

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 15 October 2020
(This meeting was held remotely)

Present:

Members: Councillor K Sandhu (Chair)
Councillor P Akhtar
Councillor J Blundell
Councillor B Kaur
Councillor J Lepoidevin
Councillor K Maton
Councillor P Seaman

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson and Mrs K Jones

Other Members: Councillor K Maton, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills
Councillor P Seaman, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Employees:

J Gregg, Director of Children's Services
G Holmes, Law and Governance
L Knight, Law and Governance
N MacDonald, Children's Services
S Watson, Children's Services

Apologies: Councillors B Gittins (Deputy Cabinet Member for Children and Young People), G Lloyd and C Thomas

Public Business

1. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2020 were agreed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

3. Children's Services Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic - Vulnerability and Disadvantage

The Board considered a briefing note of the Director of Children's Services which provided an update on the current situation and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Children's Services and partners. Councillor Seaman, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and Councillor Maton, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills attended the meeting for the consideration of this item.

The briefing note indicated that Children's Services had continued to deliver protection, support and intervention to vulnerable families across Coventry, whilst maintaining critical services throughout the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic. The critical elements of the service involved the immediate protection of children who were brought to the attention of Children's Services involving MASH; The Emergency Duty Team (EDT); Child Protection (CP) enquiries; and assessments of need. The ongoing protection and support of children had also continued during this period and included: children who received an early help offer to prevent them requiring statutory intervention, Open CiN cases, open CP cases, open Looked After Children (LAC), open care leavers. Children's Services continued as far as possible to provide the same range of provision to children and families in Coventry, albeit scaled back and delivered in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Board were informed that, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, Children's Services scaled back: routine contract management and commissioning activity; face to face contact; large gatherings; face to face group work; certain statutory visits to children where these had been risk assessed and signed off by a manager and where IT systems were used as an alternative.

Children's Services also depended on a system of partners across the city to enable the delivery of a safe and efficient service. Partners continued to work with the service throughout this period. Where services temporarily ceased, there was increased pressure on families/carers, wherever possible alternative support was offered. The vast majority of Children's Services continued to operate albeit in a different way.

Four Family Hubs and the area social work offices closed. This enabled staff to be supported to work from home and continue to ensure children were safeguarded. Four Hubs remained open which continued to provide an Early Help Offer to families and were open for a 'Here to Help' function so families could access face to face support at a time of crisis. The consequence of the pandemic and resulting changes had led to increased levels of risk within Children's Services. Fewer members of staff, parental stress, reduced availability, children seen less often, less reliance on partners and greater partial closures of schools had all contributed to operating with a greater level of risk in the system.

The briefing note detailed the impact of Covid 19 on Children's Services indicating that in April 2020 there were 25% fewer referrals than in April 2019 when national lockdown meant that access to children and families was greatly reduced, with a particular reduction in school referrals. Reference was made to the partnership work to identify children deemed to be vulnerable during this time, particularly in light of significantly increased hidden harm. Children's Services' practitioners continued to undertake face to face home visits where families were assessed as high risk or to prevent a situation from escalating. It was also noted that, where children needed to be removed from home, there was a shortage of placements, locally, regionally and nationally. This became more acute and impacted on the costs of placements and had an impact on securing safe provision for children to move to.

The briefing note made reference to Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership response to Covid-19 and set out the impact of the pandemic on the workforce. The Council had experienced a significant number of staff self-isolating which had impacted on the Council's ability to effectively respond to all safeguarding issues. Good agency staff were in short supply and did not compensate for service pressures, the negative impact on frontline staff therefore increased. Children's Services had continued to ensure that the recruitment of social workers remained a key priority, however, with demand increasing, and a high level of social worker vacancies and agency costs increasing, the service was under significant pressure.

Additional statistical information was provided on the current performance of the service compared with December 2019, prior to Covid-19 and the impact since April 2020 to the current date. Overall performance highlighted an increase in activity across Children's Services. There had been a 11% increase in Child in Need (CIN) cases, 6.3% increase in Child Protection (CP) and 5.6% increase in Looked After Children (LAC) since March 2020 to date.

Children's Services had experienced a number of challenges as well as a number of positives and advantages to working in a different way, which would influence how the service would work differently in the future. A summary of some of the challenges and positives were set out in the briefing note. New ways of working included more flexible working; further virtual /learning options; consideration of mix of face to face and virtual contacts; working differently with partners, which built on the momentum of the One Coventry approach. Reference was also made to the lessons learnt during the pandemic.

The Board were updated on the current position in Children's Services which meant all services now operating as business as usual and all buildings re-opened with protective measures to mitigate Covid-19 risks. The service had anticipated a spike in demand when Schools returned in September, however, the service had seen this earlier than expected with increased numbers of child in need work, increased numbers of child protection cases and LAC numbers increasing, all meaning a very challenging operating environment. It was noted that the service was reaching a level of work that was becoming unmanageable, with caseloads increasing, a shortage of social workers, and high levels of vacancies which had resulted in increased numbers of agency staff, with an agency market that was shrinking. The system was under extreme pressure, all leading to budget pressures.

Members raised a number of questions in response to the briefing and answers were provided, matters raised included:

- A suggestion of a report to a future Board meeting on the impact of Covid-19 on schools
- Further information on the anticipated trend of LAC numbers including the current number of LAC to date
- What intervention measures were now in place to help troubled families to prevent issues escalating
- What were Children's Services and partners doing to support schools with new referrals

- Concerns about the increasing unmanageable workloads for staff which was impacted by the shortage of social workers
- What was happening in respect of children not on anyone's radar, were additional measures in place to identify these children
- An acknowledgement that safeguarding was everyone's responsibility
- What had happened and what was the current position concerning families and children who would usually benefit from short breaks which were often a lifeline for some families, and had any children moved up the tariff of need
- The suggestion of an update report in three months
- An acknowledgment that future unemployment and mental health issues were likely to impact on family life leading to many more referrals to Children's Services
- The importance of local intelligence for picking up on children safeguarding issues.

RESOLVED that:

1) The current situation, the progress outlined and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Children's Services be noted.

2) The Director of Children's Services to investigate:

i) The communication and information on the universal offer to parents of disabled children

ii) If any children accessing short breaks had moved up the tariff of need and Board members to be updated accordingly.

3) A further update report be submitted to a future meeting of the Board in three months.

4) A report on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on schools be submitted to a future meeting of the Board.

4. Work Programme 2020/21 and Outstanding Issues

The Board considered their work programme for the current municipal year.

The Chair, Councillor Sandhu, informed of the intention to set up a Task and Finish Group to look at racism in schools and asked for volunteers to become members of the Group.

Reference was made to a new pilot project concerning children with autism and learning difficulties and it was suggested that this was appropriate as a future issue for the Board to consider.

RESOLVED that:

1) The work programme for 2020/21 be approved.

2) Councillors Blundell, Kaur, Lloyd and Sandhu and Kellie Jones, Co-opted Member be appointed to serve on the Task and Finish Group considering racism in schools.

3) Report on progress with the new pilot project concerning children with autism and learning difficulties be included on the work programme as a future item.

5. Any Other Business

The Board were informed that the recommendations from the Task and Finish Group on Partnership Working in Children's Services were to be discussed with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the Director of Children's Services and would be submitted to the next meeting of the Board.

There were no other additional items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 11.00 am)