

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

Monday 29 November at 5.00pm
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Shackleton (Chair)
Councillors Chidley, E A Giles, W Gill, Hinchliff, Millar, McVittie, Smith and Webb;
Co-opted Member K Kujawa-Sogbesan (Secondary School Governor representative)

Officers: Michael Jarrett (Director of Children's Services)
Melanie Barnett (Group Head Inclusive Learning Services);
Sue Moore (Group Head Education Support Services);
Samantha Harman (Play Strategy Manager);
Matt Powis (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

36/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Chambers and co-opted member K Heeley.

37/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

38/21 **Minutes**

Councillor Giles highlighted that herself and Councillors Chidley and Hinchliff were present at the previous meeting held on 23 August 2021 and did not submit their apologies.



Resolved:-

- (1) that the minutes of the previous meeting held on the 23 August , be approved, subject to the insertion of Councillors Chidley, E A Giles and Hinchliff as present and necessary deletion in Minute No.23/21.
- (2) That, the minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 September were agreed as a correct record.

39/21 Additional Item of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

Members of the Board welcomed Michael Jarrett as the new Director of Children's Services and Education and wished him well in his new role.

40/21 Elective Home Education

The Board considered an update and report to the Elective Home Education review.

The Director of Children's Services and Group Head Education Support Services gave an update to the Board. It was noted that nationally Elective Home Education (EHE) was under the spotlight, it was understood that the number of children who were electively home educated had increased nationally, a trend that was mirrored in Sandwell. The continued increase in numbers of those electively home educated had led to calls for a national register. Children in Sandwell who chose EHE were already recorded on a local register, however this was not mandatory. There was safeguards in place to ensure the wellbeing of those children and young people in EHE however, there remained a risk that some children would be under the radar.

The three main reasons reported for parents choosing to EHE were cultural/lifestyle, dissatisfaction with school and the ongoing pandemic. Throughout the pandemic the numbers of children and young people in EHE had increased, as restriction measures had eased, and schools returned to pre-pandemic operations, it was believed that a reverse trend would have occurred with those



children and young people returning to school. The return to school had not been as dramatic as was predicted and an increase in restrictions was predicted to lead to a slowing of the process.

For those in EHE it was difficult to monitor and track their progress. Any assessments undertaken would require parent engagement with colleges. Not being automatically enrolled on assessments led to questions on post-16 destinations. However, the Review undertaken by the House of Commons Education Committee raised the possibility of tighter rules for EHE children.

The destinations of those young people in EHE was varied, 67 were now in the equivalent stage of leaving Year 11. There were 10 young people who were part of the Inspire Programme at Halesowen College who had achieved their qualifications and were moving onto further education, apprenticeships or work. In addition, two had benefited from EHE provision at NOVA Oldbury and had progressed into further education. There were 32 young people joining college courses. Three had started traineeships and 13 had progressed into A-Level study.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- Those in EHE cannot be forced to follow the National Curriculum, any change to this would require a law change through Parliament.
- The Council welcomed parent engagement however, this was not a mandatory requirement. Only safeguarding concerns were a valid reasons for home visits. however parents, do not have to allow access to the home.
- Engagement with the Council was and continued to be encouraged. A summer activities programme over four weeks was attended by 34 children with workshops in STEM and outdoor activities and was well received by both children and parents.
- Though not required to do so, resource packs had been distributed to families to support them in their EHE.
- There were 576 children and young people currently in EHE, prior to the pandemic it was 334. A change in numbers that was reflected nationally.



- When the Council receives notification of any parent wanting to EHE, the EHE Team would communicate with the parents and school to establish the reason behind the decision and ensure all options had been considered before a final decision was made.
- The Council would welcome a national register as noted in the House of Commons report, there remains however strong opposition against such a move among parents
- Once restrictions were lifted, parents of those children being EHE would be contacted and consulted on the possible use of learning spaces in Council buildings such as libraries.
- Among those children in EHE, 20 had an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). There had been a steady increase in children with EHCPs being in EHE. All children with an EHCP and in EHE were known to the Local Authority.
- Those children and young people who were in EHE and were eligible for Free School Meals were entitled to receive them. A measure that had been taken by Sandwell Council and not replicated nationally.

Those parents who had taken their child out of school because of the pandemic were welcome to speak to the Admissions Team about returning to school.

The Board thanked Group Head Education Support Services for her attendance.

Resolved:-

- (1) The Board considered the Elective Home Education Scrutiny Working Group report and approved the following recommendations to Cabinet:
 - (a) that the EHE resource pack be reviewed and edited to make it more accessible to parents;
 - (b) that The EHE website be refreshed to provide information, guides and links to other information and links to EHE forums for advice and support;
 - (c) to identify resource and support within the council to facilitate the refresh;



- (d) that additional spaces and facilities be identified for EHE groups to meet and carry out activities, and that competitive rates for use of those facilities be negotiated for EHE group use;
 - (e) that the Council develop a mechanism for resources to be shared for EHE, such as a hub for books or other educational material to be kept;
 - (f) that youth social networks, such as 'Just Youth', be promoted on the EHE website for users to find out what's on in Sandwell for young people and to encourage engagement;
 - (g) to raise awareness of the SEN and EHCP support available and access for children.
 - (h) that the Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life and the DCS, on behalf of the Council, be requested to write to the Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi and to the Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry of Home Education, to register this council's findings from the Elective Home Education review which highlights the need for regulation and resources for Elective Home Education; and to endorse a letter from the Association of EHE Professionals which asks whether consideration is being given to strengthening the legislation to provide further safeguards for children who are EHE.
- (2) that Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board receive an update report to consider the position in relation to post Covid fluctuations and the Education Committee Inquiry on Home Education as detailed in Appendix 4.



Holiday Activities and Food Programme

The Play Strategy Manager introduced the report with a short video demonstrating the Summer Holiday Activities and Food Programme.

The Summer Holiday Activities and Food Programme had enabled a wide variety of activities and engagement to be undertaken across the Borough:

- Just under £500,000 grant funding had been awarded to Sandwell Partners.
- Just under 7,000 children had been reached.
- There had been 18,360 meals delivered.
- Activities and engagements had led to 60,000 contact hours with children and young people.
- Just under 900 sessions had taken place.
- There had been 48 voluntary and community organisations funded through the grant.

The Holiday Activities and Food Programme had a large uptake across the Borough, the largest group was from the primary sector, while there had been outreach to engage elder children through the Youth Council and SHAPE numbers were noticeably lower. It was important to provide activities that children both younger and older wanted to participate in to which an effort had been made to appeal to as many children and young people as possible.

The volunteers had been key to the success of the Programme, going forward the Programme hoped that the volunteers would continue and that more partners could be brought on board, it was hoped that in future holiday programmes, schools and their facilities could be utilised. The Programme had been given assurances until 2025 however the Department for Education (DfE) had not yet provided any specific numbers on funding.

Free School Meals would continue to be provided during holiday and half-term going forward into Easter 2022. The voucher scheme currently deployed across the Programme had been under review by the DfE and it was unclear if it would be continued in future programmes.



The Programme had been focused across the six towns in Sandwell to engage and reach children and families. Although aimed those children in receipt of Free School Meals, children who did not meet the offer but needed the provision had been catered for. It was also important that children and young people could bring along their friends and be included even if they were not in receipt of Free School Meals. The Programme was all about facilitating positive experiences with family and friends.

Once the DfE had confirmed the funding for the Programme going forward, a marketing and communications officer role would be established. The funding for the role would come from a 10% allocation of the DfE grant earmarked for administration.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- The staff who work at the residential sites managed by Sandwell Council had been utilised in the Programme events throughout the Summer. During the Christmas holidays two excursions had been planned and were fully booked. It was hoped that the staff and centres would be fully utilised going forward.
- It was important that those who attended and may not have access to a hot meal be given that option.
- The Programmes across the school holidays provide an opportunity to engage and teach children and young people about health, wellbeing, being active and eating right, ideas that will form the basis of the Programme going forward.
- Young people had indicated that they would like the Programme to teach them life skills and provide them with something positive that they can use in their future.
- The Commonwealth Games provided an opportunity to widen the offer of the Programme and really provide something unique going forward.
- There was still work to be done to ensure that the Programme provides engagement and activities for those with SEND. Work was underway to facilitate those with SEND and it was hoped that through working with schools and special schools the Programme could welcome everyone and provide for them.



- The Sandwell Leisure Trust had not had the capacity to support the Programme in 2021, it was hoped this would change in the future.
- The Programme was about ensuring there was an offer for children and families during the school holidays. It provided activities and engagement that brought the community together.

Resolved:-

That, the Holiday Activities and Food Programme be noted.

42/21

Impact of the lockdown on children and families - Working Group

The Chair proposed a working group review that she wished the Board to undertake. The pandemic had had a real impact on Sandwell, children and families had and continued to struggle, it was crucial that the Council understood the issues and challenges facing families in the Borough in order to best respond to their needs.

Previous Board meetings had set out responses to the pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021, using this as a baseline eight key point had been identified that the proposed working would investigate and consider. A scoping document was been presented to the Board for consideration.

The eight points identified were:

1. Children’s Centres, Early Years (parents and staff groups) and nursery (non-statutory settings)
2. The Children’s Trust, Virtual School, Care Leavers and Corporate Parenting Board (Care Leavers)
3. Key Stage 1
4. Key Stage 2
5. Secondary Education
6. Connexions training opportunities, assessments for exams and entry to higher education
7. Health issues such as CAMHS and mental health
8. Vulnerable Children’s Groups



The scoping documented would be circulated to members along with the eight considered points for them to identify any particular area they wished to focus on.

Resolved that the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board undertake a review into the impact of the lockdown on children and families.

43/21 **Scrutiny Action Tracker**

The Board noted the Scrutiny Action Tracker. It was noted that the recommendations made by the Board regarding the Scrutiny Review of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Transport Models had been accepted by Cabinet.

44/21 **Forward Plan**

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan. It was agreed that Schools Funding 2022/2023 would be considered by the Board at the next meeting.

45/21 **Work Programme**

The Board noted the Work Programme. The next scheduled meeting of the Board would receive an update on the Youth Facilities Scrutiny Review.

Meeting ended at 18.30p.m

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