

Minutes of the Children's Services Select Committee

**Thursday 16th November 2023 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 and D Stanley.

Officers:

P Bullingham (Head of Family Solutions), V Buchanan (Independent Children's Safeguarding Scrutineer), C Driscoll (Director of Children's Services) K Graham (Service Director of Children's Social Care), J Mupombi (Head of Service for Through Care), M Palfreyman (Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion), S Thirlway (Service Director Education, SEND and Family Solutions), J Wood (Young Persons Advisor) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer).

23. **Introductions**

The Chair invited Officers and Members to introduce themselves.

24. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors C Sullivan and M Webb.

25. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

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

26. **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.

27. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11th September 2023, be confirmed as a correct record, and signed.

28. **Public Forum**

No items were raised under this agenda item.

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

The Democratic Services Officers referred to the progress tracker detailing the recommendations and actions from the previous meeting.

Resolved

That the information contained in the Children's Services Select Committee Progress Tracker, be noted.

30. **Dudley Children's Safeguarding Partnership (DCSP) Annual Report**

The Independent Children's Safeguarding Scrutineer presented the report submitted, outlining her role.

It was stated that the report was prepared by the Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership (DSPP) Business Support Unit on behalf of the Partnership and recognised the progress the DCSP had made throughout the year and the challenges that remained that would continue to be addressed in 2023/24. As the Independent Scrutineer, V Buchanan had reviewed the report and confirmed that the contents were an accurate record of the activities of the Partnership and its Sub-Groups.

The two bespoke areas of scrutiny conducted on behalf of the Executive during the year, one with Russells Hall Hospital and a second meeting frontline police officers, to consider how they understood and were supported regarding safeguarding issues that they dealt with in their day to day work, following which two reports were prepared and action plans were put in place.

The focus of the Partnership on Restorative and Trauma informed practice was illustrated clearly in the two case studies at the end of the report and the approach had been strengthened by the move towards the Family Safeguarding Model that had recently gone live in Dudley. A report on the impact of the partnership working would be presented in the next annual report.

What was next for the Partnership, the issues to note and the risks to be dealt with as contained in the report submitted were referred to.

Section two of the report provided details of the statutory safeguarding partners including the senior officers in Dudley.

Section two-point three referred to the shared vision of the partnership which included the whole family approach.

Section two-point four outlined the priorities for 2022/2023 which allowed partners to be more flexible and adapt to emerging themes and trends that were referred to in the report.

Section two-point six of the report included the Dudley demographics including census data.

Section three of the report highlighted the data in relation to deprivation, child poverty and family income and it was reported that as at 31st March 2023 there were 252 children subject to child protection plans; 317 as at 31st March 2022 and over the course of the 12 months in the reporting period a total of 627 children had been subject to a plan, 698 in 2021 to 2022, therefore both the end of year total and the 12 month figures had decreased this year. These trends supported the outcome of working with families more restoratively at the child in need stage and reducing the need to enter into child protection. A further decrease was expected with the development of the Family Safeguarding model during 2023.

The progress against priorities of the Partnership and the first annual conference on 5th July 2022 were referred to.

Priority one had included a revision of the Child Neglect Strategy which was formally launched in November 2022 and ensured there was a multi-agency response to cases of neglect or suspected neglect.

Priority two included the work of the Children's exploitation sub-group responsible for delivering that priority which had strong partnership leadership with the voluntary sector and the police co-chairing the sub-group and overseeing the Children's exploitation work plan for the Partnership. Details of the work undertaken were referred to.

Promoting and sharing the language matters document in terms of working with young people at risk of exploitation, moving away from victim blaming language had taken place.

Barnardo's had supported 32 young people around child sexual exploitation and a direct quote from a young person who had received that support was referred to.

Following on from the success of the Partnership conference held in July 2022, partners felt it would be beneficial to have more opportunities to enable more discussion on the progress of priorities. In response, the Partnership organised and held a development workshop on 27th March 2023 with a theme of Think Family, which was well attended.

The Children with Disabilities Team had been part of Children's Services for over 18 months and improvements in service provision were now visible.

The Independent Scrutineer had made a visit to the Council's Corbyn Road facility with the staff speaking positively about the services offered.

Other areas of progress included the development of the Children out of Sight Strategy with safeguarding embedded into that strategy.

The Police had introduced a new internal guide (Aware) that covered the minimum standards of professional curiosity and recommended good practice for all offices when they encounter children.

Section four of the report referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) that oversaw allegations against adults in a position of trust who work or volunteer with children and young people. The management of the allegation process was referred to and it was noted that LADO records were viewed by Ofsted during an inspection in October 2022 and the feedback was that the designated officer service in Dudley responded promptly and robustly to concerns about adults in a position of trust who present risks to children.

Section 5 of the report submitted referred to details of the private fostering arrangements which were made by usually a parent for a child to stay with a friend and the Local Authority having a duty to ensure safety arrangements.

Section six of the report referred to learning from reviews with seven serious incident reviews taking place, however it was reported that the number of reviews tend to fluctuate.

Full details of the review and learning resources were available on the DSPP website.

Audits provided a valuable opportunity to dip sample multi-agency practice on specific themes and for the partnership to be assured about safeguarding practice. The audits highlighted key learning, details of which were included in the report submitted.

Details of multi-agency training and its impact were outlined together with the priorities for 2023/2024.

In conclusion the case studies in Appendix 2 to the report submitted were referred to.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members raised issues and questions and Officers responded where necessary as follows: -

- (a) Councillor D Stanley referred to the high figures in relation to deprivation, raising concerns that they were significantly higher in the Dudley Borough than England and requested confirmation of the work to address deprivation and child poverty.

In response, the Director of Children's Services advised that the issues referred to were within the terms of reference of the Public Health Select Committee and should be scrutinised by them.

- (b) Councillor T Crumpton also raised concerns, referring to the constant corridor of poverty in the Borough and concerns that children within those areas were more likely to suffer exploitation and safeguarding issues.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the previous work of the Committee in relation to child poverty, with Councillor C Bayton raising similar concerns. There was a task and finish group jointly with what was then Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee,

however, with the changes in Select Committees, this area was now within the remit of the Public Health Select Committee and there was the need to ensure that work was not duplicated.

It was noted that the report was a statutory report and the Independent Scrutineer advised that the report included the priorities of the DSPP and the work in relation to whole family different ways of working could be reported on in the next annual report

- (c) Councillor C Bayton referred to the significant number of re-referrals back into early help and requested information on what was in place to address those increases.

Concerns were raised in relation to training data which offered 2068 places of which 1106 were used and only 849 delegates attending courses, and whilst noting the review the training impact process to better inform the Partnership of the impact of its multi-agency training on practice, improving attendance at training was required to better inform the Partnership.

The Independent Scrutineer referred to the reduction in re-referrals in relation to the early help services which had been evidenced by the new ways of working and she was confident that improvements would continue, as percentages of those cases being closed and not re-referring were reducing, with figures being reported on a quarterly basis. Assurances were provided that figures would continue to be monitored. There was also a Performance and Quality Assurance Sub-Group.

It was agreed that those attending training should increase and reports presented quarterly to a Learning and Improvement Sub-Group. There was a commitment to hold partners to account, whilst acknowledging that there would be sickness issues for those unable to attend on the day of the course. Further data would be included in the next annual report.

- (d) Councillor S Ridney questioned whether priority number four related to health professionals failing to engage.

The Independent Scrutineer advised that the gap for 16 to 18-year-olds in health professional attendance at safeguarding meetings had been identified and had now been addressed, with public health commissioning a service to participate.

Resolved

That the Dudley Children's Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report for 2022/23, be received and noted.

31. Education Report

Members considered a report providing an update on the work of the Education outcomes team which consisted of the following: -

- Primary Data overview
- Attendance for 2022/23
- Suspensions Data
- Education Strategy Themes
- Alternative Provision Update
- Inspections

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion presented the report submitted and made particular reference to the improving picture regarding the outcomes for children in Dudley in early years and Key Stage 1 and 2. However, it was accepted that work remained as Dudley remained below the national average in most indicators and some data remained affected by Covid.

The school attendance overview was outlined with attendance rates in 2022/23 being 92.5% and in 2021/22 22.5% of pupils were recorded as persistently absent defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as missing 10% or more of possible school sessions.

843 pupils were absent from school in 2022/23 (2%) primarily as a result of anxiety and in some cases for medical reasons with an increase in parents obtaining letters from doctors being evidenced.

There remained a national picture of anxiety and parental anxiety providing the reason why children were not being sent to school, with Dudley continuing to escalate their concerns to the DfE team.

It was noted that attendance was still not back to pre-covid levels of 95% and there had been an increase in legal action and fines for non-attendance which again had been raised with DfE who had responded stating that this reflected the national picture.

The staffing within the attendance team had been increased, as there were concerns that if children were not in school, they remained out of sight and again those concerns had been raised with both the DfE and Ofsted.

The data in relation to those children who were Elective Home Educated (EHE) was reported on and the increase in numbers of those children missing from education (CME) which were averaging 300 each week due to pupils not being on school rolls.

With in year numbers increasing and 100 new arrivals into the borough it was currently part of the Alternative Provision Strategy to investigate how to engage with the new arrival centre, as there was a collective responsibility to promote school attendance.

Exclusions in Dudley remain above the national average with 128 permanent exclusions and 88 being upheld. Prevention methods in relation to permanent exclusions included accessing alternative provision, or prevention work and interventions with the capacity increasing in the Inclusion Team were referred to.

In relation to the Education Strategy Themes there included the need to increase the offer to those not in education, employment, or training earlier with it being recognised that silo working impacted on the outcomes and life chances of children and young people for the future.

There followed an Alternative Provision (AP) Strategy update, with the Strategy being redeveloped to ensure that it was fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people. A secondary headteacher workshop had taken place with every school represented.

The AP Strategy was being developed to be consistent with the principles underpinning the SEND Strategy and the inclusive pathways programme.

There was the need to have a clear ethos and vision for alternative pathways.

There was a plan to pilot the 'Children North East's Poverty Proofing the School Day Programme' in 8 of Dudley's Primary Schools during the current academic year.

There was household support for primary schools of £5,000 and £10,000 for secondary schools each year to support families and children and a report would be presented to the Committee on the above programme following its roll out.

There had been eight Ofsted inspections since September with the local authority maintaining 86% of primary schools rated good or outstanding. Further work was being conducted with academies to provide an offer of help and support by the local authority.

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

- (a) Councillor C Bayton in referring to the poverty proofing work outlined above enquired how that had impacted on the position regarding the affordability of school uniforms.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion advised that the legislation had changed and only a certain proportion of the school uniform now needed to be branded and the work outlined above had impacted on the provision of school uniforms.

Councillor C Bayton also commented that one way of dealing with poverty was to improve education and the academic skills base referring to the challenges faced by the authority in achieving this.

- (b) Councillor C Reid suggested that information in relation to the entitlement to free school meals be made available for those families who faced language barriers.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion referred to the new Arrival Centre and discussions that had been entered into with some headteachers in relation to documentation being developed and there was the ambition to establish base provision on school sites on what was available and how to access that provision.

- (c) Councillor C Crumpton referred to the work being conducted in his Ward which had been welcomed, however he referred to those with mental health issues including those with children with mental health needs and the help and information required for parents to navigate what help and services were available to deal with mental health issues.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service waiting lists, advising that some schools employed counselling staff which was having a positive impact. However, the provision of counselling staff would not be an option for every school. There were issues at national level and it was agreed that there was significant change required in the support available to children and parents in relation to mental health issues.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the challenges dealing with mental health and there was work being conducted at a national level to increase resources. There was the requirement to ensure that the correct level of emotional health and wellbeing support was offered with a real focus on partners having a consistent approach and providing early help. An information leaflet on pathways, and this had been circulated to all schools.

The Director of Children's Services advised that the issue of mental health would be a programme of work for the Public Health Select Committee who had the power to engage with mental health partners.

- (d) In responding to a question from Councillor D Stanley in relation to the household support fund for schools, it was confirmed that the money was utilised for services in Dudley schools and could not be utilised for schools outside of the borough. The funding provided was also audited.
- (e) Councillor S Ridney suggested that free school meals should be available for all primary school aged children and details of those services that were free for parents such as free school meals should be readily available to prevent the embarrassment caused to parents. It was stated that some funding was now available to provide extra family support workers, which was welcomed.
- (f) In responding to a question from Councillor C Reid, the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion stated that the Local Authority had no jurisdiction to force schools not to use logos on school uniforms.

In responding to a further question, the Director of Children's Services stated that schools would be unable to employ a child mental health nurse as this would be on an NHS foundation requiring clinical supervision.

The Chair confirmed that she supported the comments and suggestions in relation to school uniforms.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted on Education Outcomes, be noted.

32. Family Hubs and Start of Life Information and Update Report.

The Head of Service – Family Solutions presented the report submitted referring to an overview of the development and recent progress of the Dudley Family Hubs and Start of Life Programme, referring to the steps taken to achieve a successful launch and how the service would be developed across the Borough.

The Head of Service – Family Solutions reported that he was the Officer overseeing the implementation of the Family Hubs whilst also supporting them, with the Hubs providing strong opportunities to connect for people.

The Family Hubs provided a wide range of services including those for health and wellbeing, finance, school readiness, emotional support, and better outcomes for early years.

The five Family Hubs had been launched in August for families and young people with those entering the Hubs feeling part of their community.

Investment had been obtained from the DfE for the Family Hubs particularly for three years to provide services for families and children with specialist strands of services being delivered within the programme including midwifery and supporting opportunities for families to reduce the pressure on children's social care.

There were currently 15 families receiving autism training with the ambition to grow the 0 to 19 offer.

Partners in the voluntary community sector had been requested to join in the vision to create wrap around support system.

Practitioners had been trained in a number of areas including parenting and healthy eating.

Staff at the Family Hubs had the ability to drive down to grass route level with families and create simple access points to support.

The aims and goals of the programme which included a Start for Life Programme which was a sustainable model looking at parents, early support and mental health.

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

- (a) Councillor D Stanley requested details of the locations of the Family Hubs.

The Director of Children's Services advised that the locations were in the former Family Centre buildings which had been re-named and re-designed with the ambition to have a bespoke opportunity to have some facilities in Halesowen Leisure Centre.

- (b) In responding to a further question from Councillor D Stanley in relation to finances the Head of Service – Family Solutions reported that £2.5m was available from the DfE to support a range of staff that equated to £500k each year to sustain the model until 2025, with assurances being provided that work and processes were being examined to investigate longer term arrangements on how to sustain the model going forward.
- (c) In response to a question from Councillor C Reid, the Head of Service – Family Solutions advised that each Hub invested time, energy and resources to notify local residents of the services available, including events, and publishing leaflets with the aim to build on the offer going forward.

Members would be provided with leaflets in order to inform their local residents of the offer available at the Hubs.

- (d) In response to a query from Councillor T Crumpton, the Director of Children's Services referred to the invitations that had been emailed to Members to attend the Family Hubs, that was referred to in the Committee's Progress Tracker.
- (e) Councillor T Crumpton referred to the need to work with Members who could provide details of small voluntary groups who could support the Family Hubs.

- (f) In response to a question from Councillor S Ridney, it was confirmed that Housing Colleagues were integrating with Family Hubs, providing advice and information when required to do so.
- (g) In response to a request from Councillor P Lee, it was agreed that details of the dates available to Members to attend the Family Hubs would be emailed again to Members.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on Family Hubs and Start of Life Information and Update report, be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Service – Family Solutions be requested to provide Members with leaflets in relation to the Family Hubs to distribute to their constituents.
- (3) That the Democratic Services Officer be requested to email to Members details of the dates available to them to attend the Family Hubs.

33. Care Experienced Young Adults Accommodation.

A report of the Director of Children’s Services was submitted on the delivery of accommodation to Care Experienced Young Adults as well as provide a response to the Committee’s recommendations to improve suitability of accommodation for this cohort of young people.

The Head of Service for Through Care presented the report submitted making specific reference to the 274-care experienced young adults in Dudley being supported up until the age of 25. 22 individuals were currently in accommodation identified as unsuitable with 252 in suitable accommodation.

The graph setting out the summary of young people in suitable accommodation as contained in the report submitted was referred to and it was noted that care experienced young adults living in Dudley had housing priority status. That status did not however extend to care experienced young adults who were living outside Dudley.

It was reported that not all children in care and care experienced young adults wished to live independently. The Staying Put arrangement and supported accommodation arrangements were referred to along with the

specialist accommodation for young people who may have a disability or need support with mental health problems.

It was further reported that where a care experienced young person was in custody, they were allocated a Young Persons Advisor, who worked collaboratively with Youth Justice or Probation Services and Housing to ensure that suitable accommodation and support was offered when released from custody.

The new Standards and Inspection Framework for Supported Accommodation providers produced by Ofsted in November 2022 was referred to, with providers required to register their provision with Ofsted.

The DfE had provided a grant to mitigate the implications for the registration of supported accommodation.

The Young Persons Advisor presented that part of the report dealing with Homelessness Prevention and her role, advising of the work undertaken to bridge the gap with housing for the young people who were in unsuitable accommodation working collaboratively with multi-agencies and the Dudley Housing Team.

The two Homeless Workers within the Housing Team were referred to and it was noted that they notified the YPA when a young person was due to be released from custody in order that a package of support could be put in place which included work with the Housing Team and the Anti-Social Behaviour Team should any issues arise providing a holistic approach to any such situations to prevent homelessness.

In relation to the next steps contained in the report submitted, work was continuing across the region with other local authorities and Trusts. There continued to be a focus on reducing the numbers of care experienced young adults who were at risk of homelessness and those in unsuitable accommodation. That work was boosted by the presence of a Homelessness Prevention YPA and closer collaboration with all Local Authority departments and key partner agencies, including commissioner services through the Transitions Panel as well as targeted work with young people.

Work had commenced prior to young people leaving care with tenancy workshops taking place and the provision of a set up a home grant. The work of Councillor P Bradley within the Corporate Parenting Board Skills Working Group was referred to.

A new joint New Housing Protocol for care experienced young people with Housing and Commissioning colleagues had recently been drafted. Consultations had taken place with care experienced young adults during Care Leavers week in October 2023. Supported Accommodation providers were also being consulted on their views.

The Council Priorities and Projects as contained in the report submitted were referred to.

- (a) Councillor C Reid referred to some specific cases of care leavers within her Ward and in response, the Head of Through Care undertook to discuss individual cases outside the meeting.

The Service Director for Children's Social Care referred to the Staying Put arrangements and it was noted that young people were supported up until the age of 25.

The work with other authorities where care experienced young adults were placed was referred to with Dudley wishing to be in the position where any children who were placed in Dudley could be worked with. It was emphasised that Dudley children were a priority for the service.

- (b) In responding to questions raised by Councillor C Bayton, the Service Director for Children's Social Care stated that all providers of supported accommodation within the Dudley Borough had registered their provisions with Ofsted, with the West Midlands being the most reactive region to register their supported accommodation.

Each Authority prioritised their own children with no reciprocal arrangement in place. There were however good relationships with Walsall and Staffordshire authorities in relation to Dudley children placed in their authorities and their children placed in Dudley.

The types of accommodation that are not judged as suitable included sofa surfing at various properties.

There were 13 young people in custody and again that was unsuitable accommodation.

- (c) Councillor C Bayton requested that future reports include the types of unsuitable accommodation that young people were living in.
- (d) In response to a question from Councillor P Lee, the Head of Through Care advised that once a foster child reached the age of 18, Foster Carers continued to receive state allowances whilst that young person

remained in education, and young people who wished to leave their Foster Carers at 18 were provided with opportunities to change their minds and either enter into a Staying Put arrangement or where it was safe to do so return to their parents.

Once a young person reaches the age of 18 they were classed as an adult on a legal basis, however assurances were provided that YPA's would continue to work with them. The service was currently in the process of recruiting an Emotional Wellbeing Care worker to work with care experienced young people, however it was reported that fostering care rates would not continue after a child reached the age of 18.

- (e) Councillor D Stanley referred the service to Churches Housing Association of Dudley and District (CHADD), who provided accommodation for young people within the Borough.

Resolved

- (1) That the report submitted on Care Experienced Young Adults Accommodation, be noted.
- (2) That future reports on Care Experienced Young Adults accommodation included details of specific accommodation that was unsuitable.

34. **Closing Remarks of the Chair**

The Chair wished Members and Officers a happy Christmas and New Year.

35. **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 8.25pm

CHAIR