

Minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee Meeting held on 1 September 2020

Present: John Francis (Chairman)

Attendance

Ann Beech
Ron Clarke
Ann Edgeller
Bryan Jones

Jason Jones
Paul Snape
Bob Spencer (Vice-Chairman)
Mike Worthington

Also in attendance: Jonathan Price and Mark Sutton

Apologies: Trevor Johnson

PART ONE

37. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

38. Minutes of the Select Committee meeting held on 7 July 2020

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee held on 7 July 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

39. Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board (SSSCB) Response to Covid-19

At their meeting of 7 July 2020 Members requested details of the Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board (SSSCB) response to Covid 19. Members were reminded of the changes to the Safeguarding Boards in 2018, with responsibility and accountability for the Board being shared between the Local Authority, Police Force (not the Commissioner) and Health (Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs)). The changes had been made following Sir Alan Wood's review of the role and function of safeguarding boards. Staffordshire had been one of the early implementors following the Review, with one of the changes being to rotate chairing the Board between partners rather than having one independent chair. There had been an emphasis on all statutory partners understanding and enacting their responsibilities with independent scrutiny possibly coming from the inclusion of an independent member to the Board in the future. Select Committee Members accepted that there was a difficulty in finding an individual with the right experience who was also independent of any of the organisations that made up the Board membership. Sir Alan Wood was in the process of revisiting his review to consider learning from the changes made. Statutory bodies governance routes and independent scrutiny processes were likely to be areas of consideration from this learning.

The steps introduced to control the spread of Covid 19 were recognised by the SSSCB as necessary. However, they also recognised the disproportionate effect these had on children as their sources of support, including schools, friends' network and extended family members, were all removed. Additionally, there was an increase in family stress for households facing increased financial and social pressures. The SSSCB had used a range of mechanisms (including audit activity, questionnaires and surveys) to gain assurances from key partners that engagement had been maintained with those children and families that remained a concern. The wider children's system had also been monitored to determine the approach moving forward, with an aligned partnership risk assessment produced.

Throughout the Covid19 restriction period the SSSCB had wide engagement with all safeguarding partners to ascertain the stages and remit of their recovery plans. Members were informed that no partner had withdrawn their services fully and that the commitment of the wider children's workforce in maintaining levels of service for vulnerable children and their families had been outstanding. Examples were shared where officers and/or services had gone "above and beyond" what was required to ensure those most vulnerable were protected. This included refuges that had lost staff due to Covid 19, which had been able to remain running through the use of the volunteer workforce.

The Select Committee were pleased to note that the majority of services, though altered, had been maintained throughout the pandemic. Communication had worked well from the beginning of the crisis, with partners being quick to share information and work closely together to ensure services remained for those most vulnerable. Risk assessments had been completed for service users and contact maintained. The SSSCB had increased the frequency of its meetings whilst continuing its business as usual activities. A specific partnership meeting had been operational from April, meeting fortnightly, for all partners. This enabled a rapid response, with any emerging concern being escalated for consideration at the monthly SSSCB meetings, ensuring strategic oversight.

The Select Committee commended Officers on responding so quickly to the crisis and were pleased to note the SSSCB had ensured a clear strategic overview and excellent communications. The maturity of conversations between statutory partners on the SSSCB were better than they had ever been, with a more transparent and positive relationship between all.

Members raised concerns around drug and alcohol misuse and the possible increase during the Covid 19 crisis. The Council's Drug and Alcohol Commissioner, Tony Bullock, had ensured continued support throughout the pandemic, including early help for families. The success of the early help work had previously ensured additional funding from the Government, and whilst the method of delivery had changed during lockdown, the activity had not diminished.

Members queried how accountable commissioned services were, or could be, when organisations might not have access to information needed. The secure file transfer protocols enabled effective sharing of information with commissioned service providers. Strict contractual arrangements were also in place for all commissioned services, making sure they performed within the Council's strategic objectives. Through the

Council's monitoring process, performance and quality of service delivery was monitored and work was undertaken when necessary to make improvements. The SSSCB received assurances around the effectiveness of commissioned services.

As a result of these meetings and activity a risk assessment and recovery plan had been developed and Members received details of this, and noted the following key findings:

- all partners were into recovery planning;
- identified backlogs would impact on recovery, these included court capacity;
- all agencies foresaw an increased demand but with uncertainty over the level. Planning varied, with the SSSCB favouring the approach of one organisation in planning for three separate scenarios (10%, 20% and 30% increases) which, given the level of uncertainty, seemed pragmatic;
- no partner had planned to stop or reduce services;
- access to PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) remained a concern for some partners; and
- the implementation of the track and trace system was presenting additional pressure for partnership recovery efforts.

Whilst there was an awareness that the uncertainty of the immediate future meant that any plan would need to be fluid, it was agreed that it was necessary to have a recovery plan in place to ensure demand was met and for this to change this as needed. Credit was given to Natasha Moody, Joe Sullivan and the Commissioning Team for supporting recovery planning from all partners and for collating and RAG rating these. This would enable the Board to ensure services were able to meet any increase in demand and to assist partners where necessary.

Members were informed that the recovery plan would be reviewed fortnightly to ensure rapid response to any issues identified. They requested a copy of the full plan and noted that this was being refreshed at the end of this week, following the return of pupils to school, and would be made available to them once updated. The Select Committee were informed that there was some nervousness at the potential increase in demand on services, with children being seen by schools for the first time in many months. They were pleased to note the extensive work that had been undertaken during the crisis in improving relationships and close working with schools, helping to promote greater understanding of safeguarding and working in partnership to support vulnerable children.

The Chairman queried the work with Children's Centres, in particular those allied to schools, and when they would reopen. Members were pleased to note the extensive work in risk assessing centres, and in training staff and issuing guidance. They noted that no specific guidance had been given by Central Government for Children's Centres, but that they were currently considered to come under the guidance for Community Settings. Core functions were being delivered but not necessarily using the Children's Centres, as current rules meant that most rooms were only able to accommodate 3 people. District Family Hubs were staffed by Children's Centre co-ordinators who undertook targeted family work and had done so throughout the lockdown period.

The Select Committee wished to put on record their thanks to the Officers this morning and to the entire team who had done such a fantastic job throughout the Covid 19 crisis in ensuring services were maintained and that those most vulnerable were kept safe.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) the SSSCB's approach to Covid 19 be noted and their response be endorsed;
and
- b) the approach to understanding the impact and risks associated with the Covid-19 response and the role of the SSSCB in this through gaining assurances from the wider children's system be endorsed; and
- c) the updated risk assessment and recovery plan be shared with the Select Committee.

40. Work Programme

The Select Committee received a copy of their work programme.

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted.

Chairman