

Minutes of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

20 July, 2020 at 5.00 pm
Virtual Meeting

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

Apologies: C Ward-Lewis (Co-opted member).

In attendance: Councillor Underhill Cabinet Member for Best Start
in Life;
Lesley Hagger, Executive Director Children's
Services;
Jacqui Smith, Chair Sandwell Children's Trust
(SCT);
Frances Craven, Chief Executive SCT;
Tara Malik, Director of Resources SCT;
Pauline Turner, Director of Operations SCT;
Sue Moore, Group Head Education Support
Services.

10/20 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 22 June
2020 be approved as a correct record.

11/20 **Chairs Announcements**

The Vice-Chair announced that Councillor Rajbir Singh, Chair of the
Childrens Services and Education Scrutiny Board had been
appointed Cabinet Member - Skills and Employment with effect from
15 July 2020 and that he had resigned his position as Chair of this
Board. The Board wished Councillor Singh well in his new role.

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The Board noted that Councillor Liam Preece, Vice-Chair would be acting Chair until a new appointment was made at Council.

12/20 Sandwell Childrens Trust Update

The Chair welcomed representatives from Sandwell Children's Trust to the meeting. The Board received a presentation from the Chair and Chief Executive of Sandwell Childrens Trust to advise Members how the Children's Trust had worked during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Board noted that the presentation detailed how operations had adjusted and of the impact through this period, the progress that had been made on improvements to quality and some of the challenges of the work the Trust was doing now to recover closer to normal business. In addition, the Chair SCT advised that it was estimated there would be a surge in demand for children's services when schools returned in September.

The Board acknowledged that should the Trust have faced this disruption 18 months ago it would have been more challenging, but that the Trust now had a stable management team and had made considerable progress in the quality of services being offered, as recognised by Ofsted. The Trust had kept in close contact with the Council, the Department for Education and with the Chair of the Improvement Board and the Trust Board had been impressed how the leadership of the Trust had faced challenge and done what it needed to do.

The Chair of the Trust presented slides relating to:

- The key principles applied to inform decision making and the Trust's Business Continuity arrangements;
- Leadership and Governance;
- The impact of Covid-19;
- Changes to Core Practice;
- Increased Management Oversight and Quality Assurance;
- Relationship with Partners;
- Impact on future inspection outcomes;

The Chief Executive of the Trust presented slides relating to Performance:

- Key data: contacts, social care referrals, Domestic Violence notifications, assessments and visits;
- Visiting our children;

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- Quality assurance activities during the pandemic;
- Other key information and observations;
Improvement programme:
- Eight Improvement Priorities;
- Progress pre-covid-19;
- Areas of continued development;
- Improvement - Inspections;
- Recovery and surge planning;
- How we will address a surge;
- Opportunities.

The Chair thanked the Trust for the presentation, there followed a questions session.

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

Response to Councillor Costigan:

- The Chair of the Trust advised that there were concerns about the impact on demand for services when schools go back in September. The Trust had concerns about the increase of cases of domestic violence (DV) and that despite efforts to carry out visits virtually or otherwise children who were potentially at risk were more away from the eyes of professionals, whether in school or by social work visits. In normal visits check-ups and observation of the risks would have taken place, it was likely that there would be an impact.
- The Trust was concerned about the amount of work staff were putting in, they were tired, and they were being asked to continue with that level of work and respond to other ways of working. The Trust was very aware of staff wellbeing and had kept in touch and supported staff.
- The Trust gave assurance that planning was good, that different scenarios had been looked at carefully and plans were in place to deal with most scenarios, particularly if there were low levels of staffing. Partnership relationships had been built up and senior leadership team stepped up to the mark. There was confidence that good leaders respond well to crisis and that the senior management team had responded extremely well to this situation.

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- The Trust Management Board had the data they needed to know where the problems were and to be confident.
- There were concerns that this has cost money, the Trust had kept a separate budget line to identify costs that had come about as a result of Covid-19. The Council had also made clear that where there was money available for Covid-19 some would be passed to the Trust to support Children's Services.
- Plans were visited daily, the Chief Executive SCT participated in the daily Covid-19 response meetings which all linked into the business continuity plans. There had been weekly reviews which also fed into the Covid-19 plan at the Directorate meetings.
- Staff representative group had helped shape communications to staff and all staff were sent briefing about risks, ways of working and anything else relevant. The recovery group met twice a week and had action plan in place. Surge planning would be reviewed every 2 weeks. There had been daily dashboards and weekly data available but staffing resource was under pressure.
- In terms of the youth service, the service had, in the early days, delivered food packages to vulnerable families and homeless people or people facing eviction. Arrangements had been made for young people moving into independence and shielding for older foster carers.
- In regard to looked after children, some had attended school depending on shielding requirements. The Trust worked closely with families to build contact and monitor, and the Board was reassured that the Trust was working closely with health partners.

Response to Cllr Shackleton

- Many agency workers had worked for the Trust for some time and Sandwell continued to inform social workers of the benefits of permanency and the 12 reasons to work in Sandwell. Recruitment was moving in the right direction, but there were problems and it was recognised that the retention of social worker was as important as the recruitment. The Trust continued to work with social workers, to hold onto them by looking after their wellbeing and through support and training.

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- In relation to quality assurance and monthly audits the Trust advised that audits were not just based on data, face to face meetings were also carried out and checks on the quality of work.
- Virtual meetings were working well for the Trust and it was considering how to adopt these new ways of working. Social workers had been encouraged to make a note of the conversations held on the file and dip sampling was taking place to check that conversations were happening directly with families.

Response to Councillor Millar

- The Trust Board leadership structure was made up of executive and non-executive Members. Initially the Trust had inherited a high turnover of staff the management structure had been more stable since the appointment of permanent Directors and gradually that was becoming more stable moving down the structure. The Chief Executive agreed to circulate the current structure chart to members.

Response to Councillor Z Hussain

- The Chief Executive advised that when dealing with vulnerabilities the increase in contact for children and families was important, specifically for where a contact order was in place to have supervised contact. The Trust was working to prepare the supervised contact area, cleaning toys and keeping the space clean after each use. It would be a reduced service, but it would be up and running in a couple of weeks.
- The daily dashboard covered all children data, particularly children the Trust was most worried about. The Chief Executive SCT advised that there were concerns about recruitment and retention of social workers in relation to the surge and the fact that people had been working hard and would be asked to work harder still. The Trust would do all it could to keep and support staff through the surge. The new ways of virtual working were going well, a SWOT analysis showed they were working well in certain areas, however some social workers had indicated that they felt isolated, in summary virtual working worked for some and not for others.
- There were 2 different types of family time, there was supervised contact in the Hollies, where there was a lot of work to get

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buildings up and running again. Social workers were carrying out WhatsApp calls, foster carers were taking videos for moms and dads to share photograph or videos of their children crawling, taking first steps etc. to maintain virtual contact. All families had some form of contact depending on need. Community contact was now opening up where appropriate, there was a priority to get the visits to prepare for court hearing up and running.

- In relation to audits and 'near misses' the Trust advised that there had been some poor practice and some outstanding practice, all performance was monitored by managers. If poor practice had been identified in the audit there was a process to escalate the matter.
- There had been an increase in the number of families that would not have come to the Trusts attention if it had not been for Covid-19. Some families had been hard hit, financially and emotionally and there had been some significant issues, families under stress had not managed well.
- The Trust had not experienced pre-Covid referral levels for the first few months of lockdown, because a large majority of referrals came through schools, but referrals then started to increase again. The response had been a whole Trust response and there had to be a huge thank you to all staff who have done a great job in very challenging circumstances.

Response to Cllr Millar

- There were around 220 social workers in Sandwell with an average of 19.5 cases per worker. There was a range of experience and the cases varied considerably in relation to complexity and length of time.
- Each case would take the time it needed to take, when a young person came into the service they spent 2-3 weeks being assessed, then they were referred to the relevant part of the service where social work teams spent 3-6 months carrying out the bulk of work to support them and their families. If the case was related to a child protection matter it could take a year to put required processes in place. If a child was placed in care the case would remain open until they were 18 years and they would continue to be allocated a personal adviser until they were 21

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years. A child with special needs would receive support until they were 25 years. Some may be in care for their whole childhood and some for short periods of time when parent may be in crisis or in hospital.

Response to Cllr Carmichael

- The Board was advised that there was a whole section of the Trust responsible for audit, virtual training and development. Every visit required a pre-risk assessment. The Trust had to share different ways of working and has worked alongside Public Health and with the Trade Unions as well as staff to agree health and safety of staff. People had to work quickly to respond to and implement Government guidance which in Childrens Social Care had not been as clear as would have liked.
- There was a pre-visit risk assessment carried out for every visit, including repeat visits. PPE had to be worn if there was a physical risk, staff were anxious about going out and had to be protected, virtual visits were also used to safeguard staff.
- The Trust had to protect the family and the worker, and a full risk assessment had to take place each time to ensure nothing has changed health wise since the last visit.

Response to Councillor Preece

- The shortage of PPE was quite a challenge at the start of Lockdown but had been very well handled by Director of Resources, Tara Malik. The services were not impacted by lack of PPE, people were tenacious in sourcing PPE and it helped services to continue. The situation has stabilised now and there was a good supply of quality PPE.

The Chair thanked officers from the Trust for their presentation and responses to questions, he echoed all the comments of the meeting relating to the work of the staff and on behalf of the Board asked that an enormous gratitude to staff for the work they have done and continue to do through the Covid pandemic be placed on record.

The Board noted the presentation and comments.

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13/20 Elective Home Education

The Chair welcomed the Group Head Education Support Services who presented the report detailing trends and the current status of Elective Home Education (EHE) in Sandwell.

The Board noted the presentation which highlighted:

- that home education considered those children who were not on a school roll and whose parents were home 'educating other than at school' as described in the 1996 Education Act.
- that parents could choose how to educate at home and to register their children with the Local Authority. There was a duty on the Local Authority to maintain a register of children not registered at specified types of school and to provide support to parents. There was also a duty on proprietors of certain educational settings to respond to enquiries from the Local Authority;
- there was one full time Elected Home Education (EHE) Advisory Teacher who maintained communication with the EHE community, a second member of staff had recently been appointed to a peripatetic role;
- there were 408 children who were electively home educated and the reasons for choosing EHE were highlighted. It was emphasised that Multi-agency working was key in safeguarding children;
- a range of communication was used, and meetings held in libraries across the six towns to support parents;
- during the Covid-19 situation additional resources and links to on-line learning had been made available to parents.

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

Response to Cllr Z Hussain

- there was one member of staff for 408 children which did seem high, however there was a very engaged EHE Community. The Local Authority tailored support around the family needs. Many of the EHE groups were more engaged and the interaction could be light touch. When the frontline first makes contact with the family, it was about who to put them in touch with and to establish links.

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- Council staff cannot just turn up there is no authority to do so, some families do not want to talk to the Council. It was important to develop a relationship, contact was made and maintained through email, letters and leaflets telling families about the resource etc that was available to them. There were 8 families currently that did not engage with the Council, but most did engage at varying levels.
- The appointment of a peripatetic member of staff was pending and would be helpful to carry out more of the administrative work and free up frontline staff.

Response to Cllr Shackleton

- There was a challenge for every local authority to access information about attainment, training and career paths of children educated at home from the family. There was recognition that there was a need to talk to staff to engage with parents and find out more about attainment in exams. The only way to find out information was by active engagement;
- Families do have to register with the Local Authority (since 2019) and it was expected that an extra staff member would enable more engagement with families;
- It was acknowledged that some young people would be achieving higher outcomes than if they attended school, but that this was not the case for all children educated at home.

Response to Cllr Costigan

- It was hoped that by September 2020 the Sandwell Libraries would be open for families to resume sessions, and if not, other venues would be considered to get sessions up and running for the EHE Community.
- There was feedback from the staff that families were becoming more interactive and pro-active as a result of lockdown.

Response to Cllr Carmichael

- It was parental choice to home educate, at their own cost, which included exam fees.
- Out of 408 children home educated currently 25 had an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) which indicated special needs. Some parents felt that their child would not get the right support and provision in schools and did not feel confident sending them into a

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school environment. Some young people would have significant additional physical and personal needs and provision may fall outside the Borough which is why parents chose to home educate.

Response to Cllr Chidley

- The team had details of the reasons why they parents wanted to home school, but this could not be shared due to Data Protection. Sometimes the parent may not want to give reasons, however the main themes had been included in the report for information.
- More analysis was required to ensure that young people have a good future by receiving a good education.

Comments from Cllr Underhill

- The Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life had requested this item to scrutiny because she had observed a jump in the number of children in home education and that there was only one teacher for over 400 pupils. She highlighted that the Council had its hands tied and that it would be useful to bring matters arising from discussion about EHE to the attention of the Secretary of State for Education.
- Parents made the decision to home educate, the child's voice was not always heard in this decision.
- There was a need to get underneath the reasons why more parents were not sending children to school. The data showed that after 7 years old the numbers shoot up as children become teenagers.
- At this time, fewer than 1% of school aged children are home education, however this could rise again in September and the Council needed to know more to prepare, such as what exams they do, if they do them and how the Council can plan to be able to support families.
- The Cabinet Member highlighted that children are the future and that as a Council we had a responsibility to give young people the best start in life.

Response to Cllr Millar

- Tipton area had the highest number of EHE it would be interesting to analyse deeper to understand why;

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- Tipton had good schools, it would be interesting to consider the factors why parents may not choose a school in their area, whether that be by reputation or other.

The Chair thanked all members and the Group Head Education Support Services for their contribution to the discussion. He highlighted that there was consensus that there should be further analysis carried out by officers of the data, including:

- attainment levels of EHE students
- supply the numbers of EHE for each Town.

The Chair advised Board that he would meet with officers to consider the scope for a review for Elective Home Education by the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board.

The Board noted the presentation and comments

(Meeting ended at 7.05 pm)

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