

## **Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee**

5 November 2020 – At a virtual meeting of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held at 10.30 am.

Present: Cllr Hillier (Chairman)

Cllr Lord	Cllr Hall	Mr Lozzi
Cllr Baldwin	Cllr A Jones	Mr Cristin
Cllr Bridges	Cllr Oxlade	Mrs Ryan
Cllr Brunsdon	Cllr Pendleton	
Cllr Burgess	Cllr Wickremaratchi	

Also in attendance: Cllr N Jupp and Cllr Russell

### **27. Declarations of Interests**

27.1 No declarations of interest were declared.

### **28. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee**

28.1 Resolved – that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2020 be approved as a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

### **29. Urgent Matters**

29.1 No urgent matters were raised.

### **30. The Impact of Covid-19 on Schools and the Educational Outcomes of Children and Young People in West Sussex**

30.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Education and Skills setting out the support provided to schools and children during the lockdown and the return to school in September.

30.2 The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills introduced the item confirming that there had been considerable effort by the Education and Skills service, school's leadership, governors and headteachers, particularly in communications, in what had been uncharted territory. He thanked them all for their hard work.

30.3 The Director of Education and Skills introduced the report saying that the period since March had been unprecedented, with practice, policy and procedures having to be created from scratch and from the ground up, around a rapid response to an ever-changing situation. More recently challenges had been dealing with the return to school and the health and wellbeing of student, headteachers, teachers and staff. The impact of the work by all partners was reflected in the high levels of school attendance throughout the period and the management of positive Covid-19 cases had been dealt with robustly by schools meaning there had been no surge of cases.

30.4 The Youth Cabinet report at Appendix 1 was introduced by Harley Collins. He reported that a survey had been taken among young people on the impact of lockdown and the return to school. The following are answers to questions raised by the Committee Members:

- It was agreed that 16-18 year olds needed career guidance and upskilling to deal with any future unemployment gap.
- Students did experience difficulty in completing course work during the first lockdown.
- Whilst young people were not in classrooms together during lockdown many used social media to communicate with their peers.

30.5 The Committee then heard from witnesses from the schools within West Sussex.

a) Mr Phillip Potter, Headteacher at Oak Grove College, who made the following points:

- There had been woefully inadequate information from the Department for Education (DfE) on special school guidance.
- Staff, teaching assistants, business staff, support staff, medical staff including therapists, cleaners, caterers and teachers etc had done an incredibly good job over this period by completely changing the way in which they worked.
- Converting to home learning had been challenging for the special school. Packs had been delivered or posted to families. Online work had not been considered.
- DfE guidance on PPE had been confusing. PPE is reasonably well sourced now but remains an ongoing challenge particularly from a financial view.
- Some young people who require aerosol generating procedures had not been able to return to school. The County Council was working with special schools and Public Health England to escalate this issue.
- The County Council's leadership advisory team had been incredibly supportive and responsive to the school during the pandemic.
- An ongoing challenge existed around laptops and access to learning for students who had not been in school.

a) Mr Mark Anstiss, Headteacher at Felpham Community College secondary school, who made the following points:

- The County Council had provided excellent communications, particularly the daily emails from the Director, and support from general advisers, the secondary link adviser and the area educational adviser. It would be useful to have greater speed in decision making and the release of templates and policies to schools.
- There had been a positive attendance rate since the return to school in September (94% attendance the previous week)

and students had returned with a healthy and positive attitude.

- The full impact of the pandemic on the mental health of students was likely to unfold over the coming months.
- Key challenges moving forward included the increase in attainment gap (20-30% of students did not complete home learning during lockdown), the increased financial costs to adhere to Covid guidelines and the risk of low staff levels due to self-isolation or illness.

b) Ms Nicola Waters, Chair of Governors, William Penn Primary School, who made the following points:

- Guidance from central government lacked clarity and therefore the school relied on the County Council for advice and direction.
- Appreciated the communications from the County Council and the inclusion of Governors Chairmen on the circulation. The letter templates were also very helpful to help provide clarity to concerned parents. Due to evolving guidance there was a large volume of communications, which was not always relevant to governors and therefore could take time to unpick.
- A significant positive was the relationships that have developed both with the link adviser and with the locality schools. The Chair's locality group had strengthened, providing support by meeting virtually on a regular basis to share best practice and knowledge. This enabled the governors to provide a cohesive locality-wide approach that was appreciated and by schools and parents.
- The key issues moving forward included helping children to catch up on the missed learning during lockdown, the challenge of providing future home learning especially in a small school with limited resources and the wellbeing of school staff.

c) Mr David McKeown-Webster, Headteacher, Harlands Trust primary school, who made the following points:

- The school had adapted to respond to the pandemic, supporting pupils, families and colleagues. The reassurance provided to parents was reflected in the high attendance numbers since September.
- There had been good support from the County Council's link adviser and through a headteacher support group. The link adviser was easily contactable, and social workers and the MASH were always available to help support vulnerable children.
- The school and staff were proud of the work it undertook during lockdown to keep in touch with those pupils working at home as well as providing support to key worker children in school.

- The completion of the risk assessment had been challenging, and an alternative format or model may be easier to use in the future.
  - The main concerns moving forward included the increase of lower level mental health problems in pupils due to disruptions at home and the impact of the current constraints on being able to deliver an enriching curriculum and make school improvements.
- d) Mr Tim McCarthy, Chief Executive Officer, Aurora Academies Trust and Chair, West Sussex Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Alliance, who made the following points:
- The level and frequency of communication from the Director of Education and Skills had provided assurance to schools and parents which was reflected in the high attendance levels since the return to school in September.
  - The pandemic was having an impact on school recruitment.
  - The main concerns moving forward included the widening attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers due to lost learning, the wellbeing of staff and pupils and the clarity of advice for staff advised to shield or work from home.
- e) Mr Lozzi, parent governor representative on the Committee, gave feedback from a school and a nursery:
- The information from the DfE was often late and unclear and therefore made it much harder for both the schools and the County Council.
  - The executive headteacher's working group set up during the pandemic and the regular communications from County Council officers were very helpful.
  - The County Council could have provided greater confidence and clarity around some areas where schools were under pressure or struggling to keep up with requirements, for example staying open during holidays.
  - The key concerns moving forward included the lost learning of pupils and the increased attainment gap, the potential financial pressures on schools and the mental health of vulnerable students and staff.
  - Feedback from the nursery was that they had felt well supported with frequent contact from the County Council.
  - Further support on staffing, and those that could be affected by shielding arrangements would be helpful.
- f) Mr Cristin, Director of Education for the Diocese of Chichester, who made the following points:
- DfE guidance was often difficult to interpret and the Education and Skills team gave communications that were clear and open throughout, leading to clarity and support to schools.

- Being provided with a designated point of contact helped headteachers and the open dialogue developed a sense of partnership.
- g) Ms Ryan, Director of Education for the Catholic dioceses, who made the following points:
- Schools appreciated the efforts and attention of the local authority, particularly the link adviser.
  - The amount of communications initially from the DfE was overwhelming and schools appreciated the County Council reducing the number of e-mails. Information could have been summarised more and with more signposting for head teachers.
  - Schools understood the need for the County Council to take a cautious approach but on occasion the schools felt they had to make a decision before a confirmed position was given, for example with the risk assessment.

30.1 The Committee members then fed back items from schools within their constituency. The Committee recognised and welcomed the amount of work that had been carried out during this unprecedented time to support schools and children. The following answers to questions and comments were made:

- Committee members asked that it be recognised that there was little time for them to contact schools for feedback due to the school half term holiday.
- The national DfE scheme providing laptops to isolated or disadvantaged children is still running. The County Council had claimed and distributed around 900 laptops to children with social workers and children in Year 10. They were also working on securing more equipment from the scheme to share with children.
- Teacher recruitment had always been a challenge. Newly qualified teachers were starting with schools this year. The County Council had looked at support for schools by coupling them with other schools with secondments.
- Initial briefings with headteachers had given a mixed picture on the impact of lockdown on the gaps in learning for children. It had been reported that some children had lost some of their independence to apply knowledge to problem solve since returning to school in September.
- When lockdown first occurred, remote learning had been a challenge, but all schools met what was expected nationally. The development of online work and remote lessons had taken a lot more time and resource than normal lesson planning.
- The County Council has no direct access to families who have elected to educate their children at home unless there was a

safeguarding concern. The team are focussing on providing guidance and support to new children being home educated.

- The Government had provided some funding for Covid expenses but there was no clarity on whether that would continue. It was recognised that there would be schools which would face financial challenges as a result of the additional expenditure. The County Council's finance team was working with schools on preparing three-year budgets to get a better picture schools' finances moving forward.
- The County Council, headteachers and students all had concerns about what would happen to GCSE and A-levels examinations in 2021 and whether there would be changes to the kind of questioning that would be included. Pressure was being put on the Government to delay the national assessments at Key Stage 1 and 2 until later next year, rather than run them at the same time.
- Guidance had been sent to schools on the support available for contacting vulnerable children who were not in school. School attendance for children looked after had risen from about 13% to almost 70% over the summer and that had been achieved through discussion between headteachers, officers and social workers to make sure support was maintained as the country entered a second lockdown.
- All Government funding for eligible three- and four-year olds had been passed on to nursery schools, based on headcount, for the past two terms. For private nurseries outside of the furlough scheme and the various small business tax reliefs there had not been much support. There was some concern that the basic rate funding was not enough, and lobbying was taking place for funding for holiday schemes and after school clubs.
- The County Council had worked with Unions and professional associations to get a consistency of information provided to schools on shielded and vulnerable staff.
- The wellbeing of headteachers and their staff was recognised as a key area of importance and focus. A bespoke package of management and well-being support from an external provider had been arranged to provide a support mechanism to headteachers. The Committee welcomed the work being progressed to support headteachers, recognising the significant impact of the pandemic on their wellbeing and agreed that this was a key area of work to progress at pace and would be interested in receiving an update on this work at a future meeting of the Committee's Business Planning Group.
- The Committee recognised and welcomed the robust levels of communication and support that the County Council had put in place, and continued to provide, to schools, parents and carers and recognised the positive impact this had had on attendance

levels since the return to school in September. Mr Wagstaff confirmed it had often been difficult to get clarity on information from the DfE. The Directorate would continue to provide information to schools, seeking to differentiate the information needed by Governors, headteachers, etc, where possible.

- The County Council is working with colleges of further education on supporting school leavers following changes in the economy as a result of the Covid pandemic. This would involve supporting young people in their choices with careers advice and working with colleges to see what they are able to offer in terms of vocational education. The most vulnerable children are being supported by the County Council's post-16 team.

30.2 The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills thanked the Education and Skills department for the work they had carried out in the last few months to support the schools and children of West Sussex during the ongoing pandemic. He also extended his thanks to headteachers, governors and school staff. The testimonies from the Youth Cabinet, headteachers, governors and professionals at the meeting demonstrated how the Education team had stepped up to the challenges over the last few months and he thanked the team for that.

30.3 Resolved that – the Committee:

1. Expresses its thanks to County Council officers, senior leadership teams, teachers, staff, governors, students and parents for all of their efforts to keep children learning during this unprecedented and very challenging time.
2. Requests that the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills writes to the Department of Education to highlight the following:
  - The need for better timed and coordinated communication and guidance for schools moving forward, the need for early clarity over all examination testing procedures moving forward;
  - The need for further funding to support schools on the additional expenses they continue to incur and the loss of income opportunities as a result of the ongoing pandemic;
  - Welcomes that schools will remain open during the current lockdown and requests that further closures be considered only as a last resort, and if required be minimised both in number and length of time.
3. Understand the impact of the current pandemic on the emotional health and wellbeing of young people and asks the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills to consider carrying out an online survey with parents and children on the impact of Covid-19 in order to gather qualitative and quantitative data that can be used to best direct support and resources, and to repeat at intervals as the pandemic continues.

4. The Committee recognises the additional pressure on school staff, particularly senior leadership teams, and suggests that a similar survey as outlined in recommendation 3 is carried out with schools at key points during the pandemic to inform the County Council's ability to develop and respond to any potential changes to the support it provides to schools.
5. Requests that the service urgently reviews the support it provides to school leaders during the pandemic and that this information is provided to the business planning group.
6. Highlights the key challenges moving forward on school recruitment, increased attainment gap for all children, particularly the most disadvantaged, access to technology for remote learning for all children and career support for post 16 young people and will refer these items to the Business Planning Group to monitor as potential areas for future scrutiny.
7. Requests that a report on the financial stresses on schools as a result of the pandemic is presented to a future Business Planning Group for consideration.
8. Requests that the service considers the content of future communications to schools and governors to ensure they are supportive and relevant considering the ongoing pressures they face.
9. Agrees to collate any further feedback from schools following the Committee Meeting and pass on to the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills for consideration when working with schools moving forward.
10. Asks that the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills writes to the Secretary of State to highlight the need to resolve the issue of enabling those children who require aerosol generating procedures back into school to minimise their time away from learning.

1.38pm Cllr Bridges left the meeting.

1.41pm Mr Christin left the meeting.

### **31. Children First Improvement Programme Update**

31.1 The Committee considered a report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning. The item was introduced by Cllr Russell, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, who told the Committee that:

- The establishment of a Children's Trust had been agreed by Cabinet on 20 October and she thanked the Committee for their input on this matter.

- The findings of the focussed visit by Ofsted would be available on 4 December.
- The report showed that the transformation work was continuing at pace despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

31.2 Mr Clark, Children First Transformation Director, introduced the report and highlighted the following key areas:

- Following the Cabinet decision in October on the Children's Trust, work was progressing with Mutual Ventures on detailed workstreams to establish the Trust. The Trust was due to be in operation by 1 October 2021.
- The three-week Ofsted focussed visit looking at leadership, the service response to Covid-19, looked after children and care and protection had taken place and the outcome was expected on 4 December.

31.3 Summary of responses to Committee members' questions and comments:

- Good multi agency working arrangements were essential and the safeguarding model was about building and expanding those links. It was also hoped the ways of working in the Pause project could be expanded and embedded in the service. The Committee were reminded that the Children First Board had 30-35 members encompassing all areas of partnership including district and borough councils.
- Demand on service was being monitored and since the return to school the numbers of referrals had risen back in line with where they would be expected to be. Resource had been taken up with more complex cases leading to higher levels of intervention. The service was able to move staff to support front line service teams where needed.
- There are still levels of risk in the service, but the service is doing its best to keep children safe. Work includes internal auditing of cases as well as external auditing by Hampshire County Council where highlighted issues of practice can be attended to.
- Around 450 staff had taken part in staff engagement sessions to outline plans for the transformation work including the Children's Trust, and it had given staff an opportunity to provide their views and insights. It was hoped to build a more mature and open dialogue with staff enhancing the cascading information and regular feedback from staff. A staff engagement policy was being developed and Mr Clark would look at giving the Committee the opportunity to review some of the feedback from staff.
- Work was progressing on the Family Safeguarding Model. In-depth work was taking place to explore how teams are set up and how staffing resources could be changed to position and locate teams in the best way. It was expected that the new Model would be in place by October 2021.
- The Mind of My Own (MOMO) app has had an increased uptake by children, young people and staff and increased marketing was

planned this year to further increase uptake. It was agreed to share information on the app with all Councillors asking them to promote within their communities.

31.4 Cllr Russell reminded the Committee that the service was making progress but there was still a long way to go to get the service where it wanted to be. Good foundation blocks had been laid with the appointment of a permanent leadership team and progress was being made.

31.5 Resolved that – the Committee:

1. Is satisfied that the evidence provided demonstrates progress is being made on the improvement journey and improving outcomes for children and young people.
2. Highlights the importance of partnership working to ensure the best outcomes for children and families and requests that this continues to be a key area of focus and recognised area of risk.
3. Requests further data and information on the number of referrals, children under child protection plans and coming into care since the start of the pandemic and the impact this is having on the service is included in the update report presented at the 7 January Committee meeting.
4. Writes to the Chairman of the Corporate Parenting Panel to suggest that the Panel provides their view on the quality of health support for children looked after.
5. Supports that co-production work with children and young people is carried out as part of the transformation agenda to ensure the voice of the child is at the centre of the development of the service.
6. Requests that updates on staff engagement work are included in future update reports to the Committee.

2.20pm Cllr Oxlade left the meeting.

2.50pm Mr Lozzi left the meeting.

## **32. Appointments to Business Planning Group**

32.1 Resolved – that the Committee agreed the appointments to the Business Planning Group as outlined in the report by the Director of Law and Assurance.

## **33. Forward Plan of Key Decisions**

33.1 The Committee reviewed the Forward Plan dated 2 November 2020 and Members raised:

- Woodlands Meed: The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills confirmed that the project was going ahead as programmed, that the architect's designs were in the public arena and that members of the public would have the opportunity to review them before the planning application was submitted on 20 November.

#### **34. Possible Items for Future Scrutiny**

34.1 No further items were raised for future scrutiny.

#### **35. Requests for Call-In**

35.1 There had been no requests for call-in to the Scrutiny Committee within its constitutional remit since the date of the last meeting.

#### **36. Date of Next Meeting**

36.1 The next meeting of the committee will be held on 7 January 2021.

The meeting ended at 3.15 pm

Chairman