

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 9 September 2020

Attendance

Members of the Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Clare Simm
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Rashpal Kaur
Cllr Sohail Khan (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Paul Sweet
Cllr Jasbinder Dehar
Tabner

Co-opted Members

Wolverhampton Youth Council

In Attendance

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills
Cllr John Reynolds, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Julia Cleary	Systems and Scrutiny Manager
Alice Vickers	Corporate Parenting Officer
Martin Stevens	Scrutiny Officer
Emma Bennett	Director of Children's Services
Heather Clark	Service Development Manager
Alison Hinds	Head of Children and Young People in Care

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Welcome and Introductions**
Cllr Rita Potter, Chair, welcomed everyone to the virtual meeting and advised it was being live streamed to the press and public. Cllr Potter advised that she was not expecting any exempt or restricted items on the agenda. A recording of the meeting would be available for viewing on the Council's website at a future date.
- 2 Meeting procedures to be followed**

Cllr Potter explained the protocol to be followed during the meeting for asking questions and reminded everyone that microphones should be muted and cameras off, unless they have been invited to speak.

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, invited all attendees to introduce themselves to confirm they were present at the meeting.

3 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following members of the panel:

Cllr John Rowley
Cyril Randles

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (22 January 2020)**

The correct date for the agenda title should be 9.3.2020 and not 22.1.2020 as stated. The panel approved the change and approved the minutes of the meeting.

6 **Minutes of the previous meeting (3 February 2020)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

7 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from either set of minutes.

8 **Update on the Council's response to the Covid-19 crisis and future plans relating to children and young people (report to follow)**

Cllr Potter invited Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills and Cllr John Reynolds, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, to make a few introductory remarks before the main report was presented.

Both Cllrs wanted to formally place on record their thanks to employees working across the services for the excellent work done during the lockdown to support children and young people, and the professionalism shown during a very challenging time for the City.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills also wanted to record his thanks to Emma Bennett and her team for their hard work in ensuring that children services were able to get things back to normal as possible. The excellent response from Headteachers during the lockdown period was also recognised.

Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services, introduced her presentation and commented on the positive benefits of the work done to build on the existing strong working partnerships between children's services and schools. The Director of Children's Services wanted to also express her thanks to schools in recognition of the considerable work by teachers and others working in the sector to help schools re-open safely.

The panel endorsed the comments of the Cabinet Members about the work done by the service in partnership with schools during and after the lockdown.

The panel queried the arrangements for grouping pupils in 'bubbles' within schools to meet social distancing rules and what would happen in response to a reported case of Covid 19. The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills advised that depending on the 'bubble' arrangements, either year group or class, within the school would determine how many children were sent home.

The panel queried the support offered to children and families who are feeling anxious about returning schools and in particular those children with previous history of mental health issues.

The Director of Children's Services advised the panel of the preparation work done to help schools open last week. A series of training sessions were arranged with schools to help prepare them to welcome children back and to offer reassurance.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the attendance rates at schools. It was reported that the attendance rate for Wolverhampton primary schools was 84 per cent, this compares to the national rate of 87 per cent. The attendance rate for secondary schools was 91 per cent compared to the national rate of 82 percent.

The situation will become clearer in the future as the quality of attendance data improves from schools. The Director of Children's Services commented there has been an increase in positive Covid cases across the City, reflecting the national picture. There have been a few individual cases in schools across Wolverhampton.

The panel were reassured that there was no evidence of an outbreak in schools and also each case is investigated. The evidence suggests that the disease has been transmitted through the community rather than within the school and the situation is being managed with the support of colleagues in Public Health.

The panel queried the support and encouragement to children who are shielding because of existing health issues and the reluctance among some parents to allow them to attend school, given the increasing number of Covid cases.

The Director of Children's Services explained the work undertaken to reassure parents.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the range of support provided to foster carers and explained that the Council has not changed the supportive offer to children and families during the lockdown period. A range of new approaches was introduced during this period including virtual contact which was well received by families and has allowed a much more informal and regular means of communication. Care leavers were able to get face-to-face support as well as virtual support including contact by text.

The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that there had been no placement breakdowns during the lockdown as a result of the pandemic and there was a positive response from young people to the home education arrangements. In addition, Base 25 has been commissioned to offer support to young people in response to reports of groups congregating in hotspot areas in the City and encouraging them to disperse and engage with the different services on offer.

The panel queried if there was evidence of an increase in referrals to children services during the lockdown period.

The Director of Children's Services advised that at this stage the service is waiting to see if there will be a major increase in the number of referrals. The service normally will normally see an increase in referrals during September, similar to that seen in January after the school holidays. The situation is being monitored however.

The panel discussed the issue of supporting children and young people owing to concern about the impact of lockdown on their mental wellbeing. The Director of Children's Services commented on the range of activities and support introduced such as WV Holiday Squad and other activities as part of the youth engagement strategy to support children and young people.

The service has tried to be creative in their efforts to reach children and young people, for example, the extension of online support available and counselling support which offers a range of information and activities. Any child or young person who has emotional well-being concern is identified and supported, and where appropriate signposted to the right service.

The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that two surveys took place to capture the experiences of young people about being in lockdown. In total 300 responses from children and 600 responses from parents was received. The responses will influence the development of services and the future priorities during the recovery stages of managing the impact of Covid.

The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that a range of online resources have been developed to ensure children have the correct information about coronavirus. The Council has provided a mix of both online and face-to-face activities during lockdown following government guidelines, for example groups were limited to 15 young people. The Council had 10,000 people access the online service. The Way youth centre reopened during the summer period and offers a range of services and activities for example, family dining sessions.

The panel discussed the emotional well-being of children and young people and queried the specific support offered to help them settle them back into school after lockdown. The panel were concerned about the varied quality of support offered to pupils by schools during the lockdown and the plans for helping children to catch up on lost education. The panel were also concerned about the impact on the mental wellbeing of pupils returning to schools and having to comply with new safety instructions; particularly the introduction of grouping children together in small 'bubbles', which limit the amount of contact they can have with their school friends.

The Director of Children's Services agreed to follow up this issue and report back to a future meeting of the panel. The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that the issue will also be raised at a future meeting with secondary school representatives to consider what more can be done to support young people. The emotional wellbeing being of pupils returning to school is a priority for the service.

The Director of Children's Services gave examples of support on offer to pupils, for example, mental health workers based in schools.

The topic of education and supporting and working with schools has been suggested as spotlight issue for the panel to consider.

The issue will also be discussed with members of Wolverhampton Youth Council who are planning to do a survey of young people about their experiences during lockdown, the findings of which will shape future service plans. The Director of Children's Services suggested these issues could be included in the draft panel work programme.

The panel discussed the provision of laptops and the problems pupils have had in getting equipment needed.

The Chair thanked Emma Bennett for the presentation and the Cabinet Members for their contributions.

Resolved:

The panel welcomed the presentation and thanked the presenters for their contributions.

9 **Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel 2019 20 - Draft Work Programme (report to follow)**

Julia Cleary, Scrutiny and Systems Manager, presented the draft work programme and explained the new approach agreed at Scrutiny Board meeting for all panels to consider the cross-cutting theme of 'Connected City' and digital considerations when developing ideas for the work programme.

The panel were invited to comment on the draft work programme and to suggest ideas, following the guidance, of topics that could be added.

Resolved

The panel agreed to note the report.