



Children's & Education Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Children's & Education Select Committee held on Tuesday 29 September 2020 in Virtual Meeting via MS Teams, commencing at 2.17 pm and concluding at 3.32 pm.

Members present

S Adoh, D Barnes, E Culverhouse, D Dhillon, B Foster, A Hussain, N Hussain, D Johncock, R Stuchbury, P Turner, J Ward, A Cranmer, T Green and M Shaw

Others in attendance

Mr S James, R Nash, K Sutherland, S Taylor and T Vouyioukas

Apologies

M Collins, R Jones and P Kelly

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for Absence/Changes in Membership

The Chairman, Mr Dev Dhillon, welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologised for the delayed start which was due to technical issues.

Apologies were received from Mr Paul Kelly, Mr Mike Collins and Mr Robert Jones.

2 Declarations of Interest

The following declarations of interest were made:

- Mr Dominic Barnes declared that his wife worked at a grammar school in Buckinghamshire.
- Mr Arif Hussain declared that he was a school governor.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2020 were reviewed. Mr Robin Stuchbury referred to the paragraph concerning the 11+ on page 10 of the agenda pack (5th bullet point) and asked whether monitoring of the 11+ would take place to ensure there was no negative impact on the percentage of children from disadvantaged families. The Chairman confirmed that there would be an agenda item on the Educational Standards Report at the next Children's and Education Select Committee meeting.

Mr Dominic Barnes requested that his declaration of interest be amended as his wife worked at a grammar school in Buckinghamshire rather than the Education Department at Buckinghamshire Council.

ACTION: Kelly Sutherland

RESOLVED: the minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2020 were AGREED as an accurate record subject to the highlighted change being made.

4 Public Questions

Mr Dhillon advised that, in future, the work programme would be a standing item on the agenda and public questions would normally relate to an agenda item. As the agenda was published after the deadline for questions to be submitted, Mr Dhillon stated he had agreed that the following three questions could be raised. The questions were read out by Kelly Sutherland, Committee and Governance Manager; Mr Mark Shaw, Cabinet Member for Children's Services provided the responses.

Question 1

What provisions had the Council put in place that supported children who were not able to access respite care as facilities were currently closed? When would respite centres open again?

Response

Since the start of Covid-19, the service had sought to balance the overwhelming need to reduce the risk of infection for children, young people and adults and provide services in line with our statutory duties. Respite care for children with additional needs and their parents had continued throughout this period of time, although it had had to change. Initially, overnight respite care was not safe to provide; however, this was now available albeit in a limited capacity and designed around the need to reduce the risk of infection. Overnight respite care was subject to continual review.

Question Two

Was the Council now able to continue their statutory duties on timescales from 25 September 2020 under the Children's Act?

Response

The Council had regular, and at least weekly, contact with colleagues from the Department of Education to discuss service delivery in the context of Covid-19. We, as a Council, remained confident that we would continue to be able to meet statutory expectations.

Question Three

How had the Council allocated the extra catch-up funding it received for education from Government for the Covid-19 pandemic?

On 19 June 2020, the government announced £1 billion additional funding to help

England's children catch up on what they had missed while schools had been closed. The funding was for the 2020-21 academic year and was split into two amounts:

- £650 million Universal Catch Up Premium.
- £350 million National Tutoring Programme to support the most disadvantaged pupils.

Universal Catch Up Premium:

- This funding was available for all state funded mainstream and special schools, alternative provision and independent special schools to support all pupils in the 2020-21 academic year. The funding would be allocated directly to schools and the Council did not have any discretion in the allocation.
- For mainstream schools funding would be allocated at £80 per pupil.
- For special schools and alternative provision funding would be allocated at £240 per place.
- Schools had the flexibility to spend their funding in the best way for their cohort and circumstances.
- Based on the last school census it was estimated that the amount to be allocated across Buckinghamshire schools (including academies) would be approximately £6.4m.

National Tutoring Programme (NTP)

This funding was to provide additional, targeted support for those children and young people who needed the most help. The NTP was a more structured programme where schools purchased 15-hour blocks of tuition from accredited providers, with the school paying 15% of the cost and 85% of the cost being met by the NTP. The programme would launch in November and schools would need to apply for funding.

5 Chairman's Update

The Chairman reported that he had attended an informal meeting with some members of the Transport, Environment and Climate Change Select Committee. The purpose of the meeting was for members to be assured that the home to school transport plan for the return to school in September, which had been made more complicated due to social distancing requirements, was in place. The Service had been working hard with bus operators and school heads and the arrangements for the autumn term had gone smoothly.

The Chairman reminded members that this committee was responsible for the scrutiny of changes in the policy of home to school transport which came under Mrs Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills; however, the operational side of school transport was the responsibility of David Martin, Cabinet Member for Logistics. Therefore, Mr Dhillon had agreed with the Chairman of the Transport, Environment and Climate Change Select Committee that they should take the lead on this area. A member of the committee commented that he understood why school transport was scrutinised by the Transport, Environment and Climate Change Committee but was concerned that the findings had not been shared with this

Committee. Mr Dhillon replied that Sara Turnbull, Service Director for Transport Services, had provided a detailed presentation which would be circulated to the committee members for information. Mr Dhillon thanked S Turnbull, David Martin and the officers concerned for their hard work and added that he had not heard of any complaints about the service.

ACTION: Kelly Sutherland

Mr Dhillon advised that the Children's and Education Select Committee was able to appoint co-opted members to assist Members with scrutinising education matters. Following advice from the Service Director, Legal and Democratic Services, the Chairman proposed inviting two parent governors, Mark Skoyles (primary representative) and Clare Pease (secondary representative), who had previously served on the committee for a short time before the Unitary transition. If agreed, they would serve until May 2021.

RESOLVED: It was AGREED that Mark Skoyles and Clare Pease be invited to be appointed as co-opted members of the Children's and Education Select Committee.

6 Covid-19 Update

The Chairman welcomed Mr Mark Shaw, Cabinet Member for Children's Services; Mrs Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills; Mr Tolis Vouyioukas, Corporate Director for Children's Services; Mr Richard Nash, Service Director, Children's Social Care and Mr Simon James, Service Director for Education to the meeting. Mr Vouyioukas explained that the report contained two sections; Children's Social Care and Education. Mr Vouyioukas acknowledged that it had been an incredibly busy time for everyone in the Directorate and schools and thanked staff and colleagues for their hard work.

Mr Nash reported that the Service had focussed on meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people and had adopted a flexible approach in the context of Covid-19. The number of physical contacts with children, young people and their families had increased since the last meeting of the Committee. The Service had introduced new practice standards to see as many children as possible, face to face, and it was evident, due to the increased complexity of case work, that Covid-19 had had an impact on vulnerable families. There had been some positive outcomes such as the quality of the inter-agency work and the use of technology which had improved contact with some children. Professional contribution to meetings had also improved.

The following points were raised and discussed by members of the committee.

- In response to a request on the number of children percentage-wise who had returned to school and for information on the work being carried out to provide mental health resilience for children and families; Mr Nash advised that there had been a positive response to children returning to school and that children being away from school had underlined the importance of

attending school. Mental health resilience was not a new area of work but Mr Nash agreed that the impact of Covid-19 would increase the workload and that the relationship with the mental health service remained key to ensure a timely response.

- Reference was made to paragraph 1.5 which stated that “August 2020 saw a greater proportion of individuals self-referring into the service, which is a significant shift compared to previous trends”. Mr Nash explained that it was hard to provide an exact number/comparison but it had been notable that there had been successive days of requests for help which was unusual.
- In response to a question on whether staff had been impacted in Buckinghamshire due to being unable to obtain a Covid-19 test; Mr Nash advised that it had not been a significant resourcing issue from a Children’s Social Care perspective; it had been a national issue and the service was working closely with public health colleagues.
- Paragraph 1.4 referred to an increase in the number of referrals for families which had not previously been known to the service. A member asked how many referrals and the scale of issues of the new referrals. Mr Nash stated that the evidence was two-fold; the month by month comparison with last year showed the number of referrals had increased, possibly due to Covid-19. The referral numbers fluctuated week on week but Mr Nash confirmed that workloads had increased due to the complexity of new referrals.
- Concern was expressed over the increased and difficult workload for staff and how they were being supported. Mr Shaw advised that he was aware of the additional burden on staff; managers were working closely with their staff and 88% felt well supported in a recent staff survey. Mr Shaw thanked staff and colleagues for their hard work ensuring children and young people were safe in Buckinghamshire and added that statutory deadlines were being met.
- Following a request for information on whether schools had raised any issues with the children returning to school and the programmes that would be delivered to support children’s mental health; Mr James advised that, as an example of collaborative practice between schools and the local authority, a programme had been commissioned to provide additional mental health support to all children in schools. The schools were also working with the Educational Psychology team and the rest of the targeted schools support team to focus on areas such as anxiety, depression and self-harm. Mr James also highlighted the partnership work with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the NHS Trust.
- Concern was raised that not all children were willing to discuss mental health issues. Mr James advised that there were a number of youth forums and that children worked well when engaging with other children and often felt more comfortable speaking with their peers rather than professionals. The Service was also working closely with schools, many of which had a link person or key worker who often provided the best information. Mr James stated he had been impressed with the way schools had managed the return to school process and feedback had shown that children were happy to be back in school. There was good, frequent communication between the

senior leadership team and representatives from the head teachers as they met at least twice a week.

- A member raised the issue of youths being targeted by county lines and the potential of being subject to abuse and asked whether more was being done to protect young people. Mr Nash stated that an exploitation hub worked with other agencies to identify children early who were at risk.

RESOLVED: The Select Committee NOTED the following recommendations:

(a) The way in which Children’s Social Care had continued to respond and adapt its approach to service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, and

(b) The work completed by the Directorate in supporting the full return to school from September 2020.

7 SEND Improvement Plan

Mr James introduced the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Plan report which related to the progress and improvement across whole local authority area. It was part of the work for the local area inspection and should be seen in line with the SEND Strategy, the improvement plan and self-assessment document. Demand for children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was increasing each year and there were more children with complex needs, notably children on the autistic spectrum and also children and young people presenting with varying degrees of mental health concerns.

Governance was carried out by the SEND Board which was chaired by Mr Tolis Vouyioukas. This was an executive board, representative of the whole area and included parents, schools and partners. There were also a number of impact groups beneath the SEND Board which focus on specific areas of priority; e.g. Co-production (working with families and children preparing for adulthood), the quality of EHCPs, and the local offer (an online resource for families to access information).

Recent areas of improvement included the timeliness of EHCP assessments; there was a 20 week deadline for EHCP assessments to be completed and over 80% had been achieved in last four months with 89% at the end of August 2020. The Service had also focussed on the quality of the plans through an audit programme; 50% of all plans were good or better during the last month. Two of the biggest challenges were to ensure pathways were clear for young people moving into adulthood and to provide more focus on identifying children in need of SEN support.

The following points were raised and discussed by members of the committee:

- The self-evaluation document was a live document and involved the contribution of all the stakeholders across Buckinghamshire including statutory and non-statutory services to parents, representatives and volunteers and the community to identify the people who had a special education need. Mr James reported that there had been a recent, very well attended, school governors’ board meeting in which there was specific

interest in the SEN topic. The schools and School Governors were aware of the inspection preparation and there would be a series of upcoming meetings with head teachers to raise awareness of SEN.

- A member referred to Paragraph 2.14 and asked about the support for those in need of speech therapy. Mr James reported that 'Speech Link' was a very effective tool which identified children that might have a speech language therapy need. It was a way of supporting schools to identify those needs early and, if appropriate, refer into the speech and language therapy service for a further assessment. The Service was also working closely with health colleagues to make sure that teachers and teaching assistants felt confident to meet the needs of those children. Mr James did not know if there was a waiting list for children who required speech therapy but agreed to check this.

ACTION: Mr James

- A member requested an explanation of the rise in the level of statutory performance from 40% in 2019 to 65% in the current year (paragraph 2.7). Mr James stated that the rise was due to the work carried out by the SEN team who had focussed on consistency in this area.
- In response to a question on how the Council could meet the demand for support for children on the autistic spectrum; Mr James agreed that there was an increased demand and that the Service had focussed on reconfiguring the additional resource provisions in schools to align to the needs of the children who required support.
- In response to a request for an explanation on the underlying cause for the increase in the number of children on the autistic spectrum; Mr James advised that it was due to the earlier identification of the needs of autistic children; some of whom had very complex needs and would not have survived years ago.
- A member asked how parents had been supported during the recent pandemic, in terms of accessing respite care; Mr Nash Richard advised there was a need to continue to be flexible, and provide care on a case by case basis. The Service looked at alternative support where necessary and worked with the family and partner organisations.
- Mr James stated that partnership working across education, health and social care was vital to effectively support children with additional needs.
- A member asked whether any more resources had been provided to prepare children for adulthood and whether the system had been tested. Mr James reassured the committee that increased work was being carried out with adult services to ensure decisions were made which worked best for all concerned. He understood that the process could be difficult and bureaucratic and the parent forum had been involved in developing the process. It was suggested that a report be provided to the committee on the preparation of children for adulthood. Mr James stated this should be presented jointly with adult services.

ACTION: Simon James/Kelly Sutherland

- It was noted that there was currently funding for home to school transport for children with SEN but this funding was under pressure. Mr James assured

the committee that he was working closely with Transport Services to ensure the provision was sustained for the current academic year.

The Chairman thanked all the school staff and officers for their hard work.

RESOLVED: The Select Committee NOTED the most recent update against the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Improvement Plan.

8 Draft Work Programme

The following items were proposed to add to the Committee's Work programme:

- Social worker recruitment – possible area for Inquiry work to be discussed at the next meeting.
- SEN children and preparation for adulthood.
- Educational standards – the national issue/effects of C-19 on 11+.
- Members suggested that the item on the mental health of children should be brought forward to the meeting on 7 January 2021

9 Date of Next Meeting

5 November 2020 at 2.00 pm