

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

**16 November, 2020 at 5.00 pm  
Virtual Meeting**

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

**Apologies:** Councillor Phillips.

**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;  
Sue Moore, Group Head Education Support  
Services;  
Ramsey Richards, Attendance Service and  
Prosecution Manager;  
Mark Tobin, Head of Service, Adoption@Heart.

18/20 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 21  
September 2020 be approved as a correct record.

19/20 **Chairs Announcement**

The Vice-Chair announced that an additional item would be added at the end of the published agenda, to provide feedback from the Joint Health and Adult Social Care and Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2020, at which Mental Health Support in Sandwell was considered.

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**20/20      Reset and Recovery – Update**

***Relates to minute 15/20 Reset and Recovery Stage 1 update 21 September 2020.***

The Board received a presentation from the Executive Director of Children's Services to provide a progress update relating to the reset and recovery plan for the period September 2020 to date.

The Board noted the following reset and recovery activity since September 2020, when children had returned to school following the summer break:

- All services had been busy since the start of term and were back in schools working with children and supporting schools both educationally and in relation to Covid matters.
- Services were responding to daily change and needs to support schools. Staff had been volunteering to assist the response functions.
- Staff absence levels were incredibly low, and the commitment of the work force had been amazing. Some staff who were self-isolating had continued to work, the Executive Director encouraged staff to look after themselves as well;
- Business as usual was on track, including new schools being built;
- Levels of contact and scrutiny from DfE and Ofsted were continuing 2-3 times weekly. Eleven schools had been Ofsted visited;
- Due to the second lockdown the Ofsted Assurance visit to Children's Services had been paused and was expected to take place at the beginning of 2021;
- Referrals in Children Social Care and assessments for children were starting to increase, particularly young children where there may be a development delay or where they may need an assessment for a special educational need or an Educational Health and Care Plan. Some had been delayed due to restrictions and not being able to have the contact with them that was required.

The Executive Director outlined a number of impacts that Covid had on young people:

- Disrupted formal education;
- Home learning in strained environments;
- Exams and Qualifications;
- Jobs and training shortages;

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- Lack of safe space and trusted support;
- Loneliness and isolation, including fears about their future;
- Online pressure and risk;
- Risk of harmful behaviours;
- Disrupted family services and psychological support; challenging family relationships;
- Increase in domestic abuse;
- Low personal risk of direct Covid in terms of health and wellbeing but high long term social and economic pressure, resulting in an increase in eligibility of pupils for free school meals of 17.5% and rising (now 29% of pupils).

In terms of Schools and Early Years Board noted the following:

- There had been Excellent engagement from schools, academies and early years providers with the Local Authorities. Schools had fed back positively about the support provided;
- All schools were open, there had been a few short-term closures due to it not being safe to open and the need for pupils and staff to self-isolate.
- Most schools had experienced the need to consider whether to close or self-isolate, in these cases support had been provided through the support telephone line and incident management team meetings, to help them make the decision what action to take;
- Remote learning, catch up activities and tutoring were available.
- There had been some sticking points relating to the number of devices the DfE had made available to schools, the number of devices had been reduced significantly, that issue was being pursued with the DfE;
- Staff had been provided with tools to help with their health and well-being;
- Schools attendance rates had been good across the Borough;
- There had been a significant increase in requests for elective home education, which would be considered later in this agenda;
- Pupil assessment, testing and examinations for 2020/21 was still being considered and arrangements were unknown yet;
- Increased costs for schools had been identified and brought to the attention of the DfE. It was hoped that there may be additional funding to help schools meet the additional costs relating to the pandemic.

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In terms of vulnerable children, the Board noted the following:

- The Vulnerable Children Officer Group met weekly to ensure children were being checked on, in terms of welfare and support and making sure they could thrive;
- In relation to guidance on shielding and protecting children and young people whose parents or carers were clinically extremely vulnerable there was some confusion about the criteria for 'Clinically Extremely Vulnerable' and parents were being advised to check with their GPs;
- Detached youth work had continued to operate throughout lock down, to support and work with young people;
- Vulnerable children were being provided with laptops and dongles to help them carry out their work at home;
- Data returns for Sandwell were showing the trends expected and mirrored national trends;
- Surge planning was working well, partners were working together to identify services and put support in place, and where a specific need had been identified the Strategic Commissioning Partnership had managed to put the necessary services in place;
- Corporate Parenting Board had started to meet again and was a good forum to hear the views of young people;
- The winter grant announcements had highlighted that the arrangements would not be the same as for free school meals during summer holidays. The guidance was due to be published late November to go live on 1<sup>st</sup> December, so this would be a short turn-around time.

In terms of Brexit Planning, the Board noted the following:

- Preparations for Brexit on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020 were underway. The change of regulations relating to a number of arrangements were being worked on to make sure the right arrangements were in place around:
  - admissions, teachers work permits, food suppliers, medicine for children, trips abroad and data;
  - families from the EU, employment of staff from the EU, the families in EU settlement scheme and the need to ensure arrangement concluded before 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020;
  - Matters relating to EU children in care and care leavers status and the cross-border child protection arrangements;
- A Council 'Brexit Working Group' had been formed and officers were working across services to ensure preparations and arrangements for Brexit were moving forward and that they linked

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up. There was a Brexit risk register in place to highlight and monitor these matters.

In terms of Communication and Information, the Board noted the following:

- Regular meetings continue to be held - Sitrep meetings with Sandwell Children's Trust, Reset and Recovery Board and Vulnerable People Cell meetings;
- There was a lot of activity to communicate with partners and DfE, and active participation in regional and national meetings to join up work;
- The Council has continued to meet with children, young people and families to consider if their needs were being met and to establish a good understanding of what life is like for them;
- The Council has commenced staff meetings, conferences and other support to keep staff spirits up, in recognition that this has been a really challenging time for all.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- In terms of support to vulnerable children at home, the Council had challenged the DfE decision to reduction the number of devices provided to schools. There were 2 conflicting pieces of information from the DfE, which:
  - one was that the DfE themselves were struggling to source all of the devices they need;
  - also, that DfE had done some re-assessment of what they thought local need was.
- The Board noted a recent school request for devices where a school bubble had to self-isolate and the DfE response was to issue one device for the whole bubble. The Chair highlighted the need to continue to challenge the DfE on this matter and the Executive Director agreed to send the response to the Chair and to discuss the matter outside this forum.
- In terms of support to school staff, there had been general messages to staff about supporting each other, tools to help them to manage their wellbeing, how to manage the pressures (normal and Covid) and the Charter mark. Managers had signposted staff to information - how to seek support, where to look for crisis support, the wellbeing return project and trauma

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training. Schools could dip into a whole range of blended learning and there was the 'healthy minds for teachers' programme, which was zoom delivered. In addition, formal referrals to organisations that could support staff could be offered.

- Information about additional funding pressures to schools during the pandemic had been sent to the DfE already and would be shared with the Board.
- The Board would not meet again until post Brexit transition as such the Chair requested that the Brexit risk register be circulated to the Board and Members send any questions arising to the Executive Director.
- When cases of Covid were identified the decision to close a school was a jointly made through a collaborative system. Ultimately it was the school's decision, however, there was a process whereby they could contact the advice and support line:
  - The school provided the information and had a conversation with public health trained staff.
  - If there was a view that a school must close, there must be a conversation with a senior representative from Public Health and the Education Services to talk through mitigations and risk assessments.
  - It was important to reach a joint decision. Services needed to work together to make the difficult decisions and ensure that every avenue had been explored and that schools were doing everything they could to stay open.
- In terms of supply teaching staff, there was awareness of a national issue but not of any local shortage of supply teaching staff. There had been occasions when a shortage of staff available to operate school premises and to supervise school lunchtimes had required a temporary closure for health and safety reasons, because without them in place it was not possible to safely open the school and to guarantee the safety of children and staff on the school premises.
- In relation to Winter Grant arrangements there was work to do once guidance was published to clarify how the Council identified vulnerable children and families. There were several schemes available to support children and families including schemes for under 4's, food banks and free school meals. The Board requested updates relating to Winter Grants arrangements.

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- Schools were carrying out home learning in different ways. Some primary schools had issued work books and held whole class sessions, others logged in differently. In secondary schools there were more resources available for pupils to log into. Teachers could also monitor who logs on and what they log into. Teachers could contact pupils who were not logging on. It was noted that senior school pupils may miss out on classroom based activities, such as practical science sessions, but schools were doing everything possible to catch up when children were in school.

The Vice-Chair thanked the Service Director and Executive Director of Children's Services for the comprehensive update and for all the additional work that they and their services were doing.

**Resolved:**

1. That the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive the reset and recovery update.
2. That further information be circulated to the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board relating to:
  - a. funding pressures to schools
  - b. Brexit risk register
  - c. Winter Grant funding

21/20

**Adoption@Heart Annual; Report 2019/20**

The Chair welcomed the Head of Service from Adoption@Heart. The Executive Director Children's Services provided a brief introduction to the report. She advised that adoption services in the Sandwell were contracted via the Regional Adoption Agency - Adoption@Heart, and that the Head of Service for the organisation worked to ensure that adoption services function well in the region.

The Head of Service provided the Annual Adoption@Heart report 2019-20 and a 6-month performance update. The Board noted that all Local Authorities had been required by Government to integrate adoption agencies and provide a regional adoption agency (RAA). The RAA in this region included Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall and

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Wolverhampton, it went live on 1 April 2019 and been operating for 18 months.

The Board noted the presentation which highlighted that:

The integrated service was established and the identity of the Adoption@Heart had been built and developed with a partnership working feel to the contractual arrangement.

- There was a stable workforce of around 70 staff across the partnership, many had been Taped into their posts from the four authorities and hardly any had left Adoption@Heart.
- For many children moving through the care planning process adoption was the last resort. Staff had made significant progress in oversight and tracking the progress of the individual child's journey.
- Not enough people were coming forward to become adoptive families for children in the region and work was ongoing to reach people both in and outside of the region.
- The adoption support offer provided statutory authority for the RAA to adopt any child in the region, this had been a focus for the RAA to work with families. Adoption@Heart was also involved in the National RAA development work, working with 31 other RAA's sharing practice and innovative developments, which was beneficial to this region.
- Services had adapted to virtual ways of working during Covid-19 which was working really well and many of the benefits from it would be retained. Staff absence rates had been very low.
- Performance data headlines presented a positive picture for Sandwell:
  - 62 Sandwell children had been placed in 18 months which was a 20% increase on children placed on previous year.
  - There had been increased Early Permanence usage 20 in 2020/21, 5 of which were Sandwell children. By placing children in foster care, with a view to adopting, also called 'Foster to Adopt, delays for the child were avoided, and the regulation could be used to place a child to mitigate against the delays in the court system.
  - In September 2020, there were 23 children on a placement order waiting to be placed, 11 were in active family finding. This compared with March 2020 when 48 children were on placement order and 20 in active family finding. There was a levelling out in terms of children waiting within Sandwell.



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- 50% children were still being placed inter-agency, if a place with A@H could not be found, a placement would have to be purchased from an external agency, it was preferable to place the child in the region.
- 31 children had been adopted in 2019/20, many would have been placed with adopters before adoption @Heart was established. 13 had been adopted in 2020/21. There was a national trend that the number of children placed was decreasing and there were long court delays with applications.
- 2 key DfE indicators:
  - A10 the total journey (from when a child comes into care to when a child is placed with a family), Sandwell was performing within the threshold.
  - A20 (the time from receiving the placement to the matching for the child), Sandwell was above the threshold. There was more work to do to improve A20.
- Performance relating to adopters:
  - 51 adopters were approved in the first year, initially there were transitional challenges, but things have moved on significantly now.
  - Progress in 2020/21 year looked promising, 34 adopters approved in first 6 months. The challenges of Covid would have an impact on year-end total, difficulties during Covid included getting appointments for medicals and face to face meetings. A@H were likely to need to place 130 children in total across the partnership, but it was already clear that they would not hit the 40% target. However, reasonable progress was being made.
  - There was a 31% increase of adopters making adoption enquiries and there was a spike in adopter enquiries during the Covid pandemic. More challenges could impact on the adopters being approved such as income and employment position, which may impact sustainability.
  - There was a clear marketing strategy to encourage adopters across the region, A@H were working closely with communications teams in local authorities and partners, which was seeing good progress. There was, a national campaign was underway, 'You can adopt', to encourage people who have not been successfully reached in the past, particularly BAME communities.

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

- In terms of locally placed children in Sandwell, data was not available at the meeting, but this could be provided by A@H.
- The key objective of regionalising adoption was to place children in the region. If placing interagency, A@H looked regionally first to place children in the Midlands area. There were huge advantages of them growing up in the region where their wider family were.
- At the time A@H went live there were significant numbers of children waiting on adoption orders that had not been matched or placed. There had been a year on year increase in Sandwell compared to neighbouring authorities, but now A@H was seeing a drop-in numbers year on year, because more children were going into other forms of permanence, other than adoption.
- In terms of the ethnicity of the 62 children placed and who they were placed with, data was not available at the meeting but would be provided.
- The regulations were clear that If the RAA did not have adoptive parent(s) who were a full cultural match to the child, then the RAA is required not to create any delay in placing the child with a view to finding a full cultural match. The Board noted cultural match was not the only requirement in matching a child. There was currently an interesting national debate about finding the right cultural match.
- In relation to the national 'You Can Adopt' campaign there were pilot campaigns in the region to talk to people, with a focus on recruiting adopters from BAME groups, this was mainly focussed in Birmingham. The Covid-19 pandemic had changed the way the pilot was carried out, the pilot adopted a virtual approach, rather than the plan to reach out via street ambassadors in churches and community Centres. An organisation 'Home for Good' was leading the pilot and DfE driving the initiative, there was a lot of interest in the campaign.
- Councillor Z Hussain suggested that local Councillors could help to reach out and engage with communities and getting the word out about the campaign.
- A@E agreed to look at the ethnicity data of the 62 children and families they were placed with in Sandwell and circulate the data to The Board.

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- Councillor McVittie suggested a breakdown of annual information may be helpful, into months or seasonally, to provide context about how the organisation moved forward and the challenges and trends through the year. A@E were developing the template for the report and would take on board this comment.
- In terms of children with disability who were placed. A@E advised there were several children with complex clinical need, they tend to wait longer to be placed. This data could be factored in alongside ethnicity and other characteristics and provided to members.
- The Board noted that there was a challenge for adoption agencies when children had complex needs and when it was known that that child would experience delays. RAA would like to do more earlier in profiling the child and searching for adopters. The frustration faced was that the Courts required RAA to wait until there was some certainty around granting legal orders in terms of identifying characteristics. The earlier RAA could start the process the better for the child. The debate was whether the court delays were child centric or not.

Resolved:

1. That the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive the Adoption@Heart annual report 2019-20 and note the performance update provided.
2. Information be circulated to the Board relating to the ethnicity and disability data of the 62 children and families they were placed with in Sandwell.

22/20

**Elective Home Education Working Group**

The Chair provided an overview of the progress of the Elective Home Education Working Group. He outlined the key lines of enquiry, the evidence gathering activities undertaken, including a survey which Councillors had helped shape and the focus group arrangements for 25 November 2020 meeting with parents and EHE

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teachers.

The Chair referred to the Parliamentary Education Committee Inquiry into Elective Home Education which was established in September 2020 and requested DfE to provide information on the progress of the Inquiry process. He indicated that evidence from Sandwell's Elective Home Education Working Group could provide evidence to the Government's Inquiry.

The Group Head Education Support Services and Attendance Service and Prosecution Manager provided an update relating to Elective Home Education.

The Group Head indicated that since the last meeting of the Scrutiny Board, the working group had met twice and had two very productive sessions.

Scrutiny activity included:

- Meetings to consider background reports, data and case studies, there was a lot of information being processed about the current offer and areas for more in-depth scrutiny identified. It was a very positive process.
- a survey for parents and children had been drafted, Members provided suggestions of how to phrase the questions. The final version was circulated on 2nd November.
- The next meeting would be a focus group meeting with parents, children and EHE teachers to hear their views about the current offer.

The Group Head presented a data chart which highlighted a steady increase in EHE cases over four years 2016-2020, with a significant increase in 2020/21, this figure was part year (up to October 2020).

The increase in EHE was also of interest to HMI Ofsted, officers had prepared a number of responses to questions and data relating to elective home education since March 2020. The data was full and conclusive of an upward trend in EHE numbers. Closed cases indicated the number of children who had either returned to school or left at the end of year 11.

Ethnicity data since April 2020 showed 252 total – roughly half and half male / female, the ethnicity data was not unusual, there were no real spikes or trends other than the largest ethnic group was white British with 77(30%).

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HMI Ofsted asked further questions about patterns in the move to elective home education as follows:

- Social Services: there were 2 children moved to EHE since April 2020 totalling 5 children on a CIN Plan;
- SEND Pupils: EHCP 5, SEND 34 with no obvious pattern;
- Number of families where all children in the family are now EHE: the data was not held in a format to respond to this enquiry;
- Covid: The number of parents who have given Covid related reasons for choosing EHE since April 2020 was 90;
- Ethnicity: there was no pattern and nothing to indicate a reason for the move to home education;
- Postcodes: the spread of numbers across the Borough had been fairly even across the wards;
- School referral patterns: no schools had seen significant increase to EHE referrals.

The Group Head advised that data relating to the number of EHE by town was being extended to look at the number but also the percentage of children in EHE per Town. The unknown locations were due the way data was currently stored, a systems change was underway to rectify data storage issues.

The Chair thanked officers for the update presentation.

The Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life thanked officers and the Working Group for the work they had carried out so far to look at Elective Home Education (EHE). She advised that she had suggested the topic after noticing the increasing numbers at a briefing meeting. the work they had been carried out so far to look into EHE. She indicated that the benefits of the review was that the Authority would come away with more information and a better understanding of the issues than was known at the beginning of it.

The Chair highlighted that the Group had got off to a good start and needed to keep up momentum through coming months.

23/20

Joint Health and Adult Social Care and Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Outcomes

The Chair advised Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board that the Mental Health Support Session had been very

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beneficial and that two items had been identified to be included on the work programme for scrutiny in 2021.

- Acute paediatric beds
- Detailed report on CAMHS

**Resolved:**

- 1) that reports be included on the work programme for Scrutiny Board in 2021.
  - a. Acute paediatric beds
  - b. Detailed report on CAMHS

(Meeting ended at 6.45 pm)

Contact Officer: Deb Breedon Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3896
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