



Children's & Education Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's & Education Select Committee held on Thursday 4 June 2020 in Virtual Meeting - MS teams, commencing at 2.04 pm and concluding at 4.30 pm.

Members present

S Adoh, D Barnes, M Collins, E Culverhouse, D Dhillon, B Foster, A Hussain, N Hussain, S Jarvis, D Johncock, R Jones, P Kelly, R Stuchbury, P Turner and J Ward

Others in attendance

Apologies

Agenda Item

1 Election of Chairman

Kelly Sutherland, Committee and Governance Manager, welcomed everyone to the meeting and called for nominations for Chairman. Dev Dhillon was nominated and seconded and in the absence of any other nominations was declared Chairman of the Children's Services and Education Select Committee.

RESOLVED: That Mr Dev Dhillon be elected as Chairman for the ensuing year.

2 Appointment of Vice-Chairman

Mr Dhillon thanked all the staff in Children's and Education Services who had faced an extremely challenging period due to the coronavirus pandemic. A large number of services were provided by frontline staff; the officers and senior management team had worked tirelessly to provide the best service possible.

Mr Dhillon proposed Mrs Julie Ward be appointed as Vice-Chairman; Mr Arif Hussain and Mr Niknam Hussain seconded the proposal.

RESOLVED: That Mrs Julie Ward be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

3 Apologies for Absence/Changes in membership

It was noted that Mr Robert Jones had sent his apologies for the first part of the meeting and joined the meeting at 3.00 pm.

The Chairman advised that the Select Committee was able to have parent governors as co-opted members; Mrs Sutherland explained that she would contact the Legal team to clarify the process and update the committee.

The committee members introduced themselves and stated the area they represented.

4 Declarations of Interest

The following declarations of interest were made:

- Mr Arif Hussain - governor of the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe.
- Mr Dominic Barnes – his wife worked in a Buckinghamshire Grammar School.
- Mr Niknam Hussain – advised as a consultant on a number of home to school transport companies.
- Ms Sally-Ann Jarvis – worked for an academy school.
- Ms Emily Culverhouse – helps run the Chesham Youth Council.
- Mr Brian Foster – director of Haddenham Youth and Community Centre.

5 Covid-19 Update

The Chairman explained that a Covid-19 update would be provided at this meeting; however, there would be further opportunities to scrutinise the Council's response to the pandemic. On behalf of the whole committee, the Chairman extended his thanks to all staff in Children's Services and Education who had been working extremely hard on the front line during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Mark Shaw, Cabinet Member for Children's Services stated it had been an extremely challenging time for the Service as the officers had to be set up to work from home, in a very short space of time, to enable continued contact with vulnerable children via Face time, texting and WhatsApp; these methods had proven to be an efficient, effective and accepted means of communication for the children. The Service had kept the Department for Education (DfE) and OFSTED informed throughout. The planned OFSTED monitoring visit in May 2020 would be rearranged for when it was safe to do so.

Mr Shaw commended the whole team, in both education and children's social care; he particularly thanked the staff who had been working in the schools which had remained open during the pandemic and the officers who had undertaken home visits under extreme circumstances. Mr Shaw was confident that the senior management team knew what needed to be improved upon and that there was an improvement plan in place. Regular contact had been made with approximately 80% of the known vulnerable children but the team were aware that the real challenge would be the children who were not known to the service and it was anticipated that there could be a rise in the number of referrals when more children returned to school. In addition, recruitment of social work staff continued to be a priority.

Mr Tolis Vouyioukas, Corporate Director, Children's Services, referred to the detailed report provided in the agenda pack and emphasised that following the lockdown announcement; immediate action was taken to ensure all teams were able to work remotely. Mr Vouyioukas praised the schools which had accommodated the children of key workers and vulnerable children. The Service had achieved contact with over 96% of cases (paragraph 1.6) and Mr Vouyioukas stressed the importance of ensuring the momentum of improvement continued. A recent staff survey had shown that over 88% of staff in Children's Services were happy and felt supported. The senior management team had been in touch with DfE at least three times a week to understand the guidance and expectations. Regular meetings with the chairs of school partnerships had also taken place. It was anticipated that 80% of primary schools would be open by week commencing 8 June 2020, in accordance with public health guidance.

The following key points were raised by the Select Committee members during discussion:

- A member commented that the Children's Centre programme had not been implemented due to the pandemic; however, Mr Vouyioukas clarified that the Family Support Service (para 1.9 of the report), which included Early Help, actually went live in September 2019 and he was confident that families had been receiving support throughout the crisis, albeit in different ways.
- In connection with schools reopening, Mr Vouyioukas stated he was very pleased with the response from schools and the chairs of the partnerships. The guidance from the DfE was not mandatory; the Service had worked closely with schools to provide advice and it had been important to work together to agree when the schools should re-open.
- Paragraph 1.12, SEND Service stated that on 1 May 2020 the Section 42 duty had been eased. The absolute duty to deliver the provisions identified was modified by the regulations and now 'reasonable endeavours' must be used to deliver as much of the identified provision within Early Help Care Plans (EHCPs) as possible. In response to being asked how the Service had responded to the changes; Mr Vouyioukas advised that he had seen an improvement in the SEND Service and that he held regular meetings to ensure the advice was applied.
- It was highlighted that paragraph 1.15 (EHCPs) stated that "No statutory process has been altered or changed; it has just been delivered in a different way." Mr Vouyioukas explained that as it was not possible to hold face to face contact, the team had used alternative ways of communicating which had resulted in more productive meetings with some young people; the guidance had been complied with and learning would be taken from the experience.
- Mr Richard Nash, Service Director for Children's Social Care, advised that approximately 20 face to face visits per week for high risk cases had been carried out at the start of the pandemic, but had recently increased and over

100 visits had been carried out in the week commencing 25 May 2020. Mr Nash was unsure how many visits would normally be undertaken each month but would provide the information after the meeting.

ACTION: Mr Nash

- Schools had supported the request for personal protective equipment (PPE) and had provided PPE to Stoke Mandeville Hospital. Schools had also been supplied with PPE equipment.
- Mr Vouyioukas did not know how many children had caught the virus whilst attending school since lockdown but would ask the Public Health team to provide the data.

ACTION: Mr Vouyioukas

- It was noted that Mr Shaw had referred to a potential increase in referrals into the Children's Services when normal school attendance resumed and he emphasised the Council's commitment to supporting vulnerable children. In response to being asked about additional resources in schools, Mr Shaw stated that it would be a challenging time, the number and severity of cases would be closely monitored and quick action would be taken where necessary to ensure support for children needing help. Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, reported that there had been improved collaborative working between schools during the pandemic. In order to provide further support, the Service had also organised dedicated School Support Officers. Excellent communication had been maintained and a website had been established to provide quick access to help.
- Mr Vouyioukas added that Covid-19 had created a difficult financial environment as it was difficult to predict what additional activity would be needed in the future to deal with the recovery from the pandemic. The Service would continue to work in partnership with schools, the voluntary sector and health colleagues.
- Paragraph 1.6 stated that just over 96% of children have had contact with a social worker every four weeks during the COVID-19 period with 79% of those agreeing to virtual video contacts; however, 21% had not agreed to virtual contact and a member asked what had been put in place for these families. Mr Nash advised that as soon as the seriousness of the pandemic became apparent, the Service put plans in place to ensure continuity of protecting vulnerable children. Daily meetings allowed prioritisation of cases and a decision was made as to whether a home visit should be undertaken. The Service knew which families (4%) had not had contact and had evaluated their safety during the pandemic. 79% had agreed to virtual contact and this figure was comparable to other authorities. Some families, who did not have remote access, had been provided with improved mobile devices and internet connection.
- Paragraph 1.2 stated that changes were made to the electronic recording system so that work impacted by COVID-19 could be clearly recorded and accounted for. The system was revised to be able to record a virtual visit and the number of attempts to contact people to manage the current situation.
- The OFSTED improvement plan was constantly updated and presented to the Service's improvement partner at regular intervals; it was on the agenda for

the Cabinet meeting in July 2020 and Mr Vouyioukas confirmed he would discuss presenting the plan to the Select Committee before the next meeting in September 2020 with Mrs Sutherland.

ACTION: Mr Vouyioukas/Mrs Sutherland

- A member expressed concern that due to the changes to Section 42 in the SEND Service that some children may be missed. However, Mrs Cranmer reassured the committee that children were still having their plans administered and that there had been increased efficiency in the turnover of EHCP plans due to a higher number of staff and the appointment of a new Chief Educational Psychologist. Mr Vouyioukas added that in May 2020, 78% of EHCP plans were being processed within the 20 week timescale, which was a significant improvement. It was agreed that Mr Simon James, Service Director, Education, would circulate a briefing containing the SEND performance data.

ACTION: Mr James

- Staff had been well supported during lockdown and the Service was confident that improved levels of performance would be maintained.

The Chairman thanked all the presenters for this update.

6 Key priorities for 2020-21

Cllr Shaw listed the key priorities as follows:

- Service improvement
- Recovery from Covid-19
- Budgetary control.

Cllr Tony Green, Cabinet Member for Youth Provision, listed the key priorities as follows:

- Recruitment of in-house foster carers
- Improving the education and health of looked after children
- The transition of children from childhood to adulthood.

Cllr Cranmer listed the following three key priorities:

- SEND delivery and improvements
- Improving education provision
- Home to school transport. (This responsibility was divided - Mrs Cranmer advised that whilst she dealt with the policy; the delivery came under the Logistics portfolio).

The following key points were raised by the Select Committee members during discussion:

- A member asked for an explanation of how 90% of pupils attended a good or

outstanding school as he felt the attainment gap had increased over the years. Mr Vouyioukas explained that the figure of 90% was published by OFSTED. He reassured the committee that the schools and authorities were working together to narrow the attainment gap; it was a joint responsibility.

- A member asked if there were plans to improve the transition process for SEND children and children with EHCPs as they reached adulthood. Mr Vouyioukas acknowledged that there were a large number of children and young people involved and that the Service was working hard to provide a seamless transition.
- It was noted that it had proved difficult to recruit high quality social workers and this was a national problem. Mr Shaw explained that the Council was 'growing' its own social workers and a new group had been due to start in the Academy, but had been delayed due to Covid-19. Mr Nash stated that he had been working hard over the last 18 months on the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers, as well as growing the academy. The Service was in a much stronger position today than in the last two years; it was retaining more staff and the staff survey had indicated that staff felt supported. Recruitment had also taken place from Canada and Australia and five social workers had started before the pandemic; discussions were being held to decide when another four would be able to start work.
- Mrs Cranmer was pleased to report that after having similar recruitment difficulties, an additional 12 SEN Officers had been recruited in recent months, which had contributed to the tremendous improvement in the EHCP turnaround.
- A member highlighted the increase in the number of looked after children being placed with in-house foster carers, which was good for the children and the Council's budget. Mr Nash stated that it was important for children to be placed as near to home as possible and stated that there had been an increase from 128 to 180 placements with in-house foster carers. Recruitment of new foster carers involved a significant amount of training.
- In response to a question on the attainment gap, Mr James agreed to circulate an update on the position in Buckinghamshire compared with national figures and statistical neighbours.

ACTION: Mr James

- Mr James advised that the decision on when, or whether, the 11+ Secondary Transfer test would take place would be made in the next two weeks and he would inform the Committee as soon as the decision was known.
- In response to being asked what could be done to implement improvements more speedily; Mr Vouyioukas stressed that the Service was doing its best to recruit as many permanent social workers as possible and had discussed the situation with OFSTED.
- A member raised concerns that a large number of children permanently excluded from school could be fuelling the county lines problem and asked how many children were excluded. Mr Vouyioukas stated that the number of exclusions in Buckinghamshire had decreased and it was not proven that there was a connection between excluded children and the county lines. Mr Nash added that Children's Services staff were part of an exploitation hub,

with Thames Valley Police, Health, Education and Youth Offending Service colleagues, which worked to identify young people at risk of exploitation.

- Mr Vouyioukas acknowledged that recruitment was a challenge and agreed that the offer of key worker housing could be helpful; the Service had been working with colleagues in the Housing Department to discuss this possibility.
- Mr Tony Green stated that there were willing and capable families who could provide fostering but were unsure how to go about it; more publicity was required to achieve results.
- A member advised that neighbouring councils had discovered that education teams had benefitted from working from home during the pandemic and asked whether the Council was considering an increase in hot desking in order to become less reliant on office space. Mr Vouyioukas explained that hot desking was out of the question due to the Covid-19 pandemic and that the Council was working to ensure the officers were safe and compliance with public health advice was followed.
- A member referred to page 20 of the agenda pack; priority 5 – Improving the education and health of looked after children, which read, ‘as a service, we must aim to raise the ambitions, educational attainment and health of looked after children in order to help them realise their potential, whatever their starting point is’ and asked how we compared to neighbouring authorities and nationally. Mr Vouyioukas agreed to provide a response after the meeting.

ACTION: Mr Vouyioukas

In response to a query on additional support which had been put in place for young carers during the pandemic; Mr Nash stated that there was a Carers Strategy and that the Service had been aware of the need to contact those families and had arranged respite care where appropriate.

7 Work Programme Discussion

The following suggestions were made for the work programme:

- The Children’s Services Improvement Plan – members of the committee requested sight of the improvement plan before it was presented to Cabinet in July 2020 and suggested a supplementary meeting be held. The Chairman advised that the improvement plan would usually come to the Select Committee after it had been to Cabinet and that members could ask questions at the Cabinet meeting. Mr Vouyioukas added that the Improvement Plan was a ‘work in progress’ document and Children’s Services were accountable to the Improvement Board. The Chairman agreed to look at the timing and process of the Improvement Plan and review the suggestion of an additional meeting.

ACTION: Chairman/Mrs Sutherland

- The Children’s Services budget and whether it was now sufficient to cover the improvement plan due to the impact of the pandemic.
- The resilience of young people in education and care and how the effect of the pandemic on their education, attainment levels and ability to find work

could be mitigated.

- IT support and facilities provided for children being schooled at home.
- Lessons learned during the pandemic that could inform and improve the Council's practices moving forward.
- The impact of Covid-19 on transitions between early year's settings and reception and Year 6 to Year 7.
- Work being undertaken to narrow the attainment gap.

Some annual updates would be included on the work programme.

8 Date of next meeting

The date of next meeting was 10 September 2020.