

Minutes of the Children's Services and Education Board

11 January 2021 at 5.00 pm
Virtual Online Meeting

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

Also present: Lesley Hagger, Executive Director Children's Services;
Chris Ward, Director Education, Employment and Skills;
Sue Moore, Group Head Education Support Services;
Graham Pennington, Principal Sandwell College;
David Holden, Deputy Principal Sandwell College;
Jason Henderson, Department for Education

1/21 Apologies

Apologies were received from C Ward-Lewis (Co-opted member)

2/21 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared at the meeting

3/21 Minutes

Agreed: that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2020 approved as a correct record.



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4/21 Additional Item of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

5/21 Reset and Recovery – Update

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 November 2020 to date.

The Board noted that Children's Services had continued to be extremely busy since the last meeting, business as usual had been maintained across the service and staff had been brilliant. The following was noted by the Board:

- Staff had been volunteering and supporting other areas, schools where staff had been responding to enquiries from parents, supporting with risk assessments and monitoring incidents of positive coronavirus tests of staff and pupils.
- Children's Services staff absence had been low and the majority of those who were self-isolating had continued to work.
- Pressures were beginning to emerge within the SEND service, Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments that required face to face meetings were encountering delays due to current restrictions.
- A high level of scrutiny and contact with Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE) had been maintained. Questions and requests for support had been escalated and good practice had been shared.
- Ofsted had made 12 successful visits to Borough schools and assurance visits were planned to begin in February. A lot of preparation had been undertaken and there were a lot of positives that could be communicated to Ofsted. An increase



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in referrals had resulted in a growing pressure on Children's Social Care following and there would be subsequent pressure on placements.

- Due to the coronavirus children were not leaving care and costs continued to increase. Free School Meals (FSM) had continued over the Christmas period and plans to continue FSM were in place for February half-term. The Winter Grant Scheme was noted to have distributed £1.4 million, 80% of which went families with children.
- The Executive Director of Children's Services highlighted the success of the Children's Services Team:
 - In the MJ awards, the award for Innovation in Children's Services, went to the team for the STEPS Centre.
 - The team was a finalist for the Children and Young People Now Awards for Children in Care for the Sandwell Careers Interview Guarantee Scheme, the scheme had led to a reduction of those young people identified as NEET from 24% in 2017 to 6% in 2020.
 - A member of staff was shortlisted for the National NSPCC Award, recognising their outstanding practice in the implementation of the Graded Care Profile 2 (Neglect Programme).
 - Another member of staff had received an MBE in recognition of their work in school inclusion.
- There had been excellent engagement between the Local Authority, Early Years, schools, academies and Sandwell College regarding implementing Government guidance. Guidance, had taken longer than expected to be rolled out, however schools had been proactive in learning the lessons from the first lock-down and were able to operate safely.
- There had been an increase in the number of laptop/mobile devices available to schools and pupils and schools were now more adapted to manage the online provision.
- Cabinet members had been receiving daily updates from the service and a weekly update was provided for all councillors.



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- There had also been an ongoing engagement with the Trade Unions in relation to staff working safely.
- The Vulnerable Children Group continued to meet and there was confidence in the continued safety and education of vulnerable children and young people. Families of Extremely vulnerable children within Sandwell continued to be contacted and signposted towards support.
 - There had been an increase in the complexity of cases with children being at home more, it was regarded to have led to an increase in children experiencing harm, a recent Ofsted report had highlighted this. A campaign was ongoing with focus on Safe-Sleeping and the prevention of suicides, material was being distributed to schools.
 - Regular communication had been maintained across Children's Services including the Sandwell Children's Trust, the Reset and Recovery Board, the Vulnerable Children's Group, SIMT and the Vulnerable People Cell meetings. There also continued to be regular communication and engagement with external partners including education providers and safeguarding partnerships, along with Ofsted and the DfE.
 - It was important to continue to hear the voices of children and young people and their families.

The Board noted the focus of the service going forward:

- To continue to update and implement guidance.
- To pursue the access to mass testing for schools and children – the Board emphasised the importance of testing and vaccinations in supporting front-line staff.
- To roll-out holiday activities and food-schemes over Easter, summer and Christmas holidays with Government funding identified for that scheme.
- To continue to work with schools regarding testing.
- To plan for Ofsted inspections and focussed visit relating to supporting vulnerable children.
- To carry out an induction process for the new CEO of the Sandwell Children's Trust.



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- To consult on keeping children safe in education.

The Chair welcomed the hard work staff had demonstrated through the last 12 months.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- the definition of 'Key Workers' had changed since the first lock-down in March 2020 to include a wider range of frontline workers, as a consequence, it had been reported that numbers of children attending school had increased significantly.
- In terms of attendance data for Sandwell schools it was reported that the DfE had only recently reinstated the collection of the data and figures were not yet available. The Director advised that four or five schools were recording pupil attendance at around 40% and that the situation would be monitored going forward and the matter would be raised with the DfE.
- In terms of teacher's clarity on Government guidance it was stated that teachers do know what they are doing, despite some questions they had concerning the guidance and that queries had been raised with the DfE.
- Following pressure from the teaching unions regarding earlier vaccination of frontline teaching staff, it was confirmed that no commitment had been received from government and this had been raised with the DfE and a response was expected.
- It was confirmed that Cabinet would be requested to approve the appointment of the new CEO of the Sandwell Children's Trust with effect from 5th April 2021. It was noted that following Cabinet approval the CEO would be attending meetings before the start date. The Chair extended an invitation to the new CEO (to be communicated through the Executive Director Children's Services) for them to attend the next Scrutiny Board on 15th March.



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- It was confirmed that some face to face meetings were proving difficult to arrange due to current restrictions and that there were delays for some children and young people who require face to face assessments for Education Health Care Plans and similar assessments, however delays were not currently at a stage where the Service was concerned, rather it was something to monitor going forward.
- There had been an 18% increase in children requiring Free School Meals compared to this time last year.
- Schools were not receiving extra funding up front from the government for the purchase of cleaning and personal hygiene resources, schools were making retrospective claims.
- Further data regarding the Winter Support Grant Scheme would be circulated to Members.
- The prevention of suicide and its prevalence with young people in the Borough was of concern to the Board. It was confirmed that there had sadly been a couple of very serious incidents in Sandwell recently and that efforts had been stepped up in schools to encourage young people to come forward and talk about issues if they needed to.

The Board supported a suggestion to hold a celebratory event for the Children's Services staff in recognition of those who had gone 'above and beyond' in their work, in relation to Children and Education, over the course of the pandemic.

The Chair indicated that an award event was already planned for Council staff which may encompass this suggestion. It was agreed to clarify the nature of the awards event currently planned and report back to the next Board meeting.

The Chair thanked the Executive Director Children's Services and the Director of Education, Employment and Skills for the update report and for their responses to questions.



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Agreed:

- 1) The Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board noted the update report and agreed that officers action the following matters:
 - a. The new Chief Executive of the Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) be invited to attend the next scrutiny board meeting on the 15th March, pending Cabinet approval of the appointment;
 - b. Current data relating to numbers of children entitled to Free School Meals in Sandwell be circulated to members of the Board;
 - c. Data relating to Winter Support Grant applications and allocations be circulated to members of the Board;
 - d. Information relating to a 'celebratory event' for Children's Services staff be considered at the next meeting of the Board.

6/21

Proposed Changes to Vocational Qualifications

The Principal and Deputy Principal of Sandwell College presented a report relating to the proposed change to vocational qualifications and its implications for the future of the College. The report set out the key themes of Sandwell Colleges response to the Government consultation.

The Principal thanked the Board for inviting him to speak on the matter and provided a brief overview of Sandwell College and its work in the community as a large supplier of post-16 educational and training provision.



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The Board noted that the College currently enrolled around 6,200 young people across its campuses, the College also enrolled 4,000 adult learners and employed hundreds of staff. The College worked hard to become more inclusive and offer more opportunities to students from all backgrounds. The Principal advised that the College had developed a partnership with the University of Wolverhampton to afford young people the opportunity to progress from the College to University. He advised that should a recent bid by the College, to the Towns Fund, be successful the College hoped to expand its campuses and vocational training, with a focus on health and adult care, and manufacturing sectors.

The Board noted that students had been making progress in terms of qualification attainment. In recent years there had been an increase in the number of young people progressing from Level 1 and 2 qualifications to Level 3, with a number of these students progressing to university. There had been a large increase in young people undertaking BTEC qualifications, which had become more demanding for students and had widened their future opportunities. The principal explained to the Board that the government was consulting on proposals to remove funding for BTECs and instead focus on T Levels. He explained that the T Level was a new qualification which would restrict the choice for young people, predetermine educational pathways and may result in young people not being able to progress to university. He voiced concern that the change could impact social mobility for those young people. Government consultation on this change ended at the end of the week and asked if members would want to respond on behalf of the Local Authority.

The Deputy Principal explained that BTEC qualifications had given young people from a BAME background an opportunity to access vocational and higher education. The Board noted that



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BTEC classes would often be comprised of 80% BAME students and that the move away from BTECs and towards T Levels may see BAME students disadvantaged. The Principal suggested that not having a BTEC option could increase the number of students who are NEET in the long term.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- In terms of the T Level and its potential impact on young people in Sandwell. One of the main issues was that the T Level included a requirement for work-experience, young people were required to undertake 300-900 hours of unpaid work as part of the qualification. For many young people in Sandwell this may not be an option. The government had not taken into consideration the young people who were disadvantaged. Another issue was that it was unclear how effective the T Level would be, the scope was narrow, and a young person may not have the foundation to progress to university after undertaking the course.
- BTECs were broad in their study and application while T Levels had the potential to be limiting and narrow in choice.
- It was clarified that there was no objection to T levels but that there was a need to retain BTECs as well.
- Cllr Shackleton emphasised how important vocational qualifications were and that it was important that complexities not be added.
- Young people and parents had not been consulted on these changes and it was questioned whether young people would think about the long-term implications at their age. The Principal advised that the College Student Council collected feedback from students.
- It was considered that Government was pursuing the line that A Levels would lead to university while T Levels would lead to work, but individual circumstance had not been taken into account.



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The Chair thanked the Principal and Deputy Principal of Sandwell College for bring the matter to the attention of the Board and for responding to questions.

The Board considered the merits of BTECs and how they benefit the young people of Sandwell. It was the consensus of the Board that a response should be made by the Local Authority to the Government consultation taking into account the comments of the Board.

The Chair requested that Cllr Millar, on behalf of the Scrutiny Board, work with the Executive Director of Children's to prepare a draft response, to be signed off by the Cabinet Members for Best Start in Life and Employment and Skills.

Agreed:

- 1) That the Executive Director Children's Services and Councillor Millar prepare a response to the Governments consultation on proposed changes to vocational qualifications; and the Cabinet Members for Best Start in Life and Employment and Skills be requested to sign off and submit the Councils response.

7/21

Elective Home Education Working Group

The Chair provided a brief overview of the progress of the Elective Home Education Working Group. He outlined the key lines of enquiry and the evidence gathering activities that had been undertaken.



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The Board noted that surveys had been carried out with parents and children in Elective Home Education (EHE) and that an assessment of feedback had been undertaken to identify the current support offer in Sandwell. The Chair indicated that a focus group with parents and advisory teachers had taken place which had been a useful and valuable exercise, clear and honest responses were collected, and many parents have had positive experiences with the Local Authority, however there were those whose experiences were more mixed.

The Chair outlined the next steps for the EHE Working Group, there was a workshop planned with teachers and headteachers, to gain a teaching perspective on elective home education and the group continued to analyse the evidence as it was collected.

The Group Head Education Support Services emphasised the importance of the evidence collection and advised that the EHE service continued to look both locally and nationally to identify best practice. She advised that the final report of the group would be developed in light of the evidence and research and should be very comprehensive.

The Board noted that the numbers of pupils being home educated continued to rise. Numbers were being monitored to see if the current increase in numbers dropped again following a relaxation in lockdown restrictions, when parents may feel confident to send their children back to school again.

The Chair welcomed the Area Advisor from the DfE to comment on the EHE work. The Area Advisor emphasised how keen and interested the DfE department was on the findings of the research



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being undertaken in Sandwell and asked if it could be shared once completed. He advised that the Education Select Committee was currently taking evidence with regards to EHE where interesting points had been raised.

The Board noted that other Local Authorities had also raised questions around data collection and the powers of the local authorities if intervention was required and how to better support parents that were selecting to home educate their children. The DfE Area Advisor confirmed that the Select Committee would be taking more evidence early in 2021.

The Chair highlighted the importance of the DfE Area Advisor attending the Scrutiny Board meeting and that the DfE was engaged in the work that was being undertaken. He agreed that the Working Group report would be going to the Select Committee as evidence and would hopefully be considered.

Agreed:

- 1) That the Board note the update report and confirm that the Elective Home Education Working Group evidence would be submitted to the Education Select Committee on Elective Home Education for consideration.

The next meeting will take place on the 15 March 2021 at 5.00pm

(Meeting ended at 7.03 pm)

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