

Minutes of the Children's Services Select Committee

**Wednesday 19th July 2023 at 6.00 pm
At Saltwells Education Development Centre,
Bowling Green Road, Netherton, Dudley**

Present:

Councillor K Lewis (Chair)
Councillor D Bevan (Vice-Chair)
Councillors H Bills, R Collins, J Foster, M Howard, P Lee, S Ridney, D Stanley,
C Sullivan 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), M Palfreyman (Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion), S Thirlway (Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer)

1. **Welcome and Introductions**

The Chair welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting and all those present introduced themselves.

2. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors C Bayton and A Hughes.

3. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

Councillors J Foster and H Bills were appointed as substitute Members for Councillors C Bayton and A Hughes respectively for this meeting of the Committee only.

4. **Declarations of Interest**

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

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

5. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13th March 2023, be confirmed as a correct record, and signed.

6. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

7. **Programme of Meetings and Business Items for 2023/2024**

The Committee considered the programme of meetings and items of business for detailed consideration by this Select Committee during 2023/24.

In referring to the suggested items for inclusion Members made the following comments, suggestions, and observations: -

- (a) Councillor S Ridney referred to the item to be considered at the meeting of the Committee in January 2023 regarding the role and responsibilities of the Private Sector Housing Team, suggesting that this should refer to the Local Authorities Housing Section and cover a wider remit including domestic violence and the position in relation to re-housing those suffering from domestic violence.

- (b) Councillor J Foster, referred to a recent report submitted to the Audit and Standards Committee, quoting the comments from the Ofsted report and the decline of the quality of Children's Services, with their responses to challenge being too slow and asked whether the Committee were confident that business included what needed to be scrutinised, and whether it was planned to question the Cabinet Member for Children's Services on not prioritising the needs of vulnerable children.

In response, the Director of Children's Services referred to the detailed reports that were submitted to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee on the progress made to date, which had included details of previous Ofsted reports referring to the decline of services from 2018 to 2022. Those reports had referred to the considerable progress made with services during the previous 18 months and improvement work which had resulted in the Department for Education (DfE) expressing that they were confident in the progress made and removed Children's Services out of supervision in January 2023.

Following this there had been the launch of the Family Safeguarding Model during the previous week which was one of the key items covered in the Ofsted report and it was confirmed that Members would continue to receive reports on the improvement work moving forward.

- (c) Councillor D Stanley referred to the item of business on Care Leavers accommodation and the need to have a policy whereby flooring and carpets are not removed from council properties prior to letting them, as some of the floor coverings would be suitable for young people and would save money on replacing them. It was suggested that a representative from Housing Services be requested to advise what was offered to care leavers when considering that item.
- (d) Councillor S Ridney requested that Care Leavers accommodation be considered at an earlier meeting of the Committee, rather than at the end of the municipal year, with a proposal that the Car Free Streets scheme item be considered at the meeting in March 2024.
- (e) R May suggested that the Education report be considered at the November meeting.
- (f) The Chair requested that the offer to Members to attend visits to Family Centres and the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub continue.

- (g) The Chair requested that all Elected Members be offered Safeguarding Training and there followed the request that Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for all Elected Members be updated.

In response the Director of Children's Services confirmed that the requests would be considered further.

- (h) R May suggested that by way of good practice, DBS checks be carried out every three years, whilst confirming that there were no official expiry dates for such checks.

Resolved

- (1) That the report on the programme of meetings and potential items of business for this Committee, be noted.
- (2) That the item entitled 'the role and responsibilities of the Private Sector Housing Team' include the Local Authorities Housing Section, cover a wider remit including domestic violence and the position in relation to re-housing those suffering from domestic violence.
- (3) That Care Leavers Accommodation and issues relating thereto be considered at the meeting to be held on 16th November 2023.
- (4) That the car free streets scheme outlining the advantages and disadvantages be considered at the meeting to be held on 11th March 2024.
- (5) That the Education Report be considered at the meeting held on 16th November 2023.
- (6) That, subject to resolutions (2) to (5) above, the Committee confirm the programme of business as outlined in paragraph 4 of the report submitted, subject to the need for flexibility to reflect any changes that might arise during the municipal year.
- (7) That the Lead for Law and Governance, following consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair, be authorised to make all the necessary arrangements to enable this Committee to undertake its programme of scrutiny work during the 2023/24 municipal year.

- (8) That the terms of reference for the Children's Services Select Committee, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.
 - (9) That the Director of Children's Services be requested to:
 - (a) Arrange meetings for Members to the Children's Services Family Centres and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub.
 - (b) Provide an offer of Safeguarding training to all Elected Members.
 - (c) Consider the request that Members Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks be updated.
-

8. **Education Report**

Members considered a report of the Director of Children's Services updating the Committee on Education Outcomes.

The Committee were requested to note the contents of the report and highlight any areas where additional scrutiny would be welcomed.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion presented the report submitted referring to the data contained therein, advising that 2022 was the first-year post covid that secondary school data had been published and the progress for school outcomes was above the national average. Primary school data had not been published, with that data being released during the Autumn Term. There was the intention to examine the secondary school exam data in August and report on that further to Members.

The data in relation to absence and attendance was outlined including that data for those pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

An attendance plan had been rolled out during the previous year and attendance data was in line with the national average.

In relation to school improvement the Local Authority's direct duty was to maintained schools and the Dudley School Improvement Strategy Approach 2022/23 as contained in paragraph 14 to the report submitted was noted.

There was now a 10-point plan for the rag rating system, which provided a clear indication of which schools required intervention. Four secondary schools had required improvement and had subsequently been judged as good and several academies had requested the support of the authority with school improvement work continuing.

Headteacher Liaison/Network Development Meetings were now taking place as a central part of the improvement strategy on a half termly basis.

There was a Graduated Provision Model in mainstream schools for the delivery of education to children with SEND which had been developed, with particular emphasis on mainstream delivery and intervention. The model required mainstream schools to consider from the outset what early support was required, what targeted support was required and then the requirement for special interventions.

Adaptive Teaching training to highlight and raise the importance of meeting individual need had been implemented. This would change the way the curriculum was delivered in mainstream schools.

There was also the development of base provision on mainstream sites for SEND pupils, providing a programme of learning integral to their needs.

From a national perspective a number of schools were running under a licensed deficit, with different connotations emerging from Academy Trusts who were companies in their own right, with some entering into bankruptcy and there was no way to underestimate how schools were currently struggling financially, with the cost-of living-crisis impacting on schools due the soaring energy costs which had increased by 400%.

Ofsted inspections continued in line with the expected schedule and there had been 20 inspections since the start of the academic year. Maintained schools continued to perform well and over the preceding six months. 84% of maintained primary school were now good or outstanding along with 100% of secondary and special schools.

Where concerns were raised about inspections or performance in terms of academy schools, although the Authority had little jurisdiction over their improvement journey concerns were still raised with the DfE.

The Ofsted Update in April 2023 in relation to all school settings as contained in the report submitted were referred to.

It was clarified that in relation to the Ofsted update for September 2022 to April 2023, the nine graded inspections related to those schools that had been inspected previously, the 11 ungraded were those schools that had been inspected for the first time.

It was noted that post covid behaviour had impacted on schools by non-compliance for those pupils who were disadvantaged, poverty aspirations for the future and the cost-of-living crisis.

Although there was a national problem with school attendance, Dudley did perform better than the national average in school attendance data.

There were mental health issues resulting from the constraints during covid and continuing to live with the legacy of covid and there still remained parents who did not feel safe sending their children to school.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members raised questions and responses were provided by Officers as follows: -

(a) R May referred to the number of exclusions from Academy Trusts.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion confirmed that conversations would continue with the DfE and Academy Trusts in relation to any exclusions.

The report would be amended in so far as the status of St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Stourbridge, was concerned as this formed part of a Multi Academy Trust.

(b) The Vice-Chair referred to the fragility of education, which remained reliant upon the good will of staff members to support parents and families with covid being the catalyst for many problems, tearing families apart and children witnessing this. Pupils were being collected by school minibuses to attend their GCSE examinations when failing to attend.

(c) Councillor S Ridney referred to the continuing financial pressures in schools, with the majority of financial budgets utilised to meet staff salaries. There were many children with Special Educational Needs and learning difficulties that had resulted from them not being in school for a two year period, with those children unable to cope at school and form friendships. Added to this were financial pressures

with school budgets being further impacted upon by the increases in salaries rising from those budgeted at 3% to a further 3.5%. There continued the need to monitor the situation closely although attendance figures were increasing, with school readiness remaining problematic.

- (d) The Vice-Chair advised that pupils were unable to converse with teachers in school and had behavioural problems that parents were unable to deal with and were looking for support from schools and teachers as to how to deal with such behaviour.
- (e) Councillor H Bills recognised that staffing costs had long been an issue and referred to the fact that Halesowen's Family Centre was in Lye and was a distance from those residents in the Halesowen North area of the Borough.
- (f) Councillor J Foster congratulated Brockmoor Primary School's grading escalating to good following improvements.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the development of localised provision within maintained schools which had translated into better Ofsted judgments which had been greatly assisted by the work of the Head of Education and Inclusion.

- (g) R May enquired whether Dudley used any additional resources to improve schools.

The Head of Education and Inclusion referred to his small team utilising a five-point action plan to assist with bringing additional support to schools working in collaboration with those schools, making a bespoke offer to the schools needs with support being offered by other schools should the need arise.

Resolved

That the contents of the report on Education Outcomes, be noted.

9. **Family Safeguarding Update**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted providing an update on the progress with the implementation of the Family Safeguarding Model.

The Service Director Children's Social Care presented the report submitted advising that the Family Safeguarding Model was a practice adopted by Hertfordshire County Council with the Model evidencing that children's needs were better met and on a more expedient basis.

The DfE were keen to see authorities work within the method the Model provided.

Dudley was the 19th Authority to adopt the Model of working and had acquired funding to do so, with public health funding the capacity to employ the adult workers to provide that support to children and families and adopt the Family Safeguarding approach across all family safeguarding.

Hertfordshire County Council had visited Dudley on 25th June 2023 to conduct an up-to-date health check in relation to the launch of the new model of working and confirmed that they were positive with Dudley's approach.

Dudley had attended a Safeguarding conference the previous week, representatives of which were very complimentary of the multi-disciplinary team working being conducted by Dudley, to reduce the number of children in need of protection and the number of children in need of becoming looked after.

The Dudley Family Safeguarding Partnership Charter and the commitment of those who were signed up to the Charter was referred to and the partners that had signed up to the Charter included Dudley Integrated Health and Care, Dudley Council for Voluntary Services, the Black Country Integrated Care Board, the Probation Service, Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership, West Midlands Police, Black Country Women's Aid and Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

All staff had met at the Council's Corbyn Road facility for both inductions and as an introduction of all staff to each other which also included staff from the Probation Service, and it was noted that no other Authority had gone live with the Family Safeguarding Model with adult workers in post apart from Dudley.

Advanced work was underway with partners to determine the impact of working in new ways had on communities and although it was known that Hertfordshire Country Council had conducted work retrospectively, Dudley wanted to articulate as a partnership as the work happened and how that work impacted on communities.

The inspirational front door Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) would include Family Health Conferences whilst still focusing on early help from Family Hubs.

Care experienced young adults had contributed to the re-design of the service, as the Family Safeguarding Model of service would include provision for those moving from care into permanence with adult services being offered.

Staff numbers were reported upon including those Advanced Practitioners and Social Workers who had been appointed and it was noted that staff would meet to share experiences of working.

Care experienced young people had also been involved in interviews and there was the commitment to involve them in all interviews for staff within Children's Services in the future.

Saturday sessions had taken place with young people which included a combination of activities including an escape room with these providing an opportunity to receive feedback from those present. Staff had expressed their appreciation for the sessions which in their words were really helpful.

The staff consultation on the redesign had closed on 24th May 2023 and overall, the staff were supportive of the changes with no major challenges to the final structure. The final interviews had been conducted on the day of the meeting.

The DfE had agreed to fund some multi-agency system changes and they had commented positively on the redesign work, which was testament to Dudley's delivery and conviction.

Dudley had purchased, configured, and tested the 'Workbook' plug-in for the Liquid Logic Children System with system training being provided, the electronic recording system had been shared with a national team and was recognised nationally as a good approach to recording.

A Family Safeguarding Scorecard had been developed. Data was baselined at the end of March 2023, and this was the position against which impact would be measured. Work was to be conducted with Birmingham University's PhD student support to gather data and measure impact.

In relation to Family Safeguarding Scorecard teams, the data would be set against a child determining permanency, reducing Court proceedings/attendance.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members asked questions and Officers responded as follows: -

- (a) Councillor D Stanley referred to the need for accountability and future reports to be submitted to the Committee on improvements following the redesign.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the fact that the Family Safeguarding model of working went live on 10th July 2023, and it was therefore too soon to say what difference the service changes had made, however assurances were provided that the scorecard referred to above would be shared with the Committee on a regular basis.

- (b) Councillor P Lee enquired about training for Foster Carers.

The Service Director Children's Social Care stated that much work was being conducted through Fostering Support groups and other fostering networks.

- (c) Councillor S Ridney asked how the difference to children and young people would be evidenced.

The Service Director Children's Social Care reported that it should be evidenced by the reduction in the number of children and young people requiring social work intervention.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the first formal national evaluation by the DfE which evidenced that every authority that had implemented the model had seen a significant reduction in children in care and as everyone was aware the outcomes for children in care were worse than those in the general population, therefore avoiding taking children into care provides better outcomes for children and young people and reduces the need for Child Protection Plans.

Family Safeguarding also provided the opportunity to work with those parents who were struggling in a non-stigmatised method.

It was noted that Elected Members could still make referrals into the service, however there was the desire to work with the community and make community services the most obvious form of support with Family Hubs providing a pivotal role for the support and services.

The Director of Children's Services advised that Halesowen Library were already providing family outreach work.

- (d) R May expressed his appreciation for the passion and confidence of Officers and stated that he hoped the new model would assist with the retention of staff.

The Service Director Children's Social Care advised that one of the huge benefits of the Family Safeguarding Model was the retention of social workers and adult workers.

- (e) R May referred to the two-year funding, requesting assurance that the funding would not be withdrawn.

The Director of Children's Services stated that she was convinced based on evidence that the new model would work and when looking at the resource spent on expensive residential placements even a small reduction in the number of children in care would reduce that resource. There was evidence to support reductions in accident and emergency attendances for mental health services reducing pressure from public services, that were under pressure, with that money saved from children in care being invested further in children's services in the future.

- (f) The Chair referred to Phase II of the new model and the timing of implementation.

The Director of Children's Services in referring to Phase II advised that this would include the area of the work of the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions, with an open and transparent consultation with all staff being launched on 5th September 2023.

The Director also confirmed that every authority who had adopted the Hertfordshire Family Safeguarding Model had improved their Ofsted grade at their following inspection, as the model has positively impacted on outcomes for children, with Hertfordshire Country Council having an outstanding Ofsted grade.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted on the Family Safeguarding update, be noted.

10. **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 7.30pm

CHAIR