

Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families

Summary Report



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14 November 2022

Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

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Chairs Introduction

The Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families Working Group was established in response and impact of the national lockdown on children and families. It was both crucial and timely for Scrutiny to focus on this issue to fully understand the impact on our young people's development and education.

The Group investigated several topics including impact of the lockdown on exam results, child poverty and social care. Members each had a specific work-stream on which to focus and were able to interview relevant officers and key witnesses to help their research.

The gap in educational achievement has widened for our most disadvantaged children particularly in the Early Years and it is hoped that the recommendations will help, without delay, to reduce this gap.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to discussions and evidence gathering.

Councillors Ann Shackleton and William Gill
Co-Chairs of the Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families Working Group

Introduction

The Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board (the Board), on 23 August 2021 resolved to establish a Working Group (the Group) to consider the educational and social impact of the national lockdown on children and families in the Borough.

Terms of Reference

Draft terms of references were discussed and agreed by the Board on 29th November 2021.

Lead Officers

The Group was supported by primarily the following officers:

Matt Powis	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Connor Robinson	Democratic Services Officer
Melanie Barnett	Group Head of Inclusive Learning

Membership

The Group consisted of the following Councillors:

Councillor Ann Shackleton (Co-Chair)
Councillor William Gill (Co-Chair)
Councillor Ian Chambers
Councillor Elizabeth Giles
Councillor Nicky Hinchliff
Councillor Richard McVittie
Councillor Kay Millar
Councillor Vicki Smith
Councillor Julie Webb
Kelly Heeley – Primary School Governor Representative
Kate Kujawa-Sogbesan – Secondary School Governor Representative

Methodology

The Group has held three formal meetings during its investigation. Each Member carried out their individual workstreams and interviewed a number of witnesses during the Group's investigation.

Working Group Meetings

The Working Group held three meetings where Members had the opportunity to ask questions from a number of different Council officers and partner organisations. The meetings focused on the following areas:

21 February 2022

Developments from Member workstreams and providing feedback from witness interviews.

28 March 2022

The Group received reports from Youth Services and Learning Advisory Support and provided questions.

25 April 2022

The Group received presentations from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) and Sandwell Children's Trust.

Return to School Survey

The Group commissioned a survey on the educational impact of the national lockdown on students, schools and parents since the start the Covid-19 pandemic.

Final responses and statistical information in relation to the survey can be viewed in the appendix.

Background and Context

In 2020, the UK was plunged into a national lockdown due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak. Whilst all Local Authorities and education providers across the country struggled with the continuation of education for children, the disruption caused was clear and profound.

On 23 August 2021, the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board considered a presentation on the Council's pandemic response and the wider impact of the national lockdown on children and families.

Whilst the report and presentation highlighted the proactive response from the Council and education providers to support children and families, there was still an appetite to understand the wider impact of the pandemic. This included interviewing and surveying children and families at the ground level. Therefore, there was a consensus that a working group was required in order to investigate and review recovery activity across multiple areas in education and social care.

The Board considered the draft Terms of Reference for the Group and agreed to undertake a review on the following:

- To understand and capture how the Council and Schools have progressed with recovery plans to improve standards and educational attainment.
- Identify methods and strategies employed by schools/academies to shrink
- The educational attainment gap and uplift standards.
- To understand the impact of the lockdown on exam results.
- To get a crosscutting picture of the impact of the lockdown on education attainment from a wide range of stakeholders.
- To investigate child poverty rates and mitigating measures.
- To understand the increasing pressure on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and those children and young people requiring EHCPs.

The Group expressed their gratitude to all the witnesses and officers that gave their time to support and help produce this report. This report is a broad summary of the group's findings and conclusions.

2.1 Education Attainment

Education attainment was a particular concern for the Group due to the long period of disruption in the education system.

Due to the pandemic, all primary assessments in 2020 and 2021 were cancelled. In addition, examination results in Key Stage 4 and 5 were based on centre assessment grades. This had meant that there was no performance tables or data officially available. The Group, therefore, relied on information and data provided by school leaders which was collated by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in March 2022¹.

The Group acknowledged general trends from the NFER which investigated several studies conducted on Covid-19 impacts on educational attainment. Following key findings were identified:

- At Key Stage 1, there was consistently a greater negative impact of the pandemic on Year 1 pupils. This emphasises the need for time and resources to be focused on the early literacy and numeracy skills of the youngest children at this critical stage in their development.
- In Key Stage 2, it was mathematics attainment that was impacted the most and which also showed slower recovery than reading.
- The evidence suggests that interventions and resources would be best targeted at the development of reading in Key Stage 1 and identifying areas of the Key Stage 2 mathematics curriculum with which pupils are struggling.
- There should be a renewed focus on reducing the disadvantage gap. There is strong evidence that this disadvantage gap has widened during the pandemic. This appears to have been greater in mathematics than in reading in most primary year groups.
- There is limited evidence concerning the impact of the pandemic on secondary-aged pupils, and in particular Key Stage 3.

By the Summer of 2022, the Government had introduced key policies to respond to attainment challenges such as a funding package to target and transform education opportunities for the most disadvantaged. In addition, the Government designated 55 local authorities as Educational Investment Areas, which included Sandwell.

¹https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4877/the_impact_of_covid_19_on_pupil_attainment.pdf - The Impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment, Published in March 2022.

Juniper Education conducted research on behalf of 6,000 schools which compared the attainment of primary school children in autumn 2019 with data from autumn 2021². The Group noted the key findings:

- All primary year groups have been affected by the prolonged disruption of the pandemic. However, it is the youngest children whose learning has been hit the hardest (a particular reference to Year 3 pupils).
- All year groups have seen bigger drops in writing than in the other subjects. The biggest fall in writing attainment was for Year 3.
- The gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils has widened over the course of the pandemic, with the attainment gaps growing for all primary cohorts, and wider gaps forming for Year 3.
- The gap between younger children with SEN and their classmates has widened during the pandemic (a particular reference to Year 3). Some of the gaps for children with SEN are closing, particularly for children in Year 6.
- It is the Year 6 cohort which has shown the greatest resilience in learning, where there have been some signs of improvement.

The Group recognised the importance of elective home education and noted the previous Scrutiny review into the matter. During the pandemic, many parents felt confident in 'home-schooling' their children and wished to continue the practice even when there was a return to school. This would reduce childcare costs where parents were working from home. It was highlighted that the increase in home-schooled children had increased nationally. However, the Group welcomed proposals for a national register of children registered as home educated.

The Group were informed of the impact as a result of the changes to educational assessments in 2020 and 2021. It was noted that there was a record pass rate for GCSE English and Maths not only for England but for Sandwell.

² <https://junipereducation.org/blog/the-national-dataset-report-2022/> - Published 16 March 2022

Percentage achieving 9-4 in English & mathematics (from 2016/17 (academic) to 2020/21 (academic)) for Sandwell

Period	% achieving 9-4 in English and maths			
	%			
	Sandwell	Minimum for All English single tier local authorities	Mean for All English single tier local authorities	Maximum for All English single tier local authorities
2015/16 (academic)	no value	no value	no value	no value
2016/17 (academic)	52.2	47.5	63.6	84.2
2017/18 (academic)	50.7	41.9	64.0	93.3
2018/19 (academic)	54.4	40.8	64.2	80.1
2019/20 (academic)	61.2	0.0	70.1	84.4
2020/21 (academic)	61.6	51.9	71.8	84.8

Source:
Department for Education

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There was an acknowledgement that the increased pass rates in both core subjects could encourage more students to progress onto A-Level and vocational courses. Pandemic challenges had also impacted apprenticeship availability for post-16 students due to the pressures on the labour market.

Recommendation 1

That, the Council:

Welcomes the Borough's designation as an Education Investment Area by the Government and works co-operatively with the Department for Education to improve the education standards of children and young people;

Be proactive in working with schools in the area to consider the creation or adoption of multi-academy trusts;

Be proactive in considering suitable locations in the Borough for specialist sixth-form free schools which are funded by central government;

Join the Department for Education 1-2-1 attendance mentoring pilot to monitor issues in schools across the Borough.

Recommendation 2

That, the Cabinet Member for Children and Education attend the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board at least three times per municipal year to:

- a. Present an overview of their work in relation to their Cabinet portfolio;**
- b. Produce and present a report on the Council's progress to deliver Ambition 1 of the Council's Vision 2030 in particular the delivery of raising aspirations and resilience, young people to have skills for the future and raising the quality of schools.**

That, the Council pledge to improve and increase the Borough's educational assessment data in line with the national average by 2027, in line with the aims and objectives of Vision 2030.

That, the Government engage with education practitioners to understand the long-term problems caused by the national pandemic and prepare appropriate resources to help children and young people recover academically, socially and psychologically.

2.2 Child Development Journey and Virtual School

There was a view that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated general inequalities in education. There was a consensus that parents in the Borough were overwhelmed by the prospect of supporting children with their schoolwork, some did nothing, and there was the reality that not every school-aged pupil had access to online learning materials.

Feedback provided to the Group highlighted that many parents working from home had mixed loyalties to either help their children or to work from home and maintain their employment status, so many children were left to their own devices to spend the day, sometimes without getting dressed, on phones, playing games or communicating with their friends.

The Group recognise that the aforementioned issues usually relate to low-income families which can have a direct correlation to attainment results overall. An article from *The Guardian* from August 2022 highlighted that ‘despite decades of policy attention, there has been virtually no changes in the disadvantage gap in GCSE attainment over the past 20 years. While GCSE attainment has been increasing over time, 16-year-olds who are eligible for free school meals are still around 27 percentage points less likely to earn good GCSEs than less disadvantaged peers.’

The article goes on to explain that ‘the Covid-19 pandemic put the education system under enormous strain, with significant learning loss overall and a huge increase in educational inequalities.’³

This was echoed by research carried out by the London School of Economics, Centre for Economic Performance, which confirmed ‘pupils across the UK have lost out on a third of their learning time since the pandemic started, even once learning at home is taken into account. Learning loss accounted for 61 days of schooling on average between March 2020 and April 2021’.⁴

In response to the challenges faced by the pandemic, the Government announced a package worth £4.9 billion for school recovery. A large proportion of the funding was earmarked for 15-hour tutoring courses for disadvantaged pupils. Subsequently in the Autumn Spending Review, funding was allocated to Recovery Premium to invest in non-academic programmes of particular significance is the launch of the National

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/aug/16/no-improvement-in-school-attainment-gap-in-england-for-20-years-report-says> - Published, 16 August 2022

⁴ <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/new/publications/abstract.asp?index=8228> – Learning loss since lockdown: variation across the home nations – Published, July 2021

Programme to further assist young people most affected by the pandemic.

The Group had concerns and questions relating to the Government recovery fund and national programme. As such there was a consensus for the Council to receive assurances on the following issues:

- Effective monitoring of the success of programmes related to the National Programme.
- Personal specifications and qualification requirements of the tutors.
- Identification of the most affected age groups.
- Identification of where the gaps in learning have been identified and responded to positively and funds used appropriately and at the other end of the scale where monies and support packages have not been successful.
- Evaluation of existing Government initiatives and use of Council resources.
- Benchmarking other Local Authorities and other countries that have put in place to address this common agenda of ensuring the Council can help children to make up for the loss of learning during the pandemic.

The Group then considered the impact of Virtual School, it was noted that this was a statutory service which exists to support and challenge all those that are involved in supporting the education of looked after children. The Sandwell Virtual School (LACE) was paramount to the success of making sure that staff, children, families and the Borough's looked after children were supported during the lockdown. This success was highlighted as follows:

- Assessments took place as usual with an emphasis on the most vulnerable children.
- 380 looked after children of school age were prioritised for computers and 170 were distributed to children outside of Sandwell.
- Education Resource Packs were delivered to 16 homes.
- Year 11 were supported with College applications.
- Personal Education Plans (PEP) continued in and out of Borough with over 90% of the plans completed.
- Pupils falling behind before the national lockdown had the opportunity to liaise with Social Workers, carers and school staff.
- Government Grants helped with the purchase of laptops and tutors.
- 92 children received packs for creative activities based on 'laziness.'
- Key workers were utilised to effectively support young people. These workers provided consistency, availability and stability during a period of uncertainty.

The Group noted the success of LACE as evidenced by Ofsted and other relevant bodies that continue to praise the work of the Virtual School. This served a consistent and meaningful factor in the lives of so many children and families. There was recognition of the Government's White Paper on 'opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child'. This paper suggested an increase in the 'school day' to 32.5 hours a week. It was therefore recommended for the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board to receive a future report on the implications of such a proposal once formally published by the Government.

There is no doubt that LACE played a significant role in ensuring that Children in Care (CIC) received the best possible support from all relevant agencies, often face to face but more often through the online process. However, based on feedback obtained, attainment levels suffered, and effort made to get the children back on track.

In addition to Virtual School, the Group recognised the success of the Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS). This service provides necessary support and advice to families coming from overseas to ensure they can integrate and settle into their new life in the Borough. The work of the STEPs centre had been instrumental in supporting the needs of the community. It was all driven by the needs of the cohort, the context and the community challenge.

It was highlighted that there were noticeable attainment gaps in learning in Year 8 pupils from STEPS. These children had missed out on effective transitioning from primary to secondary school. As a result, building and maintaining relationships with peers presented major challenges and in particular a barrier to learning.

Recommendation 3

The Council encourages and supports schools in the Borough to provide sports programmes and extracurricular activities to help children catch up in all areas of lost learning and experiences and to improve mental and physical health;

That, the Government should provide specific monetary assistance to children eligible for free school meals to take part in extracurricular activities;

That, the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive a future report on the implications of the Government's white paper on 'Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child';

That, the Council review it's partnership working with education providers and the Sandwell Children's Trust to ensure that actions, outcomes and best practice work are shared to ensure we are working cohesively together.

2.3 Education Health and Care Plans and SEND

Since the introduction of the SEND Reforms in 2014, the number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) has nearly doubled. In 2021 maintained over 2700 EHCP's and this number continues to grow. Over the pandemic, the Council in partnership with Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) continued to engage with early years providers and education establishments. This engagement was vital, and enabled providers to receive information on risk assessments, remote learning and free school meal arrangements as well as much more.

Due to the pandemic, like many services across the Council, areas of children's services and education had to adapt and innovate. Such innovations included the Council successfully carrying out virtual school admission appeal hearings and developing a Return to School Support Strategy. As a result, the Council was awarded the 'Innovation in Children's Services Award 2020' from the MJ Awards.

Despite the success of the Council's streamlining services, if the current growth in population continues it was predicted that there could be an estimated 3500 children or young people, in Sandwell, with an EHCP by 2025. Whilst this increase was a national trend and not unique to Sandwell, it remained concerning.

Members were keen to identify personal experiences from parents and carers in the Borough. Using an online survey, the Group began to identify the following themes:

- There was a lack of specialist support available in schools during lockdowns.
- Several children were identified as have struggled with a lack of routine whilst not attending school.
- There was a noticeable regression in speech and language.

- There were noticeable concerns around emotional, social and mental health with children feeling isolated, experiencing anxiety and frustration.
- Children had minimal contact with school staff with some children only interacting with school staff once per week at most.

Whilst there were a number of concerns raised, a small number of parents and carers had positive experiences and said that they enjoyed having their child/children at home and that their child/children actively benefitted from this.

Members of the Group engaged with a number of Council officers and partners on the support available to children, parents and schools during the pandemic. It was noted that most school lessons were held online using Microsoft Teams and Zoom however, for vulnerable children, physical arrangements were put in place as required. For children who did attend school, they experienced:

- A lack of specialised or inconsistency of staff due to Covid-19;
- Issues with face masks making lip reading impossible for deaf and hard-of-hearing children;
- A lack of at-home aid equipment which would usually be provided in a school environment;
- Increases in social and emotional needs;
- Not using hearing aids and screen readers causes further impact on their development.

The Group noted the experiences gathered by Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) with particular regard to the impact on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and children and families. During the national lockdown, children were unable to access short breaks, personal assistant care support or respite. However, some carers accessed homes, but only for nursing care if medically essential. The inability to access usual care and respite provision put a noticeable strain on parents, carers and families in the Borough.

Whilst all children and young people with SEND/Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) were classed as 'vulnerable' during the lockdown and were able to go to school, this only happened in 20-30% of cases, as attendance was not compulsory in this category. It was noted that all Sandwell Special Schools remained open during the pandemic.

The Sandwell Parents of Disabled Children group continued throughout the pandemic and adjusted the service accordingly to meet the expectations and requirements of Government guidance. This involved stopping peer-to-peer support, arranging Zoom interactions and offering

one-to-one doorstep support as a replacement. This service had been commended by parents, especially for the use of well-being and activity packs provided to children and carers despite the challenges faced during the pandemic.

An article in The Independent from August 2022 highlighted that the 'National Deaf Children's Society urged the Government to use its review of how children with special educational needs and disabilities are supported in schools'.⁵

There was a consensus in the Group that parents, carers and families with children who have SEND need more support, more quickly and from a variety of sources. The lack of respite and short breaks impacted a decline in the mental health of children and their carers. This is in addition to the wider impact of children with SEND being adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

The Parent Voice:

"My son is on spectrum of autism and asperges. Being away from everybody made him actually quite happy. However, I have felt that progress that school did with him before Covid stopped and actually went back. It is like he lost whole work he done so far".

"Daughter in mainstream secondary school with an EHCP. Initially worksheets sent by school, but these were not age appropriate. Daughter struggled and stopped engaging. A once a week phone call (welfare check) Schools could have done more. Lack of support for SEND kids. January – Easter 2021 Lessons went online, but they were generic lessons, not differentiated. Some teachers lacking in IT equipment and IT skills. Teaching assistant in the background online, but not seen. No contact from SENCO at all. ECHP ignored, no value at all during 2021/2021. The support was not there".

"First lockdown, no online lessons just homework set by email. Not enough structure, my child couldn't cope. He had lots of frustration and meltdowns. Second lockdown better, he had online lessons. Son has EHCP so needed extra support, but missed out on this".

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/society-gcse-department-for-education-gcse-results-government-b2151271.html> – Published, 24 August 2022

Recommendation 4

That, the Council and Sandwell Children's Trust:

Ensure that all SEND children in Sandwell have access to the right services, provisions and support;

Continue to monitor the progress of SEND and EHCP children in regard to educational attainment;

Examine ways to effectively and appropriately communicate with parents and carers of families with SEND or EHCP children to ensure they are not alone and have the right support;

Assess and capture lessons learned data following the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.4 Young People

The impact on young people was an area of concern for the Group, especially with the difficulties of accessing services as a result of the pandemic. The Group welcomed and received the Council's Young People's Survey 2020 which was produced by Shafaq Hussain, Senior Youth Officer for Smethwick and Oldbury.

This report outlined a snapshot of the experiences of young people throughout the pandemic which outlined 8 recommendations for the Council and applicable partners outlined below:

1. the Council and partners need to use social media more effectively in supporting young people. Too often Facebook and Twitter are used instead of more popular platforms among young people, such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Whatsapp and Snapchat.
2. There needs to be more opportunities for young people to engage meaningfully in decision making processes, where they can see their value and influence in shaping and making changes to services. It may be worthwhile doing a follow up survey in the autumn with young people as they return to full time education, to see how they are feeling and what their support needs are during this transition period.
3. To establish a digital leaders group for young people to shape digital communication strategies and how services engage with them.

4. Organisations and services should take account of how young people value family and friends and how services work holistically with the individual and their support networks.
5. The recommendation is for partners who have lead responsibility around loneliness, mental health and wellbeing to lead further work around tackling this problem and a working group initiated to discuss ways partners can work more effectively together to tackle this issue and support young people. Another recommendation is to build on resilience and independence within both the schools' Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and youth service curriculum but also in other settings, where young people may be able to enhance these skills.
6. The recommendation is for school leaders to acknowledge that for some young people the education gap will be wider than for others as a result of the pandemic and the lack of home schooling and access to resources and therefore a more concerted effort will need to support these young people to catch up. A partnership approach will also need to look at wrap around support for young people outside of school to ensure the needs of young people and families are identified and addressed.
7. Partners need to look at providing a joint up offer of support during the summer and beyond to ensure access to services. This should include fun, enjoyable, sports, arts, youth and play activities with support on ways to cope with Coronavirus and its effect and impact on people's lives. The Council and partners should look at how they embed this new-found passion for the arts, culture and sports in future youth programmes and strategies. Services need to improve how they market and promote themselves to young people using existing and new mechanisms to enable this to happen.
8. The Council needs to continue investing in detached youth work to reach those young people who choose not to engage in other youth work settings. Often youth workers may be the only significant other 'trusted' adult in a young person's life and the positive relationship between young person and youth worker should be utilised to provide support and address issues and concerns at the earliest opportunity, to avoid escalation of need. It is evident that those young people that access youth provision value this and the relationship they have with workers. Further work needs to be done around promoting and marketing the youth offer, identifying gaps and maximising resources to provide the right provision in the right locations in collaboration with young people.

Whilst the Group welcomed the continued engagement with young people, there was a desire to investigate the long-term impact of the pandemic on young people. Following research, interviews and discoveries carried out by the Group are outlined as follows:

Youth Impact

- Youth unemployment during the pandemic had increased significantly due to the industries that were particularly vulnerable e.g. hospitality sector.
- There was a consensus that more young people stayed in education due to the uncertain employment situation and reduction in the number of apprenticeships, work experience placements and internships.
- Acknowledged and welcomed the Government's Youth Review response which confirmed that 'by 2025 every young person will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home and volunteering opportunities'⁶.
- Research carried out by Brock University and the University of Glasgow concluded that 'digital platforms don't in themselves bridge geographical, socio-economic or cultural differences. The way people navigate digital spaces – their experience of being online doing something - depends on their experiences, their geographical locations or contexts and their preferred way of expressing themselves'⁷.
- Youth work and engagement were vital in ensuring many children and young people have the best start in life. In this respect, the Group supported the recommendations from UK Youth's Benefits of youth work to current Government priorities: August 2021⁸

Sandwell Connexions

- There had been reductions in usual marketing and career fayre activity.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-review-summary-findings-and-government-response/youth-review-summary-findings-and-government-response> – Published, 1 February 2022

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/digital-platforms-alone-dont-bridge-youth-divides-121222> - Published, 3 May 2020

⁸ <https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Benefits-of-youth-work-to-current-govt-priorities.pdf> – Published, August 2021.

- There had been some positive examples of cross partnerships working to offer work experience to young people. Project Search was highlighted as an example of good practice.
- Some education providers were not prioritising career advice.
- Connexion advisors still remained in every Borough secondary academy and maintained school.
- The Connexions service adapted its virtual service offer and working practices for schools.

Mental Health

- There were concerns that the increase of social isolation had increased peer group pressure, digital exclusion, poverty and issues of self-worth.
- Uncertainty around work experience, internships and apprenticeship placements had increased anxiety amongst young people.
- Impact on wider mental health as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions ending.
- Concerns around wider societal pressures and alienation with hybrid work.

The Group acknowledged that the full effects of the pandemic with young people had still yet to be fully understood. However, there was a consensus that the changes within the education system, increased cost of living, education costs especially in higher education and changes in qualifications would further distance young people from mainstream services and work opportunities.

Therefore, it was recommended that the Council identify pathways to support, mentor and encourage young people in the Borough.

Recommendation 5

That the Council investigates ways to connect with young people and offer extra support, mentoring and encouragement such as:

- a. Establish a peer mentoring programme;**
- b. Encourage social youth work, sports, drama, and outdoor activities;**
- c. Encourage and support volunteering;**
- d. Engage with local businesses to improve the number of available apprenticeships;**
- e. Support a holistic youth services experience which accompanies physical and digital offer;**
- f. Support and Champion a new Eco Bus with young people's involvement.**

2.5 Emotional Health and Wellbeing Support

Emotional health and wellbeing support was highlighted as a concern for the Group given the increased prominence of mental health issues amongst children and young people. A recent Government survey found that in 2020 one in six young people identified as having a probable mental health disorder⁹. The Group sought to understand the correlation between mental health referrals and the wider impact of local and national lockdowns.

The University of Strathclyde Glasgow published a study on the impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, which found that:

1. Direct impacts on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing – the evidence on the direct impact of lockdown on mental health and wellbeing of children and young people yields mixed findings, with some studies indicating an increased likelihood of PTSD symptoms in quarantined children. Overall, studies point to increased levels of distress, worry and anxiety. Some likely reasons include increased feelings of loneliness and worries about school and the future.

⁹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmhealth/17/report.html> – Published, 9 December 2021

2. Impacts within the family context – the evidence on the mental health and wellbeing impacts for parents/carers points to family contexts where the experiences of lockdown may have been particularly difficult for children and young people. These groups include families where parents/carers are key workers, are younger, and have a history of mental health/physical health conditions. More generally, those families within disadvantaged communities, black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, and those affected by violence are more likely to be negatively affected by lockdown.
3. Impacts within the context of education – the evidence reviewed suggests that many of the worries and anxieties children and young people have been experiencing relate to returning to school, missing school, and the future. Moreover, some evidence suggests that engagement with the curriculum has been disrupted for many children and young people, including those without sufficient digital access, physical space, and other resources to support their learning.

The Group noted the study by the University of Strathclyde Glasgow and were informed of the delivery of emotional health and well-being support was provided by the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

Pre- and post-analysis of CAMHS referrals was conducted which outlined that referrals into mental health services such as Kaleidoscope and Kooth had increased month on month from June 2020 onwards. This had been a direct result of general increases in referrals into the service as well as turnovers of specialist staff members. This meant that average waiting times for a first initial assessment within specialist Sandwell CAMHS was 11 weeks before March 2020, this then decreased to 5 weeks during Covid-19 and increased to 11 weeks in January 2022. Whilst referral rates had fluctuated across the Borough, increases had mirrored a national picture of increases across mental health services.

Since the publication of the transforming children and young people's mental health green paper in 2017, the Government expanded the reach of mental health services into education environments. This allowed new Educational Mental Health Practitioners (EMHP) to be created and trained on how to handle evidence-based interventions in school environments. Interventions would work in tandem with counselling, inclusion, school nurse services and CAMHs. Whilst the full deployment of EMHP staffing was ongoing, there were areas of concern on the viability of the deployment of the practitioners as there were delays in the rollout due to the pandemic, recruitment shortages in the sector and consistency of the delivery model.

There was some progress in alleviating some of the issues to address recruitment shortages such as changing the delivery model to integrating Educational Psychologists and establishing a Sandwell Steering Group for Mental Health Support Teams which would comprise School Representatives, School Nursing and other relevant officers.

Feedback received from both practitioners, children and young people, highlighted the following post Covid-19 concerns across the sector:

- Increases in the number of referrals lead to excessive wait times across mental health services.
- Struggles to recruit and maintain long-term practitioners in the sector.
- Worries about the limitation of mental health services to only virtual appointments.
- Children and young people have increases in anxiety and a reduction in confidence levels since the national lockdown.
- Young people report worries about self-esteem and isolation as a result of the national lockdown, relationships and general insecurities.
- The establishment of the Department for Education (DfE) link programme delivered by the Anna Freud Centre was highlighted as a success by bringing partner agencies together to improve awareness of services and build relationships to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The Group received assurances from the Black Country and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) about its commitment to learn from the national lockdown and improve the outcomes for children and young families. An example included the promotion of learning from the National Panel of Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews.

There had been some progress made within the sector on adapting and using more virtual and telephone solutions for appointments, especially with prevention and early intervention services. The Group noted the Voluntary Sector Emotional Wellbeing Programme which was established from June 2021 to August 2022 with the intention of delivering targeting support to children and young people. The programme had the following delivery requirements:

- Emotional well-being support strategies to children and young people in Sandwell through personal strategies to build confidence and resilience.
- Targeting children and young people with additional support requirements that are not currently accessing services.

- Providing support for children and young people identified as being impacted by domestic abuse including family support.
- Delivering immediate support to ensure pace keeps up with the demand of the service.

This programme encompassed a number of funded projects within the Borough that were successfully delivering emotional health and well-being support for children and young people. Whilst there had been successful programme delivery for mental health services in Sandwell, concerns still remained on the increased prominence of mental health among children and young people.

The Parent Voice:

“I’ve lost both of my parents to Covid. They died within a month from each other. My son had difficulty with processing this. Then three months after we lost my dad, I become poorly with Covid. I did not have to go to hospital just isolated at home. My son was so scared that something is going to happen to me that he slept on the floor by my bedroom doors. Even now year after recovery if I cough or say I am not feeling very well he is panicking and want to call ambulance. He become very clingy and anxious”.

Recommendation 6

That, the Government be requested to provide adequate, realistic funding to address young peoples’ recovery to support the Council’s ambition to improve academic performance, socialisation, conversation, mental health and wellbeing;

That, the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board monitors the recovery strategy of mental health services within the Borough.

2.6 Child Poverty and Pupil Premium

The Group noted that child poverty rates have increased generally across Sandwell since 2015 according to *Action for Children*. The West Midlands in particular had the third highest child poverty rates in 2019/20 in England with Birmingham and London identified as cities with the greatest concentration of child poverty. Given the proximity of Birmingham to Sandwell, there were that parts of the Borough that had above-average child poverty rates.

In particular, the constituency of Warley had more than 11,445 children living in poverty between 2019 - 20 which represented more than 48% of children living in the constituency¹⁰.

Due to the pandemic and the limited ability to collate data, it remained unclear whether overall poverty rates across Sandwell and the UK had continued to increase post-2020 pandemic. The Joseph Roundtree Foundation outlined the key risk areas between 2020 and 2024 with child poverty¹¹:

Driver	Effect of increase	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Employment	Generally, poverty reducing	Increasing rents but eviction freezes and falling mortgage costs because of falling interest rates and mortgage holidays	Small increases In employment but still below 2019/20, with a limited further reduction in employment expected from furlough ending	Uncertain but Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) projections show rising employment throughout the year
Earnings	Ambiguous – can increase poverty if benefitting middle income households more than low-income	Broadly flat on average in real terms, protected by furlough scheme	Broadly flat on average in real terms, protected by furlough scheme	Increasing in cash terms with a high increase in the National Living Wage, but increases eaten away by high inflation and increases in National Insurance
Benefits	Generally poverty reducing	Increased especially £20 uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits, and Local Housing Allowance (LHA) reset to actual rents	Six months of increased Universal Credit, followed by improved Universal Credit rates for working families but cut for	Improved Universal Credit rates for working families, Universal Credit cut for workless families means those rates are lowest for 30 years in real

¹⁰ https://take.actionforchildren.org.uk/page/82559/action/1?ea.tracking.id=afc_website_blog&_ga=2.157051323.1242259437.1655302672-813208746.1655302672 – Published July 2022

¹¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2022> - Published January 2022

			workless families, reset LHA frozen	terms, mitigations in Northern Ireland and the introduction of new benefits in Scotland reduce further increases in poverty, reset LHA frozen
Housing Costs	Generally poverty increasing	Increasing rents but eviction freezes and falling mortgage costs because of falling interest rates and mortgage holidays	Ending or rolling back of temporary pandemic measures, support towards rent arrears introduced, rents continuing to increase	Rents continuing to increase and mortgages increasing due to likely higher interest rates
Inflation	Limited effect on relative poverty but will increase cost of living	Overall rate flat, but key components of food, housing and utility costs rising	Large increases projected to over 4% by end of period	Projected to remain above 3% throughout year

As mentioned previously, the £20 increase to Universal Credit (UC) and other benefits which was implemented from March 2020 to October 2021 was positively received by many families across the country and highlighted as an area of positive benefit for families. Given the period during the pandemic, the number of new claimants for UC had increased from less than 200,000 to over 1.2m. Whilst the numbers of new claimants of UC have dropped to pre-pandemic levels, the overall number of those of UC remains high compared to pre-pandemic levels with 5.6 million claimants as of January 2022 compared to 3 million in March 2020¹².

The Group was mindful of the link between the rate of UC claimant numbers with the levels of child poverty and pupil premium figures.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-13-january-2022/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-13-january-2022#people-on-uc-header> – Published 15 February 2022

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)¹³ undertook research in respect of the pandemic's impact on pupil disadvantage. This study investigated pupil premium and free school meals (FSM) data, key findings of this study included:

- The transitional arrangements introduced by the Government to smooth the roll-out of UC are significantly increasing the number of FSM-eligible pupils.
- The Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a sharp increase in the number of families in poverty, with the number of FSM eligible pupils increasing by almost 300,000 between January 2020 and 2021.
- The pupils who became newly FSM eligible in January 2021 were mainly from families in the lower half of the income distribution.

The Government announcement of the Covid-19 Winter Scheme at the end of 2020 allocated £1.4m to the Borough's most vulnerable households. The scheme ring-fenced 80% of the Borough's allocation to vulnerable households with children. This support enabled families to cover the cost of food, utilities and other essentials. In addition to the Winter Scheme, the Council took the decision to approve the provision of free school meal vouchers during the October 2021 half-term holiday.

Whilst the Group noted the work carried out by the Government and the Council to reduce child poverty, concerns remained on the long-term impact of social security funding, national inflation and cost of living.

The Parent Voice:

"My kids did not have proper hot meal for good six months. We were so broke that I could not afford to buy good quality of food. All we had was school meal vouchers. Did you ever try to feed family of 4 for £30 a week? And 2 of them are growing teenagers?"

"My husband was only breadwinner in our family and when he lost his job we found our self in very difficult situation. Before Covid we never lived expensive life, but I never was scared how I will pay all our bills or will I have food for my kids. Now we were struggling. There were times when I had to make decision will we eat or have bill paid. Kids could see it and even though we did not speak about this with them they knew we are not doing great. At some point we were unable to pay for out internet bill and we were cut off for nearly a month. Kids later admit to us that they were made fun of as someone guessed why they were absent in online classes".

¹³ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/investigating-the-changing-landscape-of-pupil-disadvantage/> - Published 18 January 2022

2.7 Children's Social Care

Since 2018, Children's Social Care in Sandwell has been managed by the Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) following a statutory direction by Government. The Council supports the Trust to deliver the necessary responsibilities for children's social care and targeted early help services. However, the Council remains overall statutory responsibility for the delivery of children's social care. As a result, the Council maintains a close working relationship to ensure all children and young people remain safe. This responsibility was particularly imperative during the pandemic. The Group noted the following success stories from the Council's and SCT cooperation during the pandemic:

- The Council enabled the Trust to access its various grants to support increased costs as a result of the pandemic and fast-tracked agile IT for social workers.
- Services across the Council and SCT continued their engagement work with children and young people despite pandemic challenges.
- Additional resources were allocated to services to support domestic abuse, emotional health and wellbeing and internet safety training.
- In addition to the Department for Education (DfE) funding for remote education technology, an additional 1800 IT devices were allocated to vulnerable children who had not accessed DfE equipment.
- Services across the Council and Trust innovated as a result of the pandemic and in some cases, improved service performance.
- The Corporate Parenting Board continued to engage throughout the pandemic via virtual communication channels.
- Ofsted Assurance Visits in 2021 highlighted improvements to the Trust's technology offer and support to Foster Carers.

The Group was keen to ascertain information on SCT's recovery planning following the challenges of the pandemic and to understand the longer-term impact of social care.

The challenges which faced SCT had mirrored those faced by Local Authorities nationally and the issue of remaining in contact with children to ensure their overall wellbeing. The Group noted the following points raised by the Trust as part of their recovery plans:

- Recruitment and retention of qualified social workers was an issue which had persisted prior to the pandemic. However, the Trust was working to increase the levels of permanent social workers and decrease the rates of agency staff employed.
- Multi-agency working remains restrictive with services and visits to children continuing to work virtually.

- The Local Offer which identifies SEND provision from across the sector has reduced due to many providers struggling to recruit staff within local communities.
- Review of engagement method with Child Protection Conferences as there was a view from families that felt more engaged with a virtual appointment rather than face to face.
- SCT continues to utilise home working whilst including a phased return into the office.
- Building on the good practices throughout the pandemic, SCT had worked to create staffing rotas to prioritise front-line social work teams.
- Social Workers had reverted to visiting children and families face to face thus improving direct work rather than virtual communication.
- Deep dives into Practice Reviews had been undertaken to test the quality of safeguarding practices.

Whilst challenges remained in the sector, the Council and SCT had demonstrated close partnership working through challenging periods. The Group remained confident that the Trust would recover from the pandemic despite issues arising in relation to social worker agency costs.

In respect of the Corporate Parenting Board, it was noted that the Board continued to ensure that Children in Care and Care Leavers were as far as possible supported during the pandemic. The Group welcomed feedback provided by care leavers and gained useful insight into their experiences from the pandemic. This can be viewed in the report's appendices.

Recommendation 7

The Council in partnership with Sandwell Children's Trust continue to monitor the challenges facing the industry including the recruitment and retention of social workers;

The Council and Sandwell Children's Trust continue to support the Borough's children in care and care leavers in their post-pandemic recovery.

2.8 Early Years

The Group were informed that the number of children attending early years settings were significantly impacted due to the pandemic.

Following the initial lockdown period in 2020 as the UK was transitioning into Covid-19 restrictions, it took time to reset sessions for families. Attendance figures in children centres gradually rose and centres across the Borough were inundated with families wanting to gain access, meet other people and socialise. This was particularly important for the Borough's disadvantaged 2-year-old children where it was noted that uptake funding dropped to 56% during the pandemic.

This was a consensus that measures should be put in place to ensure the attainment gap is closed for disadvantaged children that were severely impacted by the pandemic. This task involves partners and organisations reaching out and engaging with families. A study on the implications of Covid-19 for Early Childhood Education and Care in England found that 'the pandemic has highlighted the pivotal role of early education in children's social, emotional and cognitive development. But children from disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds, who are most likely to benefit from formal early learning, are also the children most likely to miss out. The inequality gap has widened, with a likely consequence being that the attainment gap also widens. If this trend is to be reversed, there needs to be more funding from the Government to ensure that disadvantaged children have equity of access to quality early years education, including new statutory responsibilities and funding for local authorities to ensure high-quality and accessible childcare provision is a key component of the local offer to families with young children – across the country'.¹⁴

Whilst uptake funding had dropped locally, comparative national data identified that take-up funding had decreased from 69% to 62% in the period between January 2020 and January 2021. However, the biggest impact on children could be seen with both personal and social development (PSD) and communication, language and literacy development (CLL).

It was noted that a multi-agency CLL pathway works with speech and language therapy and the Inclusion Support team to ensure children access the necessary interventions they need.

¹⁴ <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/concern-inequality-gap-has-increased-children-ethnic-minority-and-disadvantaged-backgrounds-miss-out?page=2> – Published 20 June 2022

Initiatives such as Wellcomm Toolkit, I Can Early talk boost, Tots talker and the Nuffield Early Language Toolkit were highlighted as examples of good practice in the sector.

In respect of family support, the Outcomes Star was outlined as a meaningful way of measuring the well-being of families with evidence-based tools. This method was overlaid with internal audits, supervision of staff and regular data collection.

New initiatives were launched such as 'Train the Trainer' using National Literacy Trust strategies. This initiative was particularly important to develop the confidence of practitioners and providers as the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework was introduced during this period.

Training and development of intervention strategies have a key role in the early identification of SEND children as a useful tool for practitioners. Practitioners within children's centres undertake speech and language assessments at around the two-year-old mark which allows centres to identify those children with potential development delays and support accordingly using the Council's watchful eye programme. However, when families were not attending as a result of the pandemic, the identification of children that were showing signs of development delay reduced.

Due to the pandemic, virtual screening was carried out with some success by the children's centre staff and the actual screening sessions were the first to recommence after lockdown. Any highlighted concerns were identified with practitioners such as Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) and Health Visitors etc and then followed up with families.

The Group noted the following concerns from research and interviewed carried out within early years settings:

- There was a reported rise in the number of speech and language assessments showing red scores (significant delay in development).
- Staff were reporting that children are more anxious due to the lack of socialisation such as being clingier to their parents, reluctant to engage with other children, and gross motor skills are less developed.
- Emphasis on managing children's behaviour – setting routines and boundaries; getting children back to school.
- Providing reassurance to parents and children about the safeguards put in place to reduce infection risks. There was a consensus that some schools found that parents reacted positively to the increased

use of videos, text messaging and social media as a form of communication between the school and families.

- Support through Children Centres continued throughout the pandemic with referrals to key partner agencies as appropriate.
- A fragile childcare market was impacted by parents working from home and only taking up 15 hours as opposed to 30 hours. It was noted that some nurseries in the Borough reduced their staffing to term time only.
- There had been a reduction of nurseries which had been seen locally and nationally.
- There had been a significant increase in EHCPs requests within the early years group. Before March 2020, there was an average of 12 referrals a week. This figure had increased to an average of 38 requests a week.

A snapshot of specific experiences and issues from Children's Centres can be viewed in the report appendices.

There was recognition of the Specialist Early and Sensory Support teams which worked incredibly hard to reduce the number of referral caseloads and to ensure that the highest priorities are referred to the Child Development Centre rather than some partner agencies such as NHS bodies. However, this still has not stopped parents from referring children to partner agencies due to backlogs in usual treatments such as ear syringing and grommets which have resulted in more children being given hearing aids or additional support.

The Group noted that the biggest challenge is managing demand in education and health. Increases in caseloads were creating a delay for families to get appropriate professional advice to support children to get the assessments they need. In addition, Schools are struggling with the increase in demand and need the training to manage this. There was a consensus that the Council and education providers needed to ensure the system can manage the current capacity and that demand does not outweigh capacity, especially with some temporary contact staff.

The Council, schools and children centres across the Borough have utilised learning opportunities and remote software such as Microsoft Teams to engage with professionals and families. In addition, tools such as social media have been fundamental in engaging with families to develop their confidence which has enabled positive communication.

The Group recognised partners have shown the ability to adapt and work within the constraints and restrictions of a national pandemic. Whilst, the impact of Covid-19 will be enduring on children and they need action now. Furthermore, the impact on services in the long term had created a

greater need for mental health and well-being support, special school providers and the wider public sector.

Recommendation 8

That, the Council works with our multi-agency partners to support, engage and monitor the stability within the early years setting;

That, the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive regular assurance on the Covid-19 Recovery Plan of the Council, Children's Trust and relevant partner agencies.

5

Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsible
1	<p>That, the Council:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Welcomes the Borough’s designation as an Education Investment Area by the Government and work co-operatively with the Department for Education to improve the education standards of children and young people; b. Be proactive in working with schools in the area to consider the creation or adoption of multi-academy trusts; c. Be proactive in considering suitable locations in the Borough for specialist sixth-form free schools which are funded by central government; <p>Join the Department for Education’s 1-2-1 attendance mentoring pilot to monitor issues in schools across the Borough.</p>	<p>Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Education/Director of Children and Education</p>
2	<p>That, the Cabinet Member for Children and Education attend the Children’s Services and Education Scrutiny Board at least three times per municipal year to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Present an overview of their work in relation to their Cabinet portfolio; b. Produce and present a report on the Council’s progress to deliver Ambition 1 of the Council’s Vision 2030 in particular the delivery of raising aspirations and resilience, young people to have skills for the future and raising the quality of schools. <p>That, the Council pledge to improve and increase the Borough’s educational assessment data in line with the national average by 2027, in line with the aims and objectives of Vision 2030.</p>	<p>Cabinet Member for Children’s Services/ Education/Director of Children and Education/Secretary of State</p>

That, the Government engage with education practitioners to understand the long-term problems caused by the national pandemic and prepare appropriate resources to help children and young people recover academically, socially and psychologically.

3 The Council encourages and supports schools in the Borough to provide sports programmes and extracurricular activities to help children catch up in all areas of lost learning, experiences and to improve mental and physical health;

That, the Government should provide specific monetary assistance to children eligible for free school meals to take part in extracurricular activities;

That, the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive a future report on the implications of the Government's white paper on 'Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child';

That, the Council review its partnership working with education providers and the Sandwell Children's Trust to ensure that actions, outcomes and best practice work are shared to ensure we are working cohesively together.

Cabinet Member for Children's Services/
Education/Director
of Children and
Education/Secretary
of State

4 That, the Council and Sandwell Children's Trust:

- a. Ensure that all SEND children in Sandwell have access to the right services, provisions and support;
- b. Continue to monitor the progress of SEND and EHCP children in regard to educational attainment;
- c. Examine ways to effectively and appropriately communicate with parents and carers of families with SEND or EHCP children to ensure they are not alone and have the right support;

Cabinet Member for Children's Services/
Education/Director
of Children and
Education/Sandwell
Children's Trust

d. Assess and capture lessons learned data following the Covid-19 pandemic.

5 That the Council investigates ways to connect with young people and offer extra support, mentoring and encouragement such as:

- a. Establish a peer mentoring programme;
- b. Encourage social youth work, sports, drama, and outdoor activities;
- c. Encourage and support volunteering;
- d. Engage with local businesses to improve the number of available apprenticeships;
- e. Support a holistic youth services experience which accompanies physical and digital offer;
- f. Support and Champion a new Eco Bus with young people involvement.

Cabinet Member for Children's Services/
Education/Director of Children and Education

6 That, the Government be requested to provide adequate, realistic funding to address young peoples' recovery to support academic improvement, socialisation, conversation, mental health and wellbeing;

That, the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board undertake a review and monitors the recovery strategy of mental health services within the Borough.

Secretary of State/Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board

7 The Council in partnership with Sandwell Children's Trust continue to monitor the challenges facing the industry including the recruitment and retention of social workers;

The Council and Sandwell Children's Trust continue to support the Borough's children in care and care leavers in their post-pandemic recovery.

Cabinet Member for Children's Services/
Education/Director of Children and Education/Sandwell Children's Trust

8 That, the Council works with our multi-agency partners to support, engage and

Cabinet Member for Children's Services/
Education/Director

monitor the stability within the early years setting;

of Children and
Education/Sandwell
Children's Trust

That, the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive regular assurance on the Covid-19 Recovery Plan of the Council, Children's Trust and relevant partner agencies.