

Minutes of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

**Thursday, 20th January 2022 at 6.00 pm
in the Council House, Priory Road, Dudley**

Present:

Councillor P Bradley (Chair)
Councillor B Challenor (Vice-Chair)
Councillors R Body, J Clinton, R Collins, P Drake, M Hanif, P Lee, K Lewis, C Neale, N Neale and S Ridney.

Officers:

C Driscoll (Director of Children's Services), H Ellis (Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions), I Lahel (Head of Integrated Commissioning Performance and Partnership), M Palfreyman (Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion), A Stone (Service Director of Children's Social Care), R Cooper (Head of Financial Services) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer).

Together with one Member of the Public.

30. **Opening Remarks of the Chair**

The Chair thanked Members and Officers for their kind wishes following his recent bereavement.

31. **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors R Clinton, D Bevan, C Bayton and T Reid.

32. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

Councillor J Clinton and C Neale were appointed to serve as substitute Members for Councillors R Clinton and D Bevan for this meeting of the Committee only.

33. **Declaration of Interest**

Councillor P Lee declared a non-pecuniary interest as a foster carer in the Borough.

Councillor N Neale declared a pecuniary interest as an employee of the Dudley Group of Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Councillor K Lewis declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Child Care provider.

34. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th November 2021, be confirmed as a correct record and signed.

35. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

36. **Medium Term Financial Strategy**

The Committee received a joint report of the Chief Executive, Director of Finance and Legal and the Director of Children's Services on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2024/25, with emphasis on the proposals relevant to the Committee's Terms of Reference, specifically Children's Services.

The Head of Financial Services made specific reference to the process being undertaken to update resources following the latest estimates in relation to Council Tax and Business Rates.

It was noted that the Council's administration were no longer implementing the green waste policy.

- The MTFS reflecting the revised spending proposals and forecasts of likely resource availability summary contained in paragraph 29 of the report submitted, was referred to and it was noted that there would be a small surplus in 2022/23, a large deficit in 2023/24 and a smaller deficit in 2024/25. Overall £10m use of reserves over three years and note we have a low level of reserves

It was reported that there was £10.5m in the Business Rate Grant reserve and an increase in Council Tax of 2.99% was proposed.

The risks and uncertainties referred to in paragraph 31 of the report submitted were outlined.

In responding to an observation, and concerns raised by Councillor Ridney, it was accepted that children and young people's mental health had been affected during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the full extent may not be known for some time, which may result in further demands on resources in the future. Concerns were also referred to in relation to the impact on children and young people due to periods of home schooling and school closures.

In responding to a question from the Chair in relation to the forecast and additional spending regarding the Edge of Care – Intensive work to support children at risk of moving into care to remain with their families, the Director of Children's Services reported that the focus on children and young people had been expanded in order to conduct prevention work with those families whose children and young people were on the edge of being taken into the care of the Local Authority, for example those children subject to Child Protection Plans.

At present a complexity of needs was being witnessed and often the only response available to Children's Services was to take those children into care, and it was evidenced that children in care had generally worse outcomes than other children in terms of education, health and wellbeing and representation in the youth justice system.

It was stated that although children would always be taken into care when needed there was a cohort of children whereby work could be conducted intensively with their families to focus on behaviour change. There would be an expansion of staff capacity to work with children on Children in Need Plans for those at risk of entering the care system and the team would have a mix of skills and experience encompassing Social Workers, Family Nurse Practitioners, Family Support workers, Youth workers, Emotional Mental Health and Wellbeing workers together with a Substance Misuse worker. There would be a focus on mental health and wellbeing support and behaviour change.

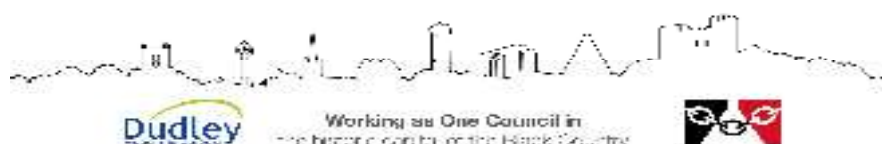
It was accepted that the ability to manage resources within families remained an issue and there remained child protection challenges. The Team would be staffed to work with 120 children, carrying out intensive work over an 18-week period.

The Director of Children's Services advised that the Committee would be provided with the opportunity to scrutinise the outcomes for those children referred to above and the Chair welcomed this and confirmed that prevention was key to outcomes for children.

Councillor Ridney referred to the need to invest in communities including investing in housing and producing facilities and more green spaces such as parks for children and young people to implement behavioural change in the families the Directorate were working with.

The Chair referred to the savings relating to a managed step down in residential placements and movement of external placements into internal residential placements, seeking assurances that this would not result in safeguarding issues.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the challenges in relation to residential provision, in that there was a national challenge in relation to capacity, with complexity in needs being witnessed and the difficulties in finding services to provide outcomes



that children needed. Assurances were provided that children and young people would always be put first to ensure they were protected.

Resolved

- (1) That the proposals for the Medium-Term Financial Strategy to 2024/25, as set out in the report and Appendices to the report submitted, be received and noted.
- (2) That the Director of Children's Services be requested to submit a report to a future meeting of the Committee on the Edge of Care intensive work to support children at risk of moving into care, to remain with their families.

37 **Quarterly Corporate Performance Report Quarter 2 (1st July 2021 to 30th September 2021)**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children's Services to present the Quarter 2 position for Children's Services for the financial year 2021/22 covering the period 1st July to 30th September 2021.

The Head of Integrated Commissioning Performance and Partnership referred to the 6 performance indicators with all but one moving in a positive direction.

The continued local, regional and national challenges regarding recruitment of Social Workers both in relation to permanent and agency staffing, and work was ongoing with Human Resources and Communications and Public Affairs to raise the profile of job adverts, along with a refresh of the Children's Services microsite.

It was reported that intervention work had provided a positive impact on Children's Services.

Following concerns being raised by Councillor S Ridney in relation to the percentage of eligible children taking up a 'Time for Two's' placement in Dudley, the Service Director Early Help/Schools and SEND in response, stated that more targeted work was required and a re-modelling of the service would lead to better working relationships with health colleagues. Work had commenced in order to support families through Family Centres. Problems had centred around parents and carers not wishing to access nursery provision and further work was required to inform parents and carers of the benefits of accessing these provisions at an early stage.

The Service Director Early Help/Schools and SEND undertook to provide members with the data in relation to the number of grandparents who cared for children not accessing Nursery provision. Further targeted work with the Council's Communications and Public Affairs including social media and schools was required in order to re-assure parents and carers and a focus on those families to identify why they were not using childcare and education provisions provided for 2 year olds.



A two-minute video was available for viewing on the Local Authority's website detailing the 2-year offer together with other promotional materials.

It was the intention to extend and encourage all early-years settings to be more proactive in promoting their settings and Family Support Workers would continue to work with families in Family Centres.

In responding to a question from Councillor N Neale regarding the single assessments completed within 45 working days, the Service Director of Children's Social Care advised that 45 days was a national measure and the data referred to Level 4 Assessments where there would be substantial concerns for the child; it was a standard assessment with standard questions which could involve safeguarding issues. The assessment would be undertaken face to face. The child concerned would be questioned alone and work would be completed with partner agencies for example schools. Parenting would also be assessed. This may also involve the police if there were serious safeguarding concerns.

Following the assessment, a decision would be taken whether there was the need to put in place support or was it so serious that there was the need for a Child Protection Plan. Support would be put in place to meet the child's needs.

In terms of the target set for the percentage of closed Early Help Cases that were not open to Level 4 Services less than 6 months after closure, each authority sets targets in relation to key performance through benchmarking by examining Department for Environment (DfE) data, therefore there would be national levels but there would also be a West Midlands average with comparisons being undertaken with neighbouring Authorities.

It was reported that there was no longer a back log of assessments, with only new assessments now being undertaken which had increased performance levels.

The timeliness of assessments were recorded on systems by Social Workers. Managers would share the data with their teams. There were also quality case file audits undertaken.

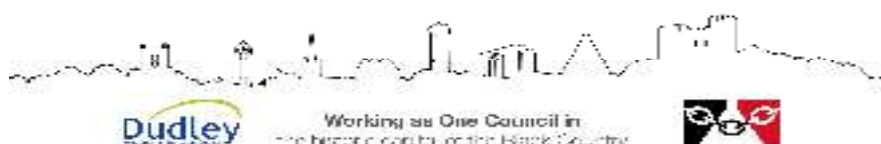
The Chair commented positively on Special Guardianship Orders.

Resolved

- (1) That the Corporate Quarterly Performance Report for Quarter 2 (1st July 2021 to 30th September 2021) be received and noted.
- (2) That the Service Director Early Help/Schools and SEND be requested to provide members with the data in relation to the number of grandparents who cared for children not accessing Nursery provision.

38. **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Programme Update.**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Children's Services on the key areas of operational performance progress and elements of the wider improvements



and transformation being implemented across the Dudley SEND Partnership. Appended to the report submitted was the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) that contained areas that the Local Authority and the Clinical Commissioning Group were jointly responsible for delivering.

Members also considered the Dudley SEND Deep Dive Schedule that was appended to the report submitted.

The Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions referred to the announcement that Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) would be carrying out a re-visit to the Local Authority on 31st January 2022.

The Team consisted of Wayne Simner – Lead HMI (Ofsted), Chris Pollit – HMI (Ofsted), Kay Goodfellow – Inspector (CQC), Peter Humphries – HMI Quality Assurance and Lucy Hart – CQC Quality Assurance who would focus on the 14 areas of the WSoA.

A snapshot of individual cases would be considered and an online survey would be available from 24th January to 28th January 2022, whereby Inspectors would devise questions for parents and carers to answer. The Survey and the letter from the Inspectors would be promoted across all channels to ensure that parents and carers had an opportunity to have their say.

Work was being undertaken on a draft inspection timetable with the Local Authority's Focus Groups.

Following the Inspection, a letter would be issued detailing the findings of the visit.

Should the Local Authority be deemed to have made sufficient progress in addressing all of the areas of significant weakness, the DfE and NHS England would cease making their formal visits.

Should it be considered that insufficient progress had been made in addressing any of the areas of significant weakness, the DfE and NHS England would determine the next steps.

In responding to a question from the Chair, the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions advised that the SEND Toolkit was in draft form and was being piloted with a number of schools. Once the Toolkit had been evaluated the findings of that evaluation would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

The Director of Children's Services referred to the imminent inspection, advising that Officers were not complacent with the knowledge that there was more work to do to meet their ambitions for children with special educational needs including the need for resources to meet those ambitions.

The Deep Dives led by the DfE and NHS England were referred to.

The Chair referred to the consistent Service Officers who were now in post and confirmed the offer of support on behalf of all Members to those Officers.

Resolved

- (1) That the report and Appendices to the report on the Special Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Programme Update including the current operational progress and the strategies and approaches, be noted.
- (2) That the Written Statement of Action (WSoA) improvements within the Local Authority and partner organisations designed to embed the cultural and operational changes required to achieve sustainable improved outcomes for children and young people, be noted.
- (3) That the feedback received from the DfE and the impacts and improvements that were beginning to be recognised on the ground, be noted.
- (4) That the Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions be requested to submit to a future meeting of the Committee the findings of the evaluation of the SEND Toolkit.

39. Education Report.

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children's Services on key areas of operational performance, progress and elements of the wider improvements and transformation being implemented within the Education Service. The report included: -

- The Education Strategy.
- Historical Data.
- Details of the School Improvement organisation.
- Details on Safeguarding.
- Details of Inspections.
- Details of Inclusive Pathways.
- Details of Attendance.
- Details of Children Missing from Education (CME)
- Details of Elective Home Education (EHE)
- Details of the School Admissions Service.

M Palfreyman, Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion introduced himself to Members and advised that he had been in post since 1st September 2021, with his role previously being as a serving Head of a Secondary School within the Dudley Borough.

The key priorities for 2021/22 as contained in the report submitted were outlined.

Members were provided with details of the numbers of Covid-19 cases for the current winter term and the amazing work that staff were undertaking in order to ensure the Borough's schools remained open was welcomed and thanks were expressed to all school staff.

It was reported that since September 2021, six inspections of five Primary Schools and one Secondary School had taken place with work being conducted with those schools.

The re-organisation of the School Improvement Team in order to provide those Officers with schools they would be responsible for within catchment areas, with those Officers drilling down to discover where CME and EHE children were within townships. A former Deputy Head from Sandwell had been appointed to increase capacity within the Team.

The Inclusive Pathways had been launched in 2021 to reduce exclusions and was having a positive impact.

Safeguarding referrals were quite stable, with the number of Ofsted referrals being resolved by talking to schools.

In relation to EHE children, there were currently 435, which had increased due to the pandemic, however numbers had reduced since September 2021. The Investigation Team had been re-organised in order to provide support to get children back into education.

A new Out of Sight Education Strategy had been created.

There were approximately 89 CME children and three designated staff members were conducting regular home visits. The CME Team met monthly and included attendance across the whole school estate.

In responding to a question from the Chair, the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion advised that the Improvement Strategy had been met with approval from Secondary Headteachers, who were fully engaged with the Strategy. Further Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training was also being offered to Headteachers.

The Service Director of Education, SEND and Family Solutions, referred to the collaborative working being undertaken by the Local Authority and schools, with consistent stability of leadership from the Local Authority being provided. The difficulties due to the pandemic were also referred to with driving improvements with energy and passion taking place within schools.

The Chair commented that it was encouraging that schools were being guided and supported by the Local Authority.

In responding to a question from Councillor R Body, the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion confirmed that further information could be circulated to the Committee on the number of children and young people who were EHE subsequently obtaining a University place.

In responding to a question from Councillor N Neale, the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion confirmed that from September 2021 investigations had been instigated through the School Attendance Policy in relation to EHE and had also been a key focus during the pandemic.

Councillor S Ridney referred to the need for a Secondary School within the North of the Borough.

All Members expressed their thanks to all school staff for keeping schools open during the pandemic, and thanked parents and carers for their understanding when schools had no alternative but to close.

In relation to the data of school attendance and enforcement from September 2021 to November 2021, the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion reported that the majority of those unauthorised absences were due to a holiday of five days or more being taken during term time that was not authorised by the headteacher. It was hoped that numbers would reduce, as many parents were stating that they had not had a holiday for two years during the pandemic and would rather pay the fine.

Resolved

- (1) That the Education Report including operational progress with regard to strategies and approaches, be noted.
- (2) That the improvements within the Local Authority and partner organisations designed to embed the cultural and operational changes required to achieve sustained improved outcomes for children and young people, be noted.
- (3) That the Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion be requested to submit details to Members of the number of young people who were EHE, proceeded to secure a University place.

40. **Social Care Improvement Update**

The Committee considered a report on the continued improvement of Children's Social Care including: -

- The overview of the refreshed Improvement Plan 2022/23.
- An update on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) Diagnostic by Worcestershire Children First.
- An update on the Sector Led Improvement Partnership with South Tyneside.
- The update on the Department for Education (DfE) Review December 2021.
- An overview of the quality of social work practice.



The Service Director of Children's Social Care reported that staffing challenges continued with increased numbers of referrals, however it was accepted that this was a regional challenge. All were mindful of the pressures upon Social Care Workers due to working throughout the pandemic.

The activity, through the new Recruitment Panel was summarised, together with the key areas around restorative practice and how work was being conducted throughout the whole system, including how support was provided in relation to Audit partnership working.

There was a new recruitment panel in order to stabilise and recruit Social Workers.

There was a whole system Edge of Care to work with families to provide wrap around services for children and their families, to reduce the number of children and young people entering the care system. There had been a second National Diagnostic Action Plan to drive that work forward with colleagues in Early Help Services and partner agencies in order to increase the support offered whilst managing risk.

In relation to the front door re-design investigations piloting and evaluating work was to be conducted.

In relation to the Learning Organisation having increased audits rated as good, when making decisions regarding how well the service was operating, there was the need to ensure that whilst managing auditing there was a second process to check those monthly audits. Deep dive and themed audits were also being investigated.

The permanency planning and the work with South Tyneside was outlined.

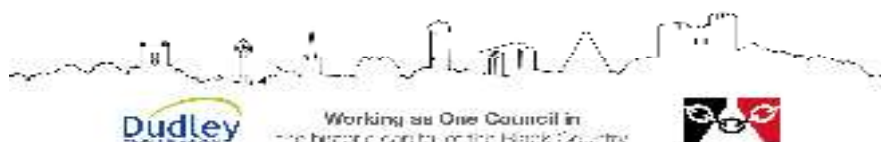
There had been a meeting with the DfE on 13th December 2021, and although the Service remained under supervision, the main review focus for the DfE moving forward was the work force, demands and caseloads, and quality practice and partnership working.

In responding to a question from Councillor R Body, the Service Director of Children's Social Care stated that more interviews for Social Workers had continued to take place, however due to the pandemic some staff were exhausted and could not cope with children's social care services. There continued to be challenges with recruitment due to the lack of qualified Social Workers nationally. An Action Plan surrounding retention had been formulated and a training offer for students was being investigated.

In responding to a question from Councillor M Hanif regarding the assistance provided by South Tyneside, the Service Director Children's Social Care advised that the work had been beneficial in terms of shared knowledge, especially in relation to permanency, to help identify earlier family members who could care for children.

In responding to a question from the Chair, it was stated that nine new staff had been recruited with a lot of interest being received in the new posts.

Resolved



- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on the Social Care Improvement update including the progress made to date in the Improvement Plan and the quality assurance practice be noted.
 - (2) The refreshed Improvement Plan agreed in November 2021 that was designed to achieve positive sustainable change to the quality of services provided to the children and families of Dudley, be noted.
 - (3) That the Corporate Leaders had been provided with an understanding of progress made to date, be noted.
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41. **Closing Remarks of the Chair**

The Chair referred to the Local Government Association Training offer and in order to inform that offer, the Self-Assessment toolkit that he had completed. The completed Assessment would be forwarded to Members for their consideration and additional comments.

The meeting ended at 7.58pm

CHAIR

