

Minutes of the Children's Services Select Committee

**Thursday 18th January 2024 at 6.00 pm
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Priory Road,
Dudley**

Present:

Councillor K Lewis (Chair)
Councillor D Bevan (Vice-Chair)
Councillors C Bayton, T Crumpton, P Lee, C Reid, S Ridney, C Sullivan, D Stanley, and M Webb; R May (Co-opted Member)

Officers:

C Driscoll (Director of Children's Services), K Graham (Service Director of Children's Social Care), S Thirlway (Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions), E Thomas (Acting Virtual School Head Teacher) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer).

36. Introductions

The Chair wished those present a Happy New Year.

37. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillor R Collins and T Reid.

38. Appointment of Substitute Members

No substitute Members were appointed for this Meeting of the Committee.

39. **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor P Lee declared a pecuniary interest as he was engaged as a Dudley Foster Carer.

Councillor S Ridney declared a non-pecuniary interest as a member of the Management Board of the Virtual School.

Councillor K Lewis declared a pecuniary interest as an Early Years Provider.

C Driscoll declared a non-pecuniary interest as a former Director of Worcestershire County Council.

40. **Minutes**

Resolved

That subject to R May being included in the list of apologies for absence, the minutes of the meeting held on 16th November 2023, be confirmed as a correct record, and signed.

41. **Public Forum**

There were no members of the public present.

Councillor S Ridney referred to the Medium-Term Financial Strategy particularly with emphasis on proposals relevant to the Committee's Terms of Reference, specifically Children's Services stating that the proposals contained therein should have been submitted to the meeting for scrutiny purposes and expressed her disappointment that it had not.

42. **Children's Services Select Committee Progress Tracker**

The Democratic Services Officer referred to the progress tracker detailing the recommendations and actions from the previous meeting, stating that a response had not been received from the Assistant Director People and Inclusion in relation to the DBS checks and undertook to contact the Director in order that a response could be provided as soon as practicably possible.

Members noted the future business items for 2023/24.

Councillor T Crumpton requested the Director of Children's Services to report to a future meeting on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, particularly the impact that would have upon Children's Services for the forthcoming municipal year.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the Children's Services Select Committee Progress Tracker, be noted.
- (2) That the Democratic Services Officer be requested to contact the Assistant Director People and Inclusion for a response in relation to the position regarding DBS checks for Members and the criteria required.
- (3) That the Director of Children's Services be requested to consider the request to report to a future meeting on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, particularly the impact that would have upon Children's Services for the forthcoming municipal year.

43. **Corporate Quarterly Performance Report Quarter 2 (1st July 2023 to 30th September 2023)**

The Director of Children's Services referred to the key performance indicators relating to Children's Services for Quarter 2 making specific reference to the following: -

Performance Indicator 1447 the percentage of Agency Social Workers, although the target was 15%, there remained the ambition to reduce this Indicator to zero, however nationally there was a shortage of social workers. Although the indicator for Quarter 2 was 18.8%, this was significantly higher in January 2023 as nearly one quarter of the posts had not been filled.

The Directorate re-design was referred to which had made a significant difference to the ability to recruit social workers, with the position significantly improving.

In relation to Performance Indicator 432, the number of children looked after per 10,000 of the population, previously the performance indicator had been high over a prolonged period of time. It was evidenced that Children in Care do not perform well in education outcomes, had health and wellbeing issues and there was an over representation in the Youth

justice system. The ambition remained to ensure that only those children who need to be taken into care were taken into care.

The Family Safeguarding model that had recently been implemented was based upon the belief that family was best for children and the model enabled parents to care for their children both safely and appropriately with a clear focus on Special Guardianship Orders (SGO'S). Following the introduction of the Model the rate of children in care was reducing, with 84.2% of children in the care of the Authority at Quarter 2, against a target of 83%. That figure continued to reduce to well below 600 at the end of September 2023.

In relation to children subject to Child Protection Plans the target had been 43% for Quarter 2, with the outturn position being 22.4%. There had been a downward trend during the preceding five years and that figure was now much lower than comparator groups. Work had been conducted to ensure that children were not being left at risk.

The Service Director of Children's Social Care referred to the work conducted to introduce the Family Safeguarding Model including the triangulation work with Hertfordshire County Council, Walsall, and South Staffordshire. Individual children were reviewed weekly, and Audit checks undertaken. Work was conducted with the Centre for Professional Practice, and an oversight was provided by Dudley Children's Safeguarding Partnership and reported in the Safeguarding report.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members raised questions and queries and responses were provided where appropriate as follows: -

- (a) In response to a question from Councillor S Ridney, the Service Director of Children's Social Care confirmed that in relation to the correct children being made subject to a Child Protection Plan, that would ensure that those children who are at risk of significant harm were provided with wrap around care and subject to Child Protection Plans.

Regarding older children, Child Protection Plans were sometimes not appropriate, and those children were subject to Safety Plans based around exploitation with the ambition that the right approach be provided for the right child.

- (b) In response to a question from Councillor C Bayton regarding Safety Plans, the Service Director of Children's Social Care advised that Safety Plans provided the same level of protection as Child

Protection Plans, with child protection meetings running parallel with the plans.

- (c) In response to a question from Councillor D Stanley in relation to financial pressures resulting from the employment of agency Social Workers and the current number of children/young people who were in the care of the Authority, the Director of Children's Services advised that there was an underspend on the Social Worker budget for 2023 as there were problems with recruitment. A Market Forces Supplement had now been implemented in the sum of £7,000 per year with a commitment to peg pay for Social Workers in conjunction with 14 other authorities working together. There remained the ambition to recruit permanent staff who were committed to the Authority.

The service redesign had resulted in more interest being generated by both Social Workers and former Social Workers and applications being received for the positions.

It was reported that as at the end of December 2023 there were 565 children and young people in the care of the Local Authority, which represented the lowest number for several years. The Director assured members that she was confident that the right decisions were being made for children and young people.

In response to a further question from the same Member, the Director confirmed that children remained looked after until the age of 18 years and should a young person have remained in care for a number of years they were classed as care experienced young people and support could be provided to them up until the age of 25 years.

The Service Director for Children's Social Care confirmed that all children in the care of the Authority were allocated a Social Worker, however it was accepted that individual Social Workers could change with work continuing in relation to caseloads.

- (d) Councillor C Reid raised concerns with safeguarding particularly regarding Agency Social Workers should information not be shared, and safeguarding issues missed.

The Director of Children's Services advised that the Authority were no longer in the position where there were high levels of vacancies. Should Agency Social Workers be recruited they were registered in the same way and treated as permanent members of staff, having

to adhere to a child record system. Lightweight mobile devices had been issued to Social Workers to record in real time.

Should Members wish to raise concerns, individual cases could be examined to determine what, if any, action was being taken. It was confirmed that safeguarding work remained paramount.

The Director of Children's Services requested Members to raise individual concerns with her.

- (e) Councillor T Crumpton raised concerns regarding the reduction in producing Child Protection Plans and in response the Service Director of Children's Social Care stated that the current reporting period for 1st July to 30th September 2023 did not reflect current numbers and was fully confident that children and young people who needed Child Protection Plans had those plans and there was no correlation between those gaps in Social Workers.

In response to a further question from the same Member, the Director of Children's Services advised that one of the challenges for recruiting Social Workers is that it was a generic profession for most authorities and there were a range of payments in various authorities for permanent staff. It was accepted that it would be ideal if there was a standard rate of pay across all authorities but that was not possible. Wolverhampton City Council remained the highest paying authority within the region, and it was not affordable for Dudley to match the same rate of pay. Progress was being made and indicators and data evidenced that. Staff remained positive and positive feedback had also been received from children and families.

- (f) In response to a query from R May, the Director of Children's Services advised that there was no evidence to suggest that high thresholds were affecting the implementation of Child Protection Plans and the performance data remained good in relation to the number of early help cases being closed.

Resolved

That the contents of the Corporate Quarterly Performance Report for Quarter 2 (1st July 2023 to 30th September 2023), be noted.

44. Dudley Virtual School – Summary of Annual Report 2022 – 2023

Members considered a report of the Director of Children's Services on the work of the Virtual School, programme of activities, systems and processes that were being developed to improve outcomes and enhance learning of children in care.

The Acting Virtual School Head Teacher referred to the background in relation to the Virtual School and made reference to the academic outcomes for children in care including in the Early Years Foundation, Key Stage Two SAT's results and Key Stage Four Results as contained in the report submitted.

Members noted the Post 16 outcomes and that the full cohort of children in care had an increasing number with identified special educational needs at 41%.

The Ofsted ratings for 2022/23 were noted together with details of the attendance at school for Dudley children and details of exclusions and suspensions.

In relation to suspensions those continued to raise concerns and work on inclusive pathways was continuing with data being examined to ascertain the reasons for suspensions and identifying trends.

Trauma informed practice training to support children in schools was provided.

It was reported that there were low numbers of young people who were not in employment, education, or training, however the number of young people identified as NEET tended to increase as they moved towards leaving care. That was an area of focus of partnership work between the Care Leavers Team, Dudley Virtual School, and Connexions.

It was reported that the Virtual School Health and Emotional Wellbeing Programme supported young people.

Dudley Counselling Service and Play Therapy intervention work was referred to and the number of those children being assessed and worked with as contained in the report submitted was noted.

Barnardo's had continued to support children in care, with the service receiving 27 referrals in the period between July 2022 and July 2023.

Work continued to improve and support Personal Education Plans (PEP's).

It was noted that Breathing Space had supported 14 young people referred to their service by the Dudley Virtual School. Breathing Space was a therapeutic alternative provision which supported young people that were disengaged with learning and at risk of suspensions or permanent exclusions.

The Virtual School had continued to initiate work with the Primary and Secondary settings with the aim to develop a co-ordinated programme to integrate an inclusive approach to teaching and learning across Dudley.

The Delivering Equality and Equity across Dudley Schools programme (DEED'S) and full details thereof were outlined. It was noted that this would link with other programmes including engaging with all secondary settings in the RADY approach over three phases.

Details of the Aspire to University Programme run by the University of Wolverhampton that was designed to support young people who were in care from Year 7 through to Year 13 were outlined.

The Virtual School were also working with 'Unifrog' to provide all young people with the chance to register on their online platform to help them research possible career choices, compare university courses and apprenticeships offers.

The Arts offer had continued to be delivered for Dudley's children in care. The programme 'Artslink' was part of the West Midlands Virtual Schools Children in Care Foundation. Details of the full arts offer were outlined in paragraph 4.9 of the report.

The Virtual School were awarded a grant from the Department for Education for the Post 16 pilot to develop an offer over the academic year of 2022 to 2023. That aimed to create a strategic platform for the enhancement of educational provision and help inform the wider 'system' to refine processes, offers and interventions for the children in care cohort.

The 'Smashlife' programme prepared young people for adulthood and reflected what young people wanted.

Arising from the presentation of the report Members asked questions and made observations and responses were provided as follows: -

- (a) Councillor C Bayton in referring to the Key Stage Four results referred to those students with social challenges and difficult journeys through their education and in particular the increase in numbers of unaccompanied asylum seekers.

The Acting Virtual School Head Teacher confirmed that their Education Health and Care Plan would move with those specific children to the alternative Authority, with the Virtual School working with colleagues as soon as children and young people were in placement including conversations with neighbouring authorities, social care services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Teams.

- (b) R May expressed the importance of the RADY programme and encouraged Members to discuss the programme and encourage those schools who were not participating in the programme to do so.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted on Dudley Virtual School – Summary of Annual Report 2022, be noted.

45. Questions from Members to the Chair under (Council Procedure Rule 11.8)

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

The meeting ended at 7.15pm

CHAIR