsted to ensure effective monitoring and accountability, work with Regional DfE representative and to share and learn from practice elsewhere.

In relation to the Sandwell Children's Trust response to Children and Families during Covid-19 pandemic the Board noted that:

- Leadership and governance: there were daily meetings to ensure that everything was in place and the interface with partners was working well;
- core practice had not changed, but measures were in place if they needed to implement change. Remote working had shown new and innovative work moving forward;
- all inspections were on hold, there would be a monitoring visit in Autumn 2020 and next full inspection 2021;
- working relationships with partners was good;
- increased management oversight and quality assurance was in place to ensure children were being protected;
- reset and recovery plan was in place.

In relation to education arrangements, schools opening, examinations and attainment and key issues the Board noted that:

- initially confused and contradictory guidelines had been received from Central Government to interpret and implement. Officers were receiving information from DFES at 9-10pm at night and interpreting to share in schools the next day;
- schools had worked hard to implement guidance which was changing on a daily basis, more than 170 pieces of guidance had been received and more was expected;
- 75% of nursery provision had been closed and many of the staff furloughed, however since 1 June provision was starting to open again, as parents were going back to work, it was not yet at full capacity;
- schools had never really closed during lockdown, they had opened for vulnerable children and key worker children, as well as supporting all pupils to support learning at home through learning packs, on line learning and supporting parents;

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- from 1 June schools could open for wider groups of pupils. The Executive Heads Group had met to determine guidance for all schools and academies and to consider how to open reception, year 1 and year 6. Schools and parents were written to explain what was happening;
- schools had to carry out risk assessments and roll out PPE. The Council provided a starter PPE kit and from then on schools had to provide their own. Schools had to keep staff and children safe within government guidelines;
- managing space logistically in bubbles was best dealt with by the school to make the decision. Government guidance was up to 15 in a bubble but realistically only 6-10 pupils would fit in classrooms;
- the Council was supporting children's learning and play at home, including provision of 1586 laptops for vulnerable children across the borough, also Information Technology (IT) for year 10 pupils who were disadvantaged;
- examinations and assessment had been cancelled this year and pupils would be marked on the course work and estimated grades. There would be opportunity to retake GCSE and A levels in the autumn;
- services were adapting in line with guidance and technology such as Connexions, Employment and Skills, Admissions Appeals. Communicating the changes was vital and there were letters daily to Head Teachers to explain the changes.
- A number of assumptions were highlighted - increased elective home education (EHE), increased pupil anxiety/school refusals, widening attainment gap.

The Board noted the phased return to school data:

- the uptake had been quite low and that there had been a variable response from school to school and class to class;
- not all schools were able to offer all 3 year groups, vulnerable children and critical workers children places;
- the uptake percentages were changing on a daily basis as people returned to work and restrictions were changing;
- secondary school year groups were welcomed back last week – year 10 and year 12 have 25% allowed in at any one time. There had been 60 % pupils taking up places staggered over a week;
- 1100 pupils initially in school, after 1 June up to 4300 and this figure was rising daily.

The Board noted the verbal presentation from Head teacher Mrs L Paino about her experience during lockdown from a delivery

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perspective. She advised of the steps and learning approach taken as follows:

- For the first few weeks of lockdown staff were updating policies and concentrating on using the time to catch up paperwork;
- She recognised a need to pick up pastorally and for staff to reach out to pupils;
- there was guidance to interpret and problems with vouchers, parents not getting money for food;
- staff started preparing food parcels and home visits – delivering food and homework packs;
- staff gave additional support for parents and young people learning from home (on-line and teachers sitting outside houses delivering lessons);
- started to consider how schools would re-open;
- announced that reception, year 1 and 6 would open (nursery not statutory);
- had to prepare staff returning to work, staff wellbeing, some had been back in school, some had not. Staff wellbeing put back in place, zoom/Teams meetings. Some staff shielding, some emotional or have young families – need to work on mental wellbeing of staff;
- had to get staff back up and active, a range of team building events and activities to raise morale;
- needed to plan how to open with the range of issues impacting on each school it was useful to be on the Head Teachers Board to hear what others were doing;
- needed to look at risks, staff, space, staff who were shielding, teaching assistants role in the class, those who could not come into class, playground/outside duties (reasonably vulnerable) and those that had to work from home;
- new way of working with new teams: a jigsaw – different parts that fit to provide a new normal
 - Classroom
 - Playground/outside
 - Providing lessons on-line from home

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- Pastoral care – food parcels, allegations of domestic violence, home visit – a bit of a jigsaw – current phase - finding a normal

The Chair expressed thanks to the Headteacher for taking time to share her experiences and welcomed the opportunity to hear from someone delivering services to keep education and schools working for young people and their parents under unprecedented times. The Vice-Chair found the presentation to be both useful and informative in nature.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions on the presentation:

from Councillor Preece:

- The Executive Director advised that the Chief Executive of Sandwell Children's Trust (The Trust) had attended all but one of the daily Sitrep meetings and was able to contribute and take away useful intelligence, the Trust has found it very helpful. The Trust will be using the same reset and recovery planning template as the Council;
- The Executive Director advised that young people and families had provided lovely feedback where the Council had provided food, toys, medicine, games and resource packs. Families had indicated there was some worry about going back to school and what that will be like. Some families had indicated they liked extra family time, particularly those furloughed but many families had said that they had struggled money/food wise. The Albion foundation had provided evening meals for some families. Young People had said they were really anxious about exams and school work missed, they missed friends and wondered what would happen about resitting exams. There was further feedback from older young people that there was potential for self-harm, the Council was addressing this through communication with schools, colleges, parents and families, providing newsletters, family fact sheets, young people forum and using practical steps as well, such as the CCG agreed to put more funding into young people counselling course.

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- The Director Education Skills and Employment advised that PPE was provided in schools initially - sanitiser, shields, face masks and gowns. Government guidance was that they did not have to use it unless there are specific needs or specific reasons. The Council doubled up PPE packs to special schools. The Council has provided a PPE contractors list to schools which list PPE at a reasonable price. In the last few months the schools have had reduced outgoings due to partial closure.
- The Director advised that social distancing was potentially reducing from 2 m to 1m and that the distance would impact on how the staff operate, however it was very difficult to stop children gravitating toward each other. He advised that should change be made on 4 July there would be 2 weeks before term closes for schools to adjust.

from Councillor Costigan:

- The Executive Director confirmed that detached youth workers were allocated in every town and where there was not a park, street activities were taking place. She advised that youth workers had been directed to a number of serious issues. It was acknowledged that Ward Members should be made aware that detached youth workers were operating in the Towns and advised that any issues could be referred to her to respond.
- The Director confirmed that the priority list for children with school places available was vulnerable children, children of critical workers, reception, year 1 and year 6, depending on space.
- The Director confirmed that 1586 laptops had been delivered and that 200 more were expected to be distributed for disadvantaged children in year 10.

from Councillor Shackleton:

- The Director indicated that it was absolutely right to point out the inequality in schools, in Sandwell the disadvantage was a wider gap. He advised that some schools went into the new way of working well prepared and other schools have had to develop IT learning platforms quickly. A good outcome of this situation is that all schools will have developed IT and looking how support can be

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provided. Another good thing to come from the situation is that schools are supporting each other;

- The Director advised that had the Government given the option to schools, the primary schools would have identified year 5 to return alongside years 10 and 12.
- The Executive Director agreed that it was absolutely right to look at vulnerability in a wider context, not just in terms of school meals take up. This Council does look at the wider gap and it was suggested that scrutiny look at the topic of child vulnerability data at a future meeting. The Executive Director informed the Board that she Chaired the ACEs programme in Sandwell and that Members would find the Trusted Adult training and trauma informed practice module very useful when considering vulnerability in the wider context.

from Councillor Z Hussain:

- The Director advised that the number of laptops shared for digital learning does not equal the number of disadvantaged young people identified. He confirmed that although not ideal, some family groups would have access to a shared laptop and that there may be a lot of families not on the radar, some who are struggling or have old technology or just a mobile phone. There would be loan laptops available from the school and the schools have been asked to find out what the gap is and to use pupil premium money to help individuals. There is no confirmation that all children are engaged in some sort of digital learning, but it can be said that it is better than it was.
- The Director advised that the remaining 40% of young people in year 10, who are not returning to school, will be sent learning packs or work online. There are some concerns that not all young people will be completing the work set and there are greater concerns that the attainment gap is getting wider.
- The Executive Director clarified that the 700 children referred to are 'shielded children', those with life limiting illness and that the vulnerable children's group was much broader, about 6000 children. She advised that Vulnerable Childrens Group meets daily, and she receives actions after each meeting. The Executive Director highlighted that her biggest concern was the vulnerable

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children the Council does not know about and that there will be some hidden harm that we cannot see.

- The Director confirmed that schools would have management of the laptops and would agree terms with the parents.

from Councillor McVittie:

- The Director of Education Skills and Employment confirmed that the PPE calculations standard was the same level as the Government and that PPE was of good quality.
- The Director advised that teachers want to go back in the classroom but unfortunately some would not be able to immediately, depending on the risk assessments that they will have to go through. Those shielding or at medium risk would have to operate in a certain way, which means being told what they can and cannot do, including face to face teaching.

from Councillor Millar:

- The Executive Director welcomed the recognition of the crucial role that schools were playing in sourcing and distributing food parcels to those in need and confirmed that the food distribution was much wider than those entitled to school meals. She highlighted how important, whether in coronavirus or not, to provide food to enable a child to learn. The Director Education Skills and Employment agreed completely, adding that the pressure put on the Government over the summer was telling. People had lost jobs and as a consequence, there was an increase in free school meals. The amount of parcels delivered by schools had doubled the total of food packages distributed by the Council.

The Director congratulated the schools and the way they have mobilised all of the community and acted as a distribution hub, they have demonstrated how communities can work together. Further to this it has demonstrated the need for a local authority (LA) and a Council that has invested in an LA, which has reacted to the need for action and has co-ordinated schools and academy groups, they have all worked together and shared resources.

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from Councillor Chidley:

- The Director confirmed that full size and re-usable visors were included in the PPE pack and the Executive Director clarified that thermometers were not included because they were not helpful as an indicator of Coronavirus.

from Councillor Rajbir Singh

- The Executive Director confirmed that there would be no Ofsted inspection in September 2020 and advised that interestingly performance of children's services had improved. She confirmed that staff sickness was not bad and that this may reflect a better work life balance. Future working practices may be something to look at. She confirmed the trajectory for improvement in Children's Services was in the right direction.

The Director advised that the widening attainment gap and increased pupil anxiety/mental health support information had been released by the Government. The headlines indicated catch up plans and funding - £650m to schools across the country and £350 towards tutoring/mentoring projects (£80 per head). The Council was waiting for further details of this.

The Board noted that the Council will support schools getting pupils back to school - to take measures they need to work with young people, to make sure they are ready and in a learning frame of mind, before launching into normal lessons.

The Board noted that children's services and education services, schools and academies were expecting to see a surge in requests for support, advice and training, in relation to children in need, at the beginning of term.

9/20

Youth Facilities Scrutiny Review Report

The Chair of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board introduced the Youth Facilities Working Group report as Chair of the Working Group. The Chair thanked the Working Group Members for

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their contribution and thanked officers who had supported the review.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer outlined the approach that had been used to carry out the review, highlighting that engagement and collaborative working had worked well and highlighted the following for members attention:

- the Working Group wanted to look at current levels of provision across Sandwell but more importantly look at the young people themselves and what their needs and wants were;
- that the work would align to the vision and how that is being reshaped and adjusted in light of current circumstances;
- that some of the evidence gathered needed to be considered in light of the reset and recovery plan;
- that members and the core officer team had worked well together and this method of working is one to take forward;
- that recommendations are focussed on how to improve the youth offer in Sandwell, make best use of resource and to link into regional initiatives and national drivers.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer outlined the recommendations and the reasoning for them based on the evidence gathered, findings and conclusions of the working group.

The Executive Director highlighted the two main successes of the review process were that the feedback from youth workers, young people and parents was consistent, they welcomed that Councillors really wanted to hear what they wanted to say about youth facilities in Sandwell and they felt that there was integrity, a genuine interest and drive to make things happen.

The Executive Director advised that the review began no one could have known that Coronavirus was around the corner and as the Council moved to reset and recovery planning there was a real opportunity to take some of the recommendations forward thinking about Council buildings and how the Council includes the voice of young people in Sandwell.

The Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life welcomed the report and advised that she had given feedback to an early draft of the report. She felt the recommendations were very good but that available resources had not been fully considered. The Cabinet Member suggested that young people should be requested to prioritise the

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recommendations in the report to ensure they understood that choices had to be made, taking into consideration the resources available for youth facilities.

The Vice-Chair echoed that the report and recommendations were useful moving forward and that he was pleased to see the recommendation to include young people in discussions at Town Deal Boards in the covering report. He requested assurance that the recommendations would be tracked and reported back on.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer gave assurance that there would be a monitoring and evaluation process built into in the new approach for scrutiny and that monitoring of outcomes and actions would also take place as part of the process. He identified the link to the Towns Fund as a real opportunity to take recommendations forward and make a difference.

The recommendations were moved by the Chair and seconded. On being put to the vote members voted unanimously in favour and it was:-

Resolved:

- (1) That Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board approve the Youth Facilities Scrutiny Review Working Group report and refer recommendations to Cabinet;
- (2) Note the Review Process Evaluation Summary and refer comments to the Scrutiny Review Working Group;
- (3) Recommend to Cabinet that young people are represented on Town Deal Boards and that young people are consulted on the development of Town Investment Plans in Summer 2020.

(Meeting ended at 6.41 pm)

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