

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 17 September 2020 at the Virtual Meeting - Web ex meeting.

PRESENT:

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Dr Richard Castle	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Cllr Chris Coleman	Cllr Brian Robinson
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Colin Hay	

Substitutes: Cllr Phil Awford (In place of Cllr Alan Preest)

Others in attendance: Sue Hall - Head of Service, Disabled Children and Young People's Service
Suzanne Hall - Finance Business Partner
Charlotte Jones - Acting Director of Education
Chris Spencer – Director of Children's Services
Cllr Richard Boyles - Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years
Cllr Patrick Molyneux - Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills

Apologies: Cllr Bernard Fisher, Cllr Alan Preest, and Cllr Loraine Vivienne Patrick

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Dr Richard Castle declared a personal interest as a member of the Plan4Sport consortium providing additional mental health support (Covid-19) to GCC.

Cllr Brian Robinson declared a personal interest as the provider of holiday accommodation for people with a disability.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 16 July 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

3. EDUCATION AND COVID-19

3.1 The Acting Director of Education informed the committee that all schools in Gloucestershire have opened to all pupils in line with DfE expectations. It was explained that all schools were asked to complete an attendance return daily to the DfE. However, not all were doing this - 5 of the 300 schools have not reported at all and 23 schools had not reported this week (week commencing 14 September 2020); all were being followed up by either the council or the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC). It was therefore clear that the attendance data we have access to, and was being reported, was understated.

3.2 Members were informed that on Friday 11 September 2020 there was a 90.5% overall attendance rate from those schools submitting their data (254 schools out of 300). This included 87.5% attendance from children with an EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) and 87.6% from children open to social care. Across the 2019 autumn term the average

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attendance rate was 95% and we have no reason as yet to believe that should not be around the same level this year.

- 3.3 Overall the return to school in Gloucestershire has been extremely successful, exceeding national attendance rates significantly in all areas: 11.2% higher for children with EHCP; 8.9% higher for overall attendance; and, 8.5% higher for children known to social care.
- 3.4 The committee was informed that attendance this week had started to dip slightly as positive Covid-19 cases began to have an impact. There were currently 220 children in Pates Grammar School and 30 children in Warden Hill Primary School self-isolating; 15 schools have attendance less than 80% and Inclusion Officers were working with those schools to understand why if not Covid-19 related. Officers from across children's services were working together with schools to understand why any vulnerable child was not attending school following the established Covid risk assessment process (including any risks associated with children being at home full time) and to take steps to encourage parents to send their children to school.
- 3.5 It was explained that nationally, whilst most children have returned to school, there has been an increase in parents choosing to home educate their children – in the majority of cases this is due to parental anxiety around the spread of Covid-19 (especially where close family were vulnerable); but some children have been able to engage much more with remote learning. In the first half of September there had been a net increase of 110 children added to the home education register; in comparison in September 2019 when there were 56 new children added to the register.
- 3.6 It was noted that these children were of all ages and from all districts. Whilst September usually saw a high number of children becoming EHE (Elective Home Education), it must be assumed that Covid-19 was the reason for over half of these cases. Schools have been asked to encourage parents to remain on roll and talk through any mitigation to alleviate their concerns. The council has also advised schools not to pursue punitive measures to non-attendance, highlighted by the DfE, during this term to give parents confidence in exploring options with the school. Parents were offered a meeting with the school and a Local Authority (LA) representative prior to removing the child from roll to facilitate alternative options being considered. In a number of cases parents were choosing to temporarily home educate until the pandemic subsided. It was important to note that home education was a parent's choice and schools could not refuse to remove a child from roll to facilitate this.
- 3.7 Committee members were informed that all children who needed transport to attend school had been able to access it and any minor issues with capacity had been managed quickly and effectively as they arose. It was noted that most of the stand by fleet we were holding back was being used. However, once travel numbers begin to stabilise over the next couple of weeks the network would be reviewed and revised to ensure appropriate levels of capacity were available.
- 3.8 It was explained that the council has worked with the Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group (GCCG) to commission a number of surveys to understand how children and families had coped during lockdown. It would be important to understand their level of resilience and where additional support needed to be targeted to support their wellbeing. A particular piece of work was underway focusing on Year 6 pupils transitioning to secondary school.
- 3.9 The committee was informed that the arrangements schools have put in place for their children and staff were working well. A particular issue being faced was the number of

parents on/around school sites and the lack of social distancing; or the congestion issues with more parents choosing to drive their children to school. Schools were managing individual issues and these were now reducing as new patterns become established. The council has used the media to remind everyone of their social responsibility.

- 3.10 Many parents whose children will be changing school next year were starting to consider their choices. To maintain the current safety measures in schools, they would not be able to offer the usual open evenings/days. The councils' recommendation was that virtual tours and events be planned and publicised for parents.
- 3.11 Members were informed that the delay in local testing capacity was creating a concern for some schools which were relying on negative test results to bring their asymptomatic teachers back into the classroom to maintain staffing levels. The council continued to raise testing concerns nationally and in the interim school staff would be able to access the Pillar 1 testing site in Brockworth.
- 3.12 It was noted that the DfE have confirmed they expected schools to incur no additional costs this academic year as a result of Covid-19 but for some schools supply costs could be considerably higher – this was being escalated locally through the RSC.
- 3.13 The committee thanked the Acting Director of Education for their thorough presentation on the issues facing pupils, parents and schools during this pandemic.
- 3.14 At this point Dr Richard Castle, Added Member, declared a personal interest as Chair of Governors at Gastrells Primary School. He informed the committee that the Covid-19 Schools Group had done a really good job. He shared his frustration with regard to the volume of guidance that had been received from the government the Friday before schools re-opened. It would have been helpful to have received this earlier, and to have the changes highlighted. Questions were also asked with regard to training and catch up funding.
- 3.15 The Acting Director explained that the council received the guidance from government at the same time as schools. The Headteacher Group had been utilised to identify changes and a summary has now been shared with all schools. It was also explained that some schools had not claimed the catch up funding due to their contingency fund, and that the training package for teachers to support pupils wellbeing was now starting. The Acting Director informed the committee that it would have been preferable to have the training available over the summer period but the council had had to abide by DfE timescales.
- 3.16 A member commented they were aware that the suicide rate in adults had gone up whilst in young people it had gone down. It was their view that this clearly indicated that schools were a factor here. They were also disappointed that government advice took so long to come through. It was also hoped that the experience of dealing with Covid-19 had strengthened relationships with and between schools.
- 3.17 The Acting Director informed the committee that managing the response to the pandemic had pushed many Headteachers to their limit, and stated that it was important to maintain their wellbeing as well as the wider school community. The work with Primary school partnerships and Headteachers had been valuable. The council was also working to support Academies but they were also being given advice when requested by the RSC and these messages did not always tally. The council was working with all partners trying to achieve a sense of shared ownership and vision. The council welcomed the additional funding from the DfE to support mental health and wellbeing.

- 3.18 In response to questions the Acting Director informed members that with regard to attendance that as there was a mixed economy of provision in the county we would normally be looking at attendance a term behind. In the current situation with data missing from 46 schools it was expected that the attendance rate would be higher than stated; some schools found the requirement to report back daily as onerous. The non-attendance was across all year groups. Officers were working with schools where non attendance was below 80%, and ensuring that the most vulnerable children were targeted for support. Colleges were offering different routes in to support young people in order to avoid them becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training); universities were also being flexible.
- 3.19 Committee members asked that their appreciation of the work that schools had and were doing to support children, young people, and their families was conveyed to them. The Director of Children's Services (DCS) agreed to facilitate this.
ACTION: Chris Spencer
- 3.20 It was clarified that the DfE had placed a cap on the number of laptops available to each LA. Gloucestershire had received 1558. Discussion had been undertaken with social workers to identify those young people who required this support. Some laptops had not yet been allocated and schools were supporting officers to identify those in most need.
- 3.21 The numbers of schools affected by cases of the Covid-19 was reiterated. It was clarified that closing a school would only be undertaken as a last resort.
- 3.22 In response to a question it was clarified that referrals to the MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) were low whilst schools were closed but that number had now started to increase. It would be important to ensure that the system was able to respond to this increase in demand.
- 3.23 With regard to the survey undertaken with regard to Year 6-7 transitions members could have access to this if required. However, it was important to note that nothing stood out with regard to Covid-19. It was anticipated that the Lockdown Survey (for Year 3- 12) would offer a greater insight. It was important to understand that everyone would be affected differently by the lockdown and that we were able to respond and support them accordingly. It would also be important to ensure that any concerns regarding a child/young person were shared with children's social care colleagues.
- 3.24 The Acting Director agreed that it was important to ensure that school governors were aware of the Covid-19 guidance and understood their role within this situation. They would ask Governor Services to ensure that relevant information/guidance was shared with school governors.
- 3.25 It was acknowledged that there were issues with contacting some secondary school Headteachers. RSC secondees had also experienced this issue and so were aware of these challenges. This situation has been raised in the Headteacher groups.
- 4. DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ACTION PLAN**
- 4.1 The Head of Service, Disabled Children and Young People's Service, gave a detailed presentation of their report; the challenges of Covid-19 had been significant.
- 4.2 A significant factor had been utilising ICT more effectively. A lot of contact time has been undertaken using ICT; some children have absolutely loved it. Staff had dressed up and sang songs to engage with the children and young people.

- 4.3 Work to address the majority of actions identified in the action plan was underway, and additional activity would be added as the plan progressed. It was explained that performance management, using LiquidLogic, was becoming much more embedded, and officers recognised the importance of this approach.
- 4.4 The instability in the workforce had been a significant factor. However the Head of Service informed members that the service was now no longer reliant on agency staff. Engagement with families had improved, reflective supervision was now being used more and proving to have a positive impact on behaviour.
- 4.5 The Head of Service acknowledged that transitions remained a concern. A draft strategy had been developed and has been shared with adult social care colleagues. It was explained that conversations with families would start before the young person was 14. Officers would work with the young person and their family considering matters such as their aspirations for the future, and support families in honing their thoughts ideas. A Transitions Panel was in place and was aware of the young people coming through. Availability of suitable accommodation was an issue, and could impact on when the young person was able to start their placement. It was emphasised that the strategy involved a whole systems approach.
- 4.6 Members were pleased to note the work in place to take the service forward, and the team was now in a stronger position. However it was commented that that the full inspection had taken place over two years ago and it had therefore been disappointing to read the monitoring letter from the visit earlier this year. The Head of Service acknowledged this but did comment that verbal feedback had been received at the time of the visit and the contents of the letter had been something of a surprise. The Director of Children's Services reminded members that Ofsted had been asked to look at this service as we knew that it was struggling, and had wanted to share plans with them.
- 4.7 The service worked closely with the parent/carer forum, and did undertake surveys to try and capture the parents' voice. Parents and young people also sat on interview panels where possible, and would score the candidates, eg using emojis if necessary.
- 4.8 The committee agreed that it would need to revisit this matter again to consider how the action plan was being moved forward. It was agreed that the latest version of the action plan be shared with committee members (the one in the agenda pack was incorrect and was removed from the website after the meeting).
- 4.9 The committee took the opportunity to receive an update on the Trevone House from the Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning. It was anticipated that the first cohort of young people would move into the facility in mid November 2020. Members of the committee were welcome to visit the facility ahead of the young people moving in.

5. PERFORMANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: DISTANCE TRAVELLED

The committee recognised that it was not able to complete the agenda for this meeting and had hoped to hold an additional meeting in due course to consider the outstanding items. The following week Ofsted announced that it would undertake a focussed visit from 6 to 8 October 2020. Committee members agreed that it would be better to meet after this time to receive and consider the outcome of this visit. Information on the date and papers for this meeting would be available on the council's website in due course.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

6. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK: PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT
Please see minute 5.

7. PERFORMANCE MONITORING
Please see minute 5.

8. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING
Please see minute 5.

9. COMMITTEE WORKPLAN 2020-2021
Please see minute 5.

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 12:57