

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

Children, Young People and Family Support Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 25 February 2021

(NOTE: This meeting was held as a remote meeting in accordance with the provisions of The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.)

PRESENT: Councillors Mick Rooney (Chair), Mike Levery (Deputy Chair), Mike Chaplin, Francyne Johnson, Anne Murphy, Joe Otten, Kevin Oxley, Colin Ross, Jack Scott, Jim Steinke, Alison Teal, Garry Weatherall, Sophie Wilson and Cliff Woodcraft

Non-Council Members in attendance:-

Alison Warner, (School Governor Representative - Non-Council Non-Voting Member)
Sam Evans, (Diocese Representative - Non-Council Voting Member)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Alan Law, and from Peter Naldrett (Parent Governor Representative - Non-Council Voting Member) and Alice Riddell (Healthwatch Sheffield, Observer).

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4. ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION

4.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Education and Skills on the Council's response to children who are being electively home educated and setting out the issues presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.2 Present for this item were Councillor Jackie Drayton (Cabinet Member for Children and Families), Andrew Jones (Director of Education and Skills) and Rosemary Ward (Interim Head of Service - Access and Inclusion).

4.3 Andrew Jones, as an introduction, reported that the pandemic had resulted in a significant increase in the number of children being electively home educated, mainly due to concerns regarding Covid-19 infection rates. Rosemary Ward introduced the report, which set out information on the Department for Education (DfE) guidance for elective home education, and detailed the Council's duties in line with such guidance. Ms Ward also reported on the changes made in the light of the pandemic, as well as the proposed arrangements in the event of the likely increase in cases where parents wanted to send their children back to school when the pandemic came to an end.

4.4 Members of the Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- Once parents had removed their children from a school, the Council was no longer responsible for facilitating their access to examinations. Therefore, further to the recent Government announcement on teacher assessments in terms of examination grades, it would not be possible for home educated children to receive such assessments. When parents elected to remove their children from school, they would be contacted by an officer from the Access and Inclusion Service, who would explain the implications of their decision.
- The Council would always try and find the reasons why parents opted to educate their children at home, and whilst there was an awareness of a number of conspiracy theories regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst the Council would continue to listen out for any news regarding such conspiracy theories, it had not been able to find any links regarding the reasons provided.
- When the Council was attempting to follow DfE national guidance, it was not able to customise the Service to work in partnership with the relevant agencies and services in the city, which had resulted in some confusion as to which organisations were doing what in terms of adhering to its statutory duties. The Council's current policy which, whilst still adhering to national guidance, was now much clearer, and sets out how the Council was addressing its statutory duties, as well as introducing more transparency. The new policy also helped to tighten the arrangements in terms of the safeguarding of those children educated at home, which had been highlighted as a concern given the recent national safeguarding cases.
- During the lockdown, the Council was making every effort to contact parents to ensure that they felt adequately supported and that they had all the necessary information to enable them to access any agencies or services relevant to their needs, as well as to check on the children's social and emotional wellbeing. Additional staff had been recruited to the Service for this purpose.
- The Council was very reliant on parents providing their reasons for educating

their children at home. Prior to the pandemic, the two main reasons parents had provided were anxiety in terms of their children attending school and Special Educational Needs (SEN). Since the pandemic, there had been a slight change in that Covid was now the main reason, followed by anxiety and SEN. A large number of parents chose not to inform the Council of their reasons.

- The Council was well aware of the rise in cases of domestic abuse, and the likelihood of home educated children being affected. In terms of safeguarding arrangements, the Council would maintain regular contact with families home educating, and would identify the level of risk in such households, based on the circumstances of how and why the children had been withdrawn from school. The Council would also review any historical information it had on the families. In those circumstances where issues were identified, the level of contact with the families would be increased to ensure that the parents felt as though they were being supported, and that they were aware of all the relevant agencies and services they could access. In those cases where the Council received information from the public regarding possible safeguarding concerns, the issue would be referred to the Safeguarding Hub, and a decision would then be taken, in collaboration with other relevant Council Services, as to what the response to the family should be. There were a number of people who, themselves, had suffered domestic abuse, working with families, and there were also a number of other services, both in-house and commissioned, including a Parenting Team, the Haven Project and the Multi-Agency Support Teams (MAST), as well as other social care and inclusion offers.
- There was a three-month agreement with parents whereby they could return their children to the school they had been withdrawn from within this time if they found that home education was not working for any reason. The Council was aware of those SEN children being educated at home, both those on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHC) and those on SEN support, and discussions were held with the families with regard to their education. Those children on an EHC plan would still have their annual review, and the Service would work with the Inclusion and Attendance Team to look at whether the parents wanted their children to return to school, and provide relevant support in terms of the transition. When parents expressed an interest for their children to return to school after the three-month period, every effort would still be made to find a place at the school which they had been withdrawn from, and where this was not possible, support and advice would be provided in terms of finding an alternative school. Meetings were held with those parents and children who had expressed an interest in elective home education, at which the rules in respect of the three-month timescale, as well as all the other rules and implications, were explained to them. The Children Missing from Education Team would also contact the parents when they had been notified of the withdrawal, to discuss the options and implications with them. In addition, it would be referred to the Multi Agency Support Team (MAST) who, again, would discuss the options and implications with the family. Furthermore, it would be referred to the

Elective Home Education Advisor, who would discuss the education aspects with the family. In the light of an expected increase in the numbers of children wanting to return to school after the pandemic, officers had raised the issue of admissions with the DfE to see if any consideration could be given to amending the statutory guidelines.

- The Director of Education and Skills was a member of the Safeguarding Board, and reported issues regarding elective home education to the Board on a regular basis. The Director and the Chair of this Committee would write to David Ashcroft (Independent Chair of the Sheffield Children Safeguarding Partnership) requesting that the Safeguarding Board amends its remit with regard to elective home education.
- In terms of children entering home education at the present time, there was a large proportion of families who were sending back appropriate approaches to education. As from April 2019, when the DfE guidance had changed, the Council then requested updated curriculums used by parents when their children moved to another year group. However, currently, parents were not routinely submitting updated curriculums to the Council. Due to the concern over whether children were receiving an adequate education, the Council would pursue such families. There was a rigorous escalation process, which could result in parents being served with a School Attendance Order. The Service was also working with the Children and Family Service in terms of serving Education Supervision Orders on parents where there were specific causes for concern. Whilst there were no figures available in terms of the number of School Attendance Orders having been served, the Council would continue to strengthen the escalation process.
- Approval had been given for the recruitment of three additional members of staff in the Access and Inclusion Service, which would result in more capacity to ensure that more thorough checks could be made to ensure children were receiving an adequate education.
- It was acknowledged that elective home education could often be viewed as a very positive choice for some families, despite it often being regarded as negative. The Council therefore wanted to be able to support all families choosing this option, whilst working with them if there were any concerns.
- The Council was linked into several networks, and signposted families to those official networks, and which had been verified.
- There had been a significant rise, from September 2020, in the number of home educated children, with around 20-30 de-registrations from school a day around this time. The figures had reduced towards the end of 2020, and had stabilised in early 2021. Records showed that the numbers generally peaked after school holidays. Given the improving situation regarding the pandemic, particularly the success of the vaccination programme, it was envisaged that there could be a continuing drop in the numbers.

- In terms of the age breakdown of children being home educated, there was usually an increase when children started school in Y1 and Y2, and when moving from Y6 to Y7, and also around GCSE examinations, in Y9 and Y10.
- As the Council, historically, had not made regular checks on the quality of education children were receiving, it was not easy to confirm whether or not such education was adequate. However, following the change in DfE guidance, the Council was now required to make regular checks so this information would be available in the next few years.
- By the end of each school term, approximately a third of the children who had been withdrawn from school at the beginning of the term, had expressed a wish to return.
- All families opting to home educate their children were granted a six-week offer regarding access to relevant agencies or services, and asked that, at the end of this, they should be providing sufficient evidence to show that they were providing an adequate education for their children. The Council would then make a decision as to whether steps should be taken for the child to return to school, or be offered support to enable them to continue to be home educated.
- In the elective home educated cohort, 86 children were in Y11, therefore would not be receiving any teacher assessments in terms of their examination grades. The Service, however, would be offering careers advice to all these children, either in a group session or on a one-to-one basis, in connection with their post-16 options. All the children would also be granted access to Sheffield Progress, the website that all Sheffield school children had access to.
- As well as measuring the number of children who were receiving an effective home education, the Council also needed to track those children who were known to the various Council services, and the number of children who progressed to post-16 provision. A further measure included those families who chose to home educate their children for positive reasons, such as lifestyle.
- It was difficult to compare the standard of education received by children at school and that of children being educated at home as no pupil was statutorily obliged to sit formal examinations and some parents took this option. Officers would review the data held by the Service and include it in the paper to be circulated.
- The 652 children currently being home educated came from around 620 families, therefore there were very few parents educating more than one of their children at home. Some parents chose to home educate only one of their children.

4.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the information contained in the report now submitted, together with the information now reported and the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Councillor Jackie Drayton, Andrew Jones and Rosemary Ward for attending the meeting and responding to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests the Director of Education and Skills to:-
 - (i) in the light of the concerns now expressed regarding those children not receiving any teacher assessments in terms of their examination grades, write to the DfE, jointly with other local regional local authorities, requesting a resolution to this issue, and to report back thereon to all Members of the Council; and
 - (ii) collate data and more detailed information in terms of (A) the reasons parents had given for educating their children at home, together with more information on the reasons given, and now reported, including Covid, anxiety and SEN, and (B) those children where the Council had identified specific concern regarding the standard of their home education.

5. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

- 5.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21st January 2021, were approved as a correct record and, arising therefrom, the Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) reported that (a) the recommendations of the Sheffield Youth Cabinet, following its meeting with this Committee on 19th November 2020, had been referred to Councillor Abtisam Mohamed (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills), Councillor Jackie Drayton (Cabinet Member for Children and Families), John Macilwraith (Executive Director, People Services) and Andrew Jones (Director of Education and Skills), and Learn Sheffield had opened a dialogue with the Youth Cabinet on their needs and suggestions, (b) a response had been sent to the member of the public who had raised a question regarding the opening of nurseries during the pandemic and (c) the Director of Children and Families had not yet provided more detailed information for all Members of the Council on the Amber Project, contextualised safeguarding and signs of safety, and the Committee requested that this information be sent as soon as possible and, based on the response and views of Members, a decision would then be made as to how this issue would be considered further.

6. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

- 6.1 There were no questions raised, or petitions submitted by members of the public.

7. MULTI-AGENCY SUPPORT TEAMS (MAST) - UPDATE

7.1 The Committee received a report of the Executive Director, People Services, providing an update on the Multi-Agency Support Teams (MAST).

7.2 In attendance for this item were Councillor Jackie Drayton (Cabinet Member for Children and Families) and Helen Sweaton (Assistant Director, Prevention and Early Services, Children and Families).

7.3 Helen Sweaton introduced the report, which contained information on the role of the MAST, the strengths of, and positive work undertaken by, the MAST, the challenges facing the MAST, the Early Help Review and the work undertaken by the MAST during the Covid-19 pandemic.

7.4 Members of the Committee raised questions, and the following responses were provided:-

- The reason why there were not enough case holding workers to undertake the key worker role for families was not because Prevention and Early Services had reduced the number of such workers, but that the number the Service believed was needed had increased. The Service was still working with the same number of families, but was aware that there were more families that it wished it could provide similar levels of support for. One reason for this was that the Service had spent the last two years working very closely with schools in order to identify those children who needed support at the earliest opportunity, in line with the Inclusion Strategy. A number of officers had not been key working with families, but had mainly been working with other professionals to help upskill them to intervene earlier, resulting in the Service having a group of professionals who had not undertaken the role of a key worker for some of the city's most complex families. There were around 470 staff in the early help review, with around 250 undertaking the role of key worker, and it was hoped that this number could be increased in the future.
- The Service worked very closely with South Yorkshire Police and the Council's Community Youth Teams to address any safeguarding concerns regarding vulnerable young people. The Service had undertaken considerable safeguarding work in local communities, particularly with regard to extra familial harm, a specific concern which had been identified. The Amber Project had been established as part of the contextualised safeguarding strategy, which involved officers working with, and visiting, schools to discuss any specific concerns. Where children had been identified to be at specific risk, even where the risk was not within the household, this would be escalated, which included referral to the Safeguarding Hub and discussions with South Yorkshire Police.
- Whilst people applying to be a key worker were asked for proof of relevant qualifications, previous experience was also taken into consideration, such as working in the voluntary sector, the local community or schools. Therefore, the approach to qualifications was relatively flexible, with applicants more likely being required to have basic skills, specifically

regarding communication and IT.

- The Service held monthly supervision for all workers, including personal supervision, and for key workers, this included case supervision. The key workers had relatively high caseloads in that they worked with 12 families which could, in some cases, include more than one child in each family.
- Where possible, key workers would be assigned to a family until closure, a period which usually equated to between three and six months. Every attempt was made to assign the same worker to a family during this period.
- Retaining key workers had proved to be a challenge, but in a positive way, in that the low level entry requirements had resulted in a high number of applicants, with a number going on to achieve other qualifications, and undertaking other roles, some within the Council. A very low number of key workers moved to other local authorities. The Service provided a lot of staff development opportunities, which many used to progress other roles. This, however, created a challenge in terms of continuity.
- The funding received for the MAST Service was not a one-off allocation, therefore would roll over to the 2021/22 financial year. To manage the additional demand as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to enable the recruitment of the additional 22 posts, the Service required specific funding from the Covid Relief Fund, which spanned over the two years, resulting in there being no problems during 2021/22. Whilst staff turnover in the Service meant that it was likely that the 22 workers would progress and leave the Service during the period, so that the Service could manage without the additional funding in 2022/23, this would mean the additional 22 posts would be lost.
- Details of the £2.5 million funding for Children's Services, including whether the funding of the additional 22 posts would come out of this, would be circulated to Members of the Committee.
- Family centres had provided an excellent facility during the pandemic, both with regard to online services and through normal access, where possible. The centres had worked hard to keep the parenting groups running, and providing support for families. Prior to the pandemic, the centres had provided advice and support for younger people regarding sexual health problems. The long-term plan was to move the online offer across the 0-19 age range back into delivery, when access to the family centres was reopened. The MAST Service has always worked very closely with the family centres, providing an offer up to the age of 19, and 25 for people with special educational needs, from the centres. There had been a gap in service in terms of the youth offer as this service had its own buildings, therefore was less likely to operate from the family centres.
- In terms of the review of early help services, the issue regarding the lack of data from health creating barriers, particularly for early years, and the fact

that the data was not being used for effective predictive analysis, was work in progress for the Service. Some areas of work had actually been improved during the pandemic, such as information-sharing. The Service was trying to create a system which would pull all the various services together, such as having different data sets all on one system, which would be a big help for staff. The Service had increased its robustness in terms of screening, whereby workers, following referrals, were now able to view information from different areas all in one system.

- The Service had looked at the accommodation where MAST could be based so that they were able to meet the needs of specific localities. Whilst there were benefits to being based in a locality, such as making home visits, the administrative functions could be undertaken at home, or from a school or a community building. Therefore, the Service was less restricted, and it stopped the need to keep having to look where MAST could be physically located.
- The main reason for the delays in children and families receiving support from MAST was a lack of capacity within the Service. The Service was aware of more children and families needing support, and needing such support earlier, but there was limited capacity in terms of the key worker role. Some families have been forced to wait three months or more to be assigned a key worker.

7.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the information now reported and the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Councillor Jackie Drayton and Helen Sweaton for attending the meeting, and responding to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests that the Committee be involved in the review of early help services.

8. DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21 AND FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

- 8.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) containing the Committee's draft Work Programme for 2021/22 and the future Work Programme.
- 8.2 Councillor Mike Levery suggested that the Committee includes Early Years and Family Centres as part of its future Work Programme.
- 8.3 RESOLVED: That the Committee noted and approved the draft Work Programme 2021/22 and future Work Programme.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 9.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on a date to be arranged.