

Minutes of the Children's Services Select Committee

Monday 11th March 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 H Bills, T Crumpton, P Lee, C Reid, S Ridney, D Stanley, and M Webb.

Also in Attendance:

Councillor R Buttery (Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education)

Officers:

C Driscoll (Director of Children's Services), N Hale (Head of Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance), M Palfreyman (Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion), S Thirlway (Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions), and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer).

46. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors C Bayton, C Sullivan and Mr R May.

47. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

It was reported that Councillor H Bills had been appointed as a substitute member for Councillor C Bayton for this meeting of the Committee only.



48. **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor P Lee – Declared a Pecuniary Interest in any references to Dudley Foster Carers relating to any matters directly affecting his employment as a Dudley Foster Carer.

Councillor K Lewis – Declared a Pecuniary Interest in any reference to Early Years Providers relating to any matters directly affecting her employment as an Early Years Provider.

49. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 18th January 2024, be confirmed as a correct record, and signed.

50. **Public Forum**

There were no members of the public present.

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

The Chair referred to the progress tracker detailing the recommendations and actions from the previous meetings. It was noted that there was one action that remained outstanding. The Briefing Note submitted to Members on 7th March 2024 responding to the query in relation to Disclosure and Disbarring Service checks (DBS) checks was referred to.

Following further consideration, although it was noted that there was currently no legal basis for enhanced checks to be provided, the Chair recommended, and there was a general agreement that Members of the Select Committee should have enhanced DBS checks carried out in view of the possibility of them encountering vulnerable children and young people.

Resolved

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

- (2) That the Assistant Director of People and Inclusion be advised that the Committee recommended that those members serving on the Children's Services Committee should receive enhanced DBS checks given the possibility of them encountering those children and young people who were vulnerable.
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52. **Verbal feedback on the Ofsted visits on 1st and 2nd February 2024.**

The Director of Children's Services referred to the Ofsted visits held on 1st and 2nd February 2024 and in doing indicated that a focused visit had taken place in relation to the experiences of children in care and decision making for older young people. Two Inspectors had been on site for five days. Following the Inspection, a letter had been received from Ofsted providing recommendations however as that letter contained some inaccuracies Ofsted had been requested to consider those inaccuracies.

Many positives had resulted from the Inspection including practice models adopted by the Service and in particular the restorative practice model, with family safeguarding being judged as providing good and quality direct work with children, young people, and families.

The Inspectors had spoken directly to children and young people and noted the vast opportunities available for that cohort and expressed their appreciation for the offer in particular horse-riding lessons whilst noting those opportunities in relation to the arts, music, and therapeutic complimentary services.

It was stated that the Independent Reviewing Officers Service (IRO) produced good quality work including the oversight of those in unregistered provision.

The areas of improvement included those for 16 to 17-year-olds who were potentially homeless targeting four young people, recommending that two of those required additional work to ensure that their rights were protected.

Recording regarding homelessness was judged to require targeted work mitigating risk. In response to those concerns it was noted that a particular recording module was due to be implemented in October 2023, however following difficulties with the Authority's system provider this was subsequently implemented in March 2024 which resulted in consistent recording supervision and work was ongoing to ensure that continued.

It was stated that the formal findings letter from Ofsted would be shared with Members as soon as it was available.

Arising from the verbal presentation Members raised concerns, asked questions and made comments as follows, with Officers responding where appropriate.

- (a) Councillor S Ridney endorsed that reported above by the Director.
- (b) Councillor C Reid raised concerns in relation to those 16 and 17-year-olds requesting information on the work conducted to resolve those issues raised by Ofsted.

The Director of Childrens' Services reported on the issues with recording and systems being put in place in March to resolve those issues and continuing work to identify those who were homeless at risk and those at risk of becoming homeless. The work conducted on the Homeless Policy was referred to and it was noted that Ofsted had expressed their approval of that work. It was emphasised that Ofsted had not referred to any children back to the Authority for immediate safeguarding.

In response to a query by the same Member it was reported that once a young person reached the age of 18 and presented as homeless, they would become the responsibility of Adult Social Care Services.

Resolved

That the information reported on in relation to the Ofsted visits on 1st and 2nd February 2024, be noted.

53. **Change in Order of Business**

Pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 1(c), it was: -

Resolved

That Agenda Item No. 9 – Education Report be considered as the next item of business.

54. Education Report

Members considered a report providing an update on Education outcomes including the work of the Education Outcomes Team in relation to the following: -

- Dudley Performing Arts
- Suspensions
- Admissions
- Alternative Provision (AP) Strategy
- Elective Home Education (EHE) numbers
- Children Missing Education (CME) numbers

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion referred to the Performing Arts event that had taken place at Birmingham Symphony Hall on the previous day advising that 500 children had participated in two concerts.

It was reported that 94% of possible settings were engaging with tuition delivered in 82% of schools. Provision had moved to evenings following the pandemic with 1,000 children and young people participating each week. Work had also been conducted with the Virtual School.

An application had been submitted to lead the new Black Country Music Hub from September 2024. Annual funding of £2 would be allocated, should that application be successful, with the outcome of the application scheduled for April 2024.

Details of the suspensions and exclusions data for term 1 in 2023/24 as contained in the report submitted were referred to and it was noted that suspensions in primary provision had fallen following interventions by the Inclusion Team. However, in relation to secondary schools' suspensions had increased with the greatest increase in Key Stage 3, with Year 9 having nearly 25% all suspensions for term 1. It was noted that this group were in year 5 when schools went into lockdown and may have missed out on significant transition to secondary school.

The highest groups and reasons for the percentage of suspensions were referred to and it was noted that the most predominant reason for the increase in suspensions was around verbal and threatening abuse aimed at adults. To address issues, some schools had included behaviour expectations in the curriculum.

It was reported that in relation to permanent exclusions national figures had increased. Anti-social behaviour in schools with conflict between adults and pupils was referred to, with work being undertaken by the Inclusion Team within schools and continuing dialogue with the Department for Education (DfE) in relation to the behaviour issues.

It was stated that there was an increase in one off reasons for exclusions rather than persistent disruptive behaviour, in particular pupil-on-pupil assaults.

The summary included in the report submitted was referred to and the work of the Inclusion Team which continued to challenge schools in relation to suspensions and exclusions. Conversations continued with schools around their data and what support could be offered to improve and address issues. The Dudley Pathway Strategy that was due to be launched in September 2024 was outlined.

In relation to the Admissions update, applications to primary schools had dipped and there was spare capacity across the primary phases, however more pressure had resulted in the higher years of secondary provision. That was expected to level out and it was noted that birth rates had not returned to pre-pandemic levels at present.

New arrivals and in year transfers had recorded a significant increase with almost 1500 applications in the first term of the current academic year. The number of students joining schools in the borough with English as a second language was significantly higher. Secondary settings were currently working collaboratively through Fair Access Panel Processes to establish a new arrivals base through alternative provision.

The Alternative Provision Strategy was being developed to ensure that it was fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people across the local area. The Strategy was being developed to be consistent with the principals underpinning the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy and the inclusive Pathways programme, with the need to ensure that the Strategy tackled prevention prior to reaching the permanent exclusion stage. Further details would be shared with Members as the Strategy and Pathways programme progressed.

It was reported that the data clearly identified that should a child not have a good transition in and out of primary, secondary, or into further education, that would impact on a child's education.

In relation to Elective Home Education (EHE), numbers had increased since 2016. Currently there were 578 instances which was expected to

to increase throughout the academic year. The data contained in the report submitted in relation to EHE was referred to.

Various checks and balances were in place to ensure that children received a good standard of education and at-risk points were flagged should children move to those missing education (CME).

It was noted that the authority identified CME via different sources and used a range of investigatory powers and methods to try and identify the

whereabouts of children who leave the authority without notifying their school or other departments. The Authority had two full time equivalent officers who worked to identify CME and support the parents to apply for school places.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted Members asked questions, raised concerns and Officers responded where appropriate.

- (a) Councillor H Bills expressed her appreciation for the continuing work on Dudley Performing Arts and referred to the work on Pathways for children and young people.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion advised of the need for a level of personalisation within pathways which were tailored to individuals.

- (b) Councillor C Reid stated that she was impressed with the work conducted on the transition from high school to college and referred to the need for a more visual authoritarian presence when children and young people travel into and out of school to prevent crime.
- (c) Councillor D Stanley expressed concerns with school attendance levels and enquired whether those figures had been impacted upon by schools converting academies and whether behavioural issues were more prevalent in academies.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion advised that behavioural issues were impacted upon by both management and leadership, however there was no data to support that behavioural issues or attendance issues were greater in academy converters.

- (d) Councillor S Ridney raised concerns regarding the number of CME with 38 of those children having special education and disability needs, requesting information on the number of visits to the parents and carers of those children.

In response it was stated that all children who were EHE were rag rated in essence when concerns were raised, otherwise annual visits were conducted in line with regulations, and in accordance with legislation.

The Cabinet Member confirmed that when the Directorate restructure was carried out that resulted in young people being tracked to the age of 18 for education purposes and three teams were merged making tracking systems more robust. Schools who may encourage parents/cares to home educate would also be challenged.

- (e) Councillor S Ridney enquired whether there were any hotspots within the Borough in relation to EHE and in response it was indicated work had previously been undertaken, however that had now levelled out across the borough and there were no hotspots identified.

The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion confirmed that he would provide Members with a breakdown of EHE area-based data throughout the borough.

- (f) Councillor C Crumpton expressed his appreciation for the Dudley Performing Arts Events at the Symphony Hall and encouraged Members to attend future events.

The same Member expressed the need to obtain support should a child or young person become EHE due to bullying including both school support and psychological support.

The Director of Children's Services encouraged Members to contact her with any personal concerns regarding EHE and/or obtaining support services to transition children back into education. It was noted that the Health Select Committee at their meeting on 28th March 2024 were scrutinising emotional wellbeing and mental health needs for infants, children, and young people in Dudley.

Conversations could also be entered into with the Service Director for Education, SEND and Family Solutions and the Head of Education

Outcomes and Inclusion in relation to any missed opportunities, should Members wish to contact them. It was emphasised that scrutiny was important, and reference was made to the work of Independent Scrutineer, Vickey Buchanan and the reports submitted by her to previous meetings. There was also an individual audit in relation to the Independent Reviewing Officers to hold all Officers to account.

A whole host of training had been provided to Members of the Committee during the proceeding municipal year from the Local Government Association to ensure that there was a robust challenging system in place.

It was emphasised that difficulties were encountered when information was not received in advance of meetings for Officers to provide constructive responses.

- (g) In response to queries raised by Councillor C Reid, the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion stated that safeguarding checks were undertaken when issues were raised, and legislation dictated that yearly visits were necessary for those being EHE.

The Cabinet Member stated that a reason was required to visit the home of a child or young person unless invited to do so and that was contained within legislation. It was also requested that should specific issues arise Members contact her direct.

- (h) Arising from a question from the Chair it was confirmed that police partnership working was in place should children be found not to be attending school and for example discovered wondering around local retail parks.

Resolved

- (1) That the report submitted on Education Outcomes be noted.
- (2) The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion be requested to email to Members a breakdown of where those EHE were within the Borough.

55. **Corporate Quarterly Performance Report Quarter 3 (1st October 2023 to 31st December 2023)**

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted presenting the Quarter 3 position for Children's Services of the financial year 2023/24 covering the period 1st October to 31st December 2023.

Reference was made to the five Performance Indicators across the two Council priorities and the detail contained in the Children's Services scorecard relating to those Performance Indicators.

It was reported that of the five Performance Indicators, four had surpassed their target and the indicator in relation to percentage of Agency Social Workers for children was yet to achieve its target, however the percentage of 17.7% had reduced each quarter towards the target of 15%.

Resolved

That the contents of the Corporate Quarterly Performance Report for Quarter 3 (1st October 2023 to 31st December 2023), be noted.

56. **Learning from Complaints**

Members considered a report of the Director of Children's Services providing information in relation to learning from complaints, with the aim to provide a better understanding of how lessons were learned from complaints and how training and quality assurance activities supported that learning.

The Head of Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance, provided a detailed overview of the report submitted, referring to the annual report that was presented to the Committee on complaints, comments, and compliments from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 when it was proposed that the Centre for Professional Practice would provide an annual learning report, and it was noted that three themes had been identified.

In relation to concerns around communication, 19 of the complaints had raised concerns where the family felt that they had missed out on clear information that should be shared in a timely manner.

Individual examples included not knowing when a social worker was away from work (sickness absence); where an assessment included information that a family did not consider to be accurate or where family members considered that they were not kept up to date in relation to the plans for children and that impacted on the family time arrangements.

In relation to assessments, the opportunity to work through with the principal social worker in direct sessions across the workforce to review and fresh practice guidance was completed in December 2023. That had provided the opportunity to raise the profile of and include fathers in assessments; ensuring assessments were shared with children and families in a timely way; using the period of assessment to maximise the reach to the wider family and increase curiosity and practice.

The triangulation of the impact had been included in the Quality Assurance Framework. There continued to be detailed and monthly practice learning audits.

The second theme related to concerns raised about staff behaviour, 13 of the complaints that were upheld or partially upheld related to family's experiences of the practitioner. That was often aligned to a concern about communication. Examples as contained in the report submitted were referred to.

It was noted that as part of the work to implement Family Safeguarding a comprehensive training programme for practitioners and for managements around motivational interviewing had been shared. Assurances were also triangulated through a quarterly stocktake and showcase activity with each Service Manager reviewing and sharing their progress against the Practice Framework and Participation Strategy.

The third theme was in relation to Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP's), with examples including the timely delivery of a decision or the quality of the EHCP.

The Directorate now had in place a Designated Social Care Officer (DISCO) to support work, with the primary focus on enabling good quality social care contributions to the assessment of need and where relevant, in the plan.

A multi-agency, bi-monthly quality assurance group had been developed including a parent and carer forum, which included a specific focus on the quality impact of plans.

Further developments in practice to contribute to an EHCP assessment in a more timely way across early help and with social care had taken place, including making the appropriate use of prior social care involvement.

Training had been progressed through Genuine Partnership (4cornerstones co production) to better support effective co production arrangements with children and families who had additional needs.

It was reported that training was made available to every new starter, with every participant requested to provide feedback and contribute to staff surveys.

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

- (a) Councillor C Crumpton requested information on the training that was available to the DISCO to enable the Officer to assist Social Workers.

The Head of Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance referred to specific training packages that were available, and the regular Team Forum that would be attended by the DISCO to support any difficulties experienced.

- (b) The Chair requested confirmation as to whether EHCP's were being delivered within the 20-week target range.

The Service Director of Education, SEND an Family Solutions responded stating some were slightly exceeding the target range by a matter of days where significant improvements were required, however it should be noted that it was important to take time to develop EHCP's with families.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted on Learning from Complaints, be noted.

57. **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.

58. **Closing Remarks of the Chair**

This being that last meeting of the municipal year, the Chair wished all those present the best with the forthcoming local elections.

The meeting ended at 7.25pm

CHAIR