

Minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee Meeting held on 7 July 2020

Present: John Francis (Chairman)

Attendance

Ann Beech
Ron Clarke
Ann Edgeller
Jason Jones

Paul Snape
Bob Spencer (Vice-Chairman)
Victoria Wilson

Also in attendance: Mark Sutton

Apologies: Trevor Johnson and Mike Worthington

PART ONE

32. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

33. Minutes of the Safe & Strong Communities Select Committee meeting held on 13 January 2020

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Safe & Strong Communities Select Committee held on 13 January 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

34. Response to COVID-19 for SCC Children and Families Services

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People introduced his report outlining the Children and Families Services response to Covid-19. He thanked all staff for their adaptability and dedication in supporting the most vulnerable children and families during the pandemic, including staff within Children and Families Services, as well as those in education and childcare.

Throughout this period over 200 pieces of new, additional and amended guidance had been received from the Department of Education (DfE), Public Health England (PHE) and other regulatory and statutory bodies. This included core statutory legislative changes to the Children and Families Act and easements to the SEND Code of Practice. All these changes had been assimilated and locally interpreted before being communicated to staff, partners, education settings and commissioned providers.

Staff commitment and resilience throughout the period had been remarkable, with circa 86% staff availability to work being maintained. A small number of staff had been shielding or were required to self-isolate, whilst 60% of staff had been available to conduct home visits. Gratitude was also shared for the work of ICT colleagues who had ensured appropriate ICT equipment and support was available for staff throughout this

period which had enabled the service to continue its work. These changes gave access and agility, enabling a shift from face to face working with families to a comprehensive digital offer. Many young people had engaged better through the use of virtual meetings than previously, and whilst there remained a need for face to face contact in some instances, the new digital approach had seen benefits.

Thanks was also given to the work of the Council's health, safety and wellbeing team who had worked with the business support team in each district to ensure that there was sufficient and effective Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) distributed for front-line practitioners from the beginning of lockdown. Staffordshire County Council's (SCC) iCount volunteers had also provided support in a variety of ways, including the creation of PPE packs for a range of providers. Staff volunteers had also worked to ensure that the Domestic Abuse refuges across Staffordshire remained open and accessible.

Members received details of the operating model developed to address the new ways of working necessary during the pandemic lockdown.

Staffordshire schools had switched to providing remote learning for most children and young people but had remained open to support vulnerable children and the children of essential key workers. A process had been quickly established for identifying vulnerable children not in contact with their education settings, with contact made with those remaining at home to seek assurances that appropriate safeguarding and support remained in place. Data suggested that around 20% of children with a social worker attended school, with those remaining at home having been contacted regularly by their schools.

Members were pleased to note that more children were able to attend Staffordshire schools than many other authorities and that Staffordshire Schools were amongst the top performers nationally for this. Returns to the DfE indicating the number of vulnerable children and young people who had a current completed risk assessment had been 100% in Staffordshire, one of only a very few local authorities to have achieved this. The risk assessment enabled staff to predetermine the interaction necessary with each child.

Around 52% of all Early Year's settings had remained open to provide places for vulnerable children and children of critical workers. A project team had been developed to respond to the crisis and broker alternative placements for 132 critical worker families (175 children in total). The crisis had impacted on the sustainability of some Early Years settings and funding support had been necessary to ensure appropriate provision remained in the longer-term.

Children's Centres had been closed in line with Government guidance, except for emergency childcare which operated through some districts.

Residential, foster care and supported accommodation markets had been stable for the last two months, with a downturn in residential placements. Staffordshire was one of the few local authorities that hadn't seen prices for residential care increase. Foster carers had received a "lockdown allowance", equivalent to the summer holiday payment, to support the education of children at home as well as extra household expenses. The supported accommodation sector had continued to be managed and providers had

worked well to accommodate the current demand and were keeping children post18 until housing associations were back to their usual allocations.

Many care leavers and other vulnerable children and young people had engaged more freely with services via technology than they may previously have done. Future services will consider the learning from these changes to influence ways of working. Care leavers had been provided with extra data to enable them to access digital services, with the free wifi establishments (cafes etc) they may previously have been able to use being unavailable during lockdown.

To help prevent placement breakdown and promote stability a contract had been brokered with Entrust to utilise the Laches Wood outdoor education centre in South Staffordshire for short breaks. This provision had been accessed by over 20 children and young people, with none of these placements having broken down. Work with Early Years had also identified 12 childminding families who could provide additional care for children 0-18 years and offer overnight care for up to 28 days. This resource had supported placements made by the Emergency Duty Service and had provided short breaks for fostering families when necessary. This new resource also had the potential to expand further to provide overnight care for “children in need” under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

A core set of data indicators had been established to evidence and monitor the impact of service changes. Recent findings from this data showed:

- the number of children being referred was returning and stabilising at pre lockdown levels;
- the number of children going missing was 25 (23 children) and seemed to have returned to pre-lockdown levels;
- the number of children allocated to a social worker had stabilised.

Members commended the work of Catch22, the commissioned service working with missing children, and asked that a letter of thanks be forwarded to them on behalf of the Select Committee for their continued professionalism and commitment throughout the crisis.

The proportion of children referred where domestic abuse (DA) was a factor was monitored each week. Overall, since the start of the Covid-19 restrictions, the proportion of children with DA identified as a referral factor had increased above the 12-month average. However, the proportions were affected by the reduction in the overall number of children being referred as the actual number of children remained unchanged until the start of May when restrictions were eased. A partnership group had been established at the beginning of Covid-19 to closely monitor DA and work together to mitigate the assessed risks. Members had some concerns that, whilst Staffordshire had not seen a significant rise in the levels of DA, a small group of children may be suffering from increased exposure. The concerted partnership working had enabled services to be focused on supporting children where there was a known risk around repeated domestic violence. This included visits by police colleagues where risks were identified, with appropriate responses triggered whenever there was an alerted risk.

The Government had so far assigned £3.2bn for local government in their response to Covid-19, of which SCC would receive c £38m. Of that allocation Children and Families

was currently expected to incur additional exceptional spend of circa £1.3m in response to the pandemic, although the estimated cost to the service was considerably higher at circa £6.6m due to the delayed delivery of planned savings of c £4.8m and lost income of c £0.5m.

As a result of other statutory bodies having to alter their operating model or close services a number of backlogs had been identified which would impact on the ability to complete or progress key outcomes for children and young people. This included 19 young people eligible for independent housing provision having to remain in supported accommodation funded by the local authority as housing providers had stopped all new allocations during lockdown. Between 30-50 children and young people who would have expected to have exited the care system through adoption orders, care orders discharges and special guardianship orders were now remaining as children in care due to the closure of courts for anything other than urgent safeguarding cases. It was anticipated that clearing the backlog of this enormous reduction in family court capacity would take between 9-12 months. Whilst Courts were now beginning to work face to face again SCC had been looking at ways to increase capacity and therefore reduce the backlog. Alternative venues were being suggested, such as County Buildings and Staffordshire County Showground, but this was dependent of the judiciary having staff numbers to accommodate the increased workload.

Members accepted that no one could have foreseen the current crisis and that the Service had responded brilliantly, however there were clearly budget implications and the anticipation that Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) identified saving were unlikely to be met. The £8m service investment over four years had been based on the introduction of restorative practice. It had been a corporate decision to pause the major programmes over the last 3-4 months during the crisis. The 30-50 children remaining in the care system due to the crisis had an impact on costs. Additionally 10 asylum seeker children were now resident in Staffordshire following a request from Kent and Southampton council's for support to address capacity issues. Volunteering to take the extra children had been the right thing to do, although it incurred further costs to the Service. Whilst there would be some slippage as a result of the crisis, the Service was on course to resume project investment with the £8m to be spent as agreed. However, the savings identified in the MTFS were at risk, particularly in light of the 12 month court backlog. The £1.3m Government fund to support dealing with the crisis was helpful but didn't take account of the indirect costs incurred as a result of the crisis, eg the non-delivery of savings. Local Government were currently lobbying Central Government around recouping these savings. Further mitigating action was being explored, such as the suggested alternative venues for court hearings.

A supporting vulnerable families programme had been developed to enhance community response to those families most in need. Families had been identified using a range of data and information that indicated they were financially excluded and therefore at greater risk during Covid-19 restrictions. Survival packs were created and funded by the Community Foundation (£15,000), SCC Members (1803.00) with the remaining balance from SCC. A range of families had also sought community support, including Alice Charity cleaning packs, food parcels, laptops for children and accessing emotional wellbeing support for parents. Of the 3000 families contacted 511 had engaged with the newly established Facebook Family Hubs.

Members were pleased to note that communication with staff, partners and schools had been effective and well received, noting the range of methods used, including webinar videos, Facebook live chats and YouTube clips.

Interim Emergency Locality Teams (ELTs) had been developed in each district to support schools and families during the crisis. These teams ensured a consistent approach from early years through to post-16, including SEND provision. The ELTs also provided a mechanism for wider discussions around supporting vulnerable families during lockdown to ensure they received appropriate support.

Members received details of the SCC Covid-19 Planning and Recovery Group, with each directorate leading recovery for its own area whilst cross cutting themes were led through recovery groups linked to four principles: communities; digital; people; and, climate change. They also received details of the high level and immediate priorities for the Families and Communities Directorate, with these being monitored through a range of workstreams against a set of core indicators and deliverable.

Members were also pleased to note that, whilst the Government had introduced a number of flexibilities to legislation for children's services around timescales, these timescale flexibilities had not been used in Staffordshire. Services had not faltered, and all Staffordshire children and young people had been seen in line with statutory guidance and to the original pre-Covid timescales. Schools had been excellent, working flexibly throughout the crisis, incorporating new guidelines and facilitating as many children as possible to return to school as the restrictions began to lift.

The Select Committee congratulated the staff for their dedication and commitment. They felt it was clear that services had acted swiftly to address the issues faced by the crisis and to adapt to the new working arrangements. The wide range of initiatives to help support the most vulnerable children and families was impressive, as was the partnership working that had ensured the service success and safeguarding of the most vulnerable. Members noted that both the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Families and Communities had expressed their pride in the Service, its staff and the way they had risen to the challenges of the current crisis. Members wished to add their gratitude to all the staff, both in SCC and schools and early years setting, for the remarkable way they have managed to adapt and address the issues they faced.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) the Children and Families Services approach and response to Covid-19 be noted and endorsed;
- b) the approach to understanding the impact and risks associated with the Covid-19 response be endorsed; and,
- c) a letter of thanks be sent to Catch22 for their continued professionalism and commitment throughout the crisis.

35. Mick Harrison

Members shared their memories of Mick Harrison, Assistant Director in the Families and Communities Directorate. Mick had been involved in the work of this Select Committee

and Members had appreciated his knowledge and expertise. Previously working within the Police Force Mick had given many years in public service. Sadly Mick died on 2 April. He will be very sadly missed and the Chairman asked that the Select Committees condolences be sent to his family.

36. Work Programme

Members considered their draft work programme 2020/21. As a result of the Covid-19 crisis two Select Committee meetings had been cancelled resulting in the following items being postponed:

- Update on the Children's Transformation Plan;
- Progress with the Children's Services Improvement Plan;
- Domestic Abuse; and,
- Catch 22 update.

To help prioritise work programme items a briefing paper will be requested on these items. Members also asked for details on the recent Police raids due to County lines to be included in the briefing.

The next meeting is scheduled for 1 September at which Members requested inclusion of the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Children's Safeguarding Board report, included as an appendix to the Covid-19 response report at this meeting.

Members noted that the SEND working group was due to meet on 27 July.

The Chairman also updated Members on the Children's Improvement Board. He suggested that an informal briefing session should be arranged for the Select Committee to help understand developments.

A further item was suggested around child illness and mental health concerns post lockdown to consider the impact on children, young people and their families of the current crisis.

RESOLVED – That amendments be made to the work programme as listed above.

Chairman