

**Minutes of the Children's Services and Education  
Scrutiny Board**

**21 September, 2020 at 5.00 pm  
Virtual Meeting**

**Present:** Councillor Preece (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors Ashman, Carmichael, Costigan, Z  
Hussain, McVittie, Millar, Phillips and Shackleton.

**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;  
Chris Ward, Director Education, Employment and  
Skills;  
Sara Baber, Early Years Lead;  
Sally Dowie, Data Information Officer, Family  
Information Service.

14/20 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 July  
2020 be approved as a correct record.

Cllr Millar requested that the Sandwell Childrens Trust  
Organisation Structure referred to in minute 12/20 be  
circulated.

15/20 **Reset and Recovery – Phase 1 Update**

The Board noted the update report from the Executive Director of  
Children's Services which was in two parts firstly to provide the  
activity undertaken in Phase One of the corporate reset and  
recovery programme services relevant to children's services and  
education and secondly, to inform the board of the findings from this  
work in relation to impact on the community. The presentation slides  
were provided in advance of the meeting.

## **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board – 21 September, 2020**

The Executive Director Children's Services and Director of Education, Employment and Skills presented slide pack one relating to the Councils Reset and Recovery progress for:

- Council Services;
- Schools and Early Years;
- Vulnerable Children;
- Communication and Information.

The Board noted learning points arising from the new ways of working virtually using online and social media that would be developed and included in future working practice. In particular, remote and flexible home working arrangements for staff who needed or wanted to work from home, it was noted that many staff had continued to work in Oldbury Council House offices.

The Board welcomed the success of the virtual school admission and appeals process and meetings, school place planning, play services summer period activities and packs that were supplied to families using virtual and online services to support children's learning in school and at home.

The Board noted that:

- services were starting back to work in offices and each of these services had been considered by the Reset and Recovery Board process and had undertaken rigorous risk assessment and review.
- Adult and family learning services and connections services were starting to offer face to face work, online and careers interviews had been successful and were very visible on social media.
- Inclusive learning services were supporting children with learning difficulties and vulnerable children with special educational needs and disabilities, transport services had also been through the Reset and Recovery Board process.
- Safeguarding, attendance and prosecution services had continued throughout lockdown. No prosecutions had taken place, the services had focussed on support for families to get children back into school and some staff had been redirected to provide support to schools to reassure parents about getting children back to school. Similarly, nurseries and child minders were receiving support.

## **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board – 21 September, 2020**

Since the presentations were prepared Sandwell had moved into local restrictions, officers had revised some plans and they had been through the Reset and Recovery Board process again. Assurance was provided about partners working arrangements to ensure there was safe access to front door services, buildings and when accessing spaces to meet with parents and children.

The Director of Education Skills and Employment advised the Board that since start of school term in September, there had been a phased return for pupils and all schools had carried out risk assessments to make services available, safe and ready, this had meant changes to the way they worked.

The Board noted that:

- initially attendance had been good, as schools increased capacity attendance was good but there were increasing requests for elected home education (EHE).
- Engagement with schools and academies had been excellent initially the schools ensured they were following Government guidance and queries were challenged with the DfE.
- When a Covid case had occurred, the school closed down the bubble to ensure other children remained isolated. There had been a number of Covid cases dealt with and numbers of cases changed on a daily basis.
- Early years settings and childminders had initially been impacted, only 25% were open in April and May, but this percentage had increased in September and more had opened as parents returned to work. It was paramount to make sure not too many had been lost as many had struggled financially, and to ensure help and support was provided to help them get back on their feet.
- Sandwell was in an area of intervention, schools were in tier 1, which allowed all schools to open and secondary school pupils were required to wear facemasks in community areas.
- In order to support children when not in schools, all schools had to provide a digital offer, for children to carry on with their studies while they self-isolating.
- School transport for special need pupils was available. There was dedicated transport available or funding that parents could claim if they preferred to get children to school in other ways, parents had a choice.
- There were concerns from schools how to help children catch up. An announcement from Government was awaited relating to

## **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board – 21 September, 2020**

additional funding of £80 per child, when received they could plan how better to support children.

- Schools focus initially had been checking young people's wellbeing, ensure they were ready to learn and settle into a normal school day. New personal Social Health and Education requirements would be introduced.
- The pupil assessments process had been confusing this year and the Government had been asked to make a decision on exams and studies next year.

The Executive Director of Children's Services informed the Board that at the start of lockdown, a multi-agency group was formed to focus on vulnerable children in Sandwell. The Vulnerable Children Group initially met daily and now met two or three times a week, its conversations had moved onto support for families.

The Board noted that:

- There were 700 shielded children in the Borough and plans were being worked through to support them and their families.
- Detached youth work had continued through the pandemic. It had helped young people to talk and engage, and to get into activities and a positive mindset. The Youth Team had started Doctor Bike Sessions which involved young people in fixing and building bikes, to show them how to get around more easily and in a different way.
- Access to laptops and dongles for vulnerable children to access education had been extended to children self-isolating, who did not have access to IT equipment.
- Data returns to DfE had continued to inform the national picture and some had started to be produced as reports. The Vulnerable Children return had reported the same things that were being experienced at local level.
- Referrals to Children's Services had been much lower in lockdown but the referrals were more complicated, and issues had been exacerbated by lockdown, particularly domestic violence (DV).
- With children back in schools there had an increase of safeguarding referrals and surge planning was underway, working through information and experiences of young people, which had resulted in a surge period to respond to young people. The real impact would not be seen for 6 months or more.

## **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board – 21 September, 2020**

- Strategic commissioning work had helped to see where services needed to be increased, particularly about Mental Health in partnership with Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).
- Two Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) meetings had been held and valuable conversations with young people had taken place.
- Communication and information daily sessions, created a number of cell meetings whilst in local restriction, taking speedy action where incidents occurred. Partnership meetings had taken place to plan business continuity and Schools involvement had been amazing, with regular meetings taking place. An Ofsted meeting was expected soon, to look at support to vulnerable children between March and September.
- Meetings with parents had been very useful.
- The longer-term impact of Covid was being considered, but it was not clear what that impact would be or whether there would be greater need in the future services.

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

- The Board welcomed the work undertaken by officers from home and on site in a very difficult time and thanked officers for all of the elements of the agenda that had been addressed.
- Some of the key issues moving forward were that a number of young people had missed out on university due to information being received too late to secure their place, there was an expected increase in young people not in education, education or training (NEET) and many businesses were not taking on apprentices at this time as they did not have capacity.
- A report would be included in the scrutiny work programme for Spring 2021, when data was available, which would include the destination information for young people from Connexions Team to consider the impact moving forward.
- In relation to mental health in schools, additional work was being put in place, including support from advisors, activities and measures for young people to feel safe.
- Schools focus was to assess children's state of mind and readiness to work. Although many young people welcomed being back at school, there were some who needed additional help from educational psychologists. Schools were being asked to identify young people who may need additional support and they were working with partners to support families where there may be wider issues.

**Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board –  
21 September, 2020**

- There was additional support in the Elective Home Education (EHE) Team to support and advise parents in their decision to educate at home and to put them in touch with the right support and supply material.
- Attendance officers were working in COGS going out to work with families who were EHE, the Council could support families and had the duty to make sure they were safe and well, but had no power to check the quality of home schooling. Support was being offered to EHE parents in supporting children back into school. The Elective Home Education (EHE) Work Group would be meeting soon to consider EHE in more depth.
- Schools had followed process in cases of Covid in school bubbles. Cases were reported to DfE and to test and trace services. Schools were closed on the advice of Public Health where necessary. Additional teams were supporting Public Health in their work and contacting child siblings in different schools for them to take appropriate action. Work was carried out overnight to identify which children and which schools were impacted, to put in place remote learning and to report to relevant bodies. Information about potential Covid cases came from schools, track and trace and parents, and when received it was important to act quickly.
- Youth workers had continued with outreach work and sport activities through lockdown, this had ensured conversations with young people and parents in parks, street corners etc. Many youth workers were multi-lingual, and this had helped explain to parents about social distancing.
- The Council transport funding budget had been extended to make direct payment to families who were not happy with the dedicated transport arrangement, the Council had a duty to get children to school. The funding was based on assessment needs and parents were in charge of the funds and made transport arrangements for their child.
- There was no requirement for parents to wear face masks near school premises, but some schools had asked parents to do so, this was something the Council would recommend as good practice but there was no legislative requirement at this time.
- During lockdown remote learning was made available, there had been work packs made available, online classes and sheets sent to families supporting children learning at home to return to the teacher and receive feedback. Some schools had ICT issues and some households did not have access to a laptop or the internet

## **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board – 21 September, 2020**

which meant connecting with families was not always possible, particularly in areas of deprivation.

- There was a Government scheme in place to provide laptops to children who had not got access, the Government promised a 48-hour turn around to get the laptop or suitable equipment to the school, it would not be to every child, some households had to share.
- The learning materials supplied to parents were not available pre-Covid however schools were sharing materials and had built a bank of materials and recorded lessons with support to co-ordinate this from the Council. The Board suggested that it would be beneficial to provide material in local language accents.

The Board noted that the Executive Director was leading on the Community Impact Group and were advised that the group had pulled together and considered information from a wide range of national and local sources to get a sense of the direct impact of Covid in Sandwell.

The Board noted key Community Impacts to be:

- Mental Health: highlighting isolation and relationship issues.
- Housing: the impact of poor quality housing and not having gardens.
- Increase in unhealthy behaviours: an increase in issues that impact on health conditions and also food insecurity.
- Digital inclusion: Covid exposed and exacerbated access to ICT with more services going online.

The Board noted that there had been some positives arising from the situation including:

- increased civic participation
- decreased car use
- more people cycling canal tow paths and taking up a healthier lifestyle.

They were advised of some of the negative impacts such as hidden harm and how BAME groups were susceptible to Covid.

The Board welcomed the presentation and the work that had been carried out so far. Members noted that there would be a further report to Cabinet and then work to prioritise and revisit the Council plan could be moved forward.

**Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board –  
21 September, 2020**

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

- Housing issues were primarily around poor-quality housing, social isolation and households facing eviction. Council rent collection had been suspended but was now due to be collected.
- There was a refocus around housing living conditions and supporting people with poor housing conditions particularly around the private sector housing offer.
- Insight information would be forwarded to members relating to getting involved and taking a leading role in communities.
- Housing and Children's services were working well together using the knowledge, sharing experiences and discussing approaches to learn from recent months.
- The Town Funds Sub Group on Housing was informed and using the information gathered.
- Cllr Millar voiced her interest in participating in the work relating to homelessness and helping people find justice in housing matters.

The Vice-Chair thanked officers for the comprehensive update and for all the additional work that they and their services were doing.

**Resolved:**

That the Reset and Recovery – Phase 1 Update was noted and that a further update be requested in Spring 2021.

16/20

**Sandwell Childcare Sufficiency Report 2020-21**

The Chair welcomed the Early Years Lead Officer and the Information Officer from Family Information Services who presented the report detailing trends and the current status of Childcare in Sandwell.

The Board noted the presentation which highlighted that:

- all but one of the childcare providers in Sandwell had re-opened following the return to work after lockdown.
- DfE received data weekly about take up of places, nearly 4000 children had attended childcare in the previous week.
- In current circumstances it was difficult to predict what childcare sufficiency would look like moving forward.



**Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board –  
21 September, 2020**

- The Council funding for 2-4 year olds remained the same.
- Support was available to businesses to make sure people were claiming their entitlement. The biggest loss of earnings for childcare providers was private income because many parents were working from home during lockdown and many had not currently returned to work.
- More business support was needed for the childcare providers, the team had worked with SWEDA and brokered support for childcare providers.
- Public Health data was not currently available, the team used information they had gathered on a month by month basis, to provide the current picture.

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

- Wrap around care provision in schools had been difficult through Covid, some schools had not allowed other providers on site and the guidance from DfE was confused. The childcare team and childcare brokers had worked with individual parents to find provision that was suitable for them and their children.
- There was still undersubscribed childcare provision in the Newton Ward. Communications work had taken place in October 2019 but there had only been one term to focus on it which had not been enough; outreach work was also planned but it did not progress far before Covid stopped activities in March 2020. The work would recommence as soon as it could.
- There was an increase in demand for 2 year old provision, before Covid there were around 1600 names on the list from the Department for Work and Pensions, this had recently increased to 2200, this was attributed to more people losing jobs and more families meeting the financial criteria.
- There was an increase expected in the 30 hour offer for parents that both work.

Resolved:

That the Sandwell Childcare Sufficiency Report 2020-21 be received, and comments of the Board be referred to the Director Education, Employment and Skills.

**Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board –  
21 September, 2020**

17/20

**Youth Facilities Review**

The Executive Director Children's Services presented the executive response to the recommendations of the Youth Facilities Review Work Group.

The Board noted the response which provided an update of progress made to implement the recommendations:

Partnership Framework, Communications plan and Multi-agency approach:

- Work was progressing with Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) on the partnership framework.
- The Just Youth Website was being developed, a single web-based platform with a calendar of activities and links to Discover Sandwell and Families and Children's Services.
- An apprentice post had been created to keep the website up to date but there were not many activities on the calendar at this time due to Covid; there was however plenty of activity using social media.
- The Youth Symposium planning was moving forward but it would not take place in Spring 2021. It would be important to get the technology right to reach young people, professionally we use Teams and Skype however young people use zoom and other platforms.

Young People Spaces:

- There was a delay to progressing the bid to increase mobile provision through the Town Fund process due to Covid, discussions were taking place about use of Community Infrastructure levy to fund a new bus.
- A development bid had been made in partnership with the Albion Foundations to create a West Smethwick Park youth hub, to provide sports activity in different spaces.
- Pilots sessions with Sandwell Leisure Trust at Tipton Sports Academy and Portway Lifestyle had stalled due to Covid and discussion around use of Libraries and other buildings were all waiting at the moment. Detached youth work had been invaluable.

## **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board – 21 September, 2020**

### Better Access to transport:

- Progress was limited under current circumstances, but discussion was taking place around the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) transport plan.
- Young people were not keen to use public transport, there was some development re Metro and potential to assist travel.
- There was progress with Doctor Bike sessions, the Strategic Walk Plan focus on canals and cycle routes.

### Strategic approach to funding:

- Through strategic partnerships the Council was exploring strengthening funding bids and looking to increase the skill available and also looking at voluntary sector grants.
- There were concerns how to fund these activities and how to produce high quality bids.
- Thinking about sustainability was really important.

### Develop a renewed Youth Offer:

- The current youth offer was mainly detached and online, which had worked really well. Moving forward young people want to meet up and have youth spaces, plans were being made to develop the offer in street based, park based and online.

### Budget:

- As the reset and recovery plans were being worked through. the impact on young people has been substantial, health and education and enabling to catch up and think about their future was identified and there was more ambition and significant policy work ongoing to link to corporate plan.

### Question Time:

- The virtual platform was not there to engage with young people in terms of connectivity at the moment. This needs further work and was tricky in terms of connectivity.

The Chair noted that there was a lot of 'wait and see' because of reset and recovery measures and suggested the need to programme in a report mid 2021 to get more information when the position was fully known.

**Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board –  
21 September, 2020**

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

- Cllr McVittie indicated that the bus was not popular with all young people and suggested that an eco/hybrid versatile minibus should be considered rather than a double decker bus, to utilise facilities in different areas of the Borough and to be more resourceful.
- Tanhouse had potential for future use to develop as a sports hub, the sports hub initiative was welcomed.
- It was noted that young people had indicated that they did not always feel welcome in shared spaces as they were perceived by others to be a nuisance.
- The Question time sessions could be held in the Council Chamber using ICT facilities and the big screens in the future, but this was not an option at this time.
- Utilisation of the Towns Fund and the use of infrastructure levy money was welcomed, the Chair was pleased to see that gaps in funding were being addressed this way.
- Cllr Shackleton suggested that the transit styled vehicles should be used to transport young people who wanted to engage in drama to Conegre Centre particularly for young people with disabilities.

The Board endorsed the suggestion of transit buses to transport people to places and welcomed the progress being made to respond to the recommendations and that there was movement to implement the recommendations.

**Resolved:**

- 1) that the response and update report be received;
- 2) that a further report be included on the work programme for the Board mid-year 2021.

(Meeting ended at 7.05 pm)

<p>Contact Officer: Deb Breedon Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3896</p>
--