



**Chair -  
Councillor  
Anne Millward**

## **Annual report of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

**2020/21 Municipal Year**



**Vice-Chair -  
Councillor  
Parmjit Sahota**

Our role involves the scrutiny of matters relating to Children's Services in the Directorate of Children's Services and the Cabinet portfolios of appropriate Cabinet Member(s).

### **Children's Services COVID-19 Updates**

Throughout this Municipal Year Members have considered the impact on and responses to COVID-19 within Children's Services. These verbal updates have provided detailed information on critical services being maintained during the pandemic, including the monitored visits undertaken to determine which children needed to remain in school following the first lockdown.

There had been the provision of devices and ICT equipment to children in care in order that they could maintain learning during lockdown, and the summer school provision that was available to children in care was presented to Members.

Following the ease in restrictions Children's Services had supported children and young people to return to school.

An Improvement Plan was endorsed in relation to Children's Social Care and improvement work is continuing.

An Ofsted focused visit took place in December 2020 when Ofsted evaluated the experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account the Covid-19 context, and how well children and young people were helped and protected.

#### *Outcomes:*

- The Committee continued to scrutinise and monitor the services provided by Children's Services, critical and otherwise together with improvements within Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the Youth Offending Services.
- Members requested the Interim Director of Children's Services to provide the analysis of the types of referrals into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub.

### **Children's Services Complaints, Comments and Compliments Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020.**

The Committee considered this report which made particular reference to statutory and corporate complaints and noted that the data also now included SEND Services.

Members raised concerns in relation to response times to complaints and requested that these be addressed together with the reasons for the late responses.

*Outcome:*

- The Interim Director of Children's Services was requested to devise an Action Plan regarding the concerns raised by Members in relation to the report submitted, with that Action Plan to be shared with Members.

### **Children's Services Complaints: Response Times Action Plan**

The actions taken, and processes that had been put into place to improve complaint response times within Children's Services was presented to Members, together with a referral and follow up Action Plan.

*Outcomes:*

- The revised processes and actions put in place to improve complaint response times was endorsed by the Committee.
- The Acting Director of Children's Services was requested to submit regular updates in relation to complaint response times to future meetings.

### **Early Years Transformation Academy in Dudley**

Members considered a report on the partnership progress through the Early Years Transformation Academy, and the 'critical first 1001 days vision' and Dudley's Implementation Plan, to support transformation of the maternity and early years system, and contribution to maternity and early years outcomes.

*Outcomes:*

- That the issue of vaping and the effect on unborn children be scrutinised once data becomes available.

### **Elective Home Education (EHE)**

A report providing Members with a position statement around EHE in the Authority area up to July 2020 was considered by the Committee, when it was confirmed that the Authority had a statutory responsibility to ensure that all children of school age received an education.

It was accepted that EHE had increased due to the pandemic, with some parents feeling anxious in relation to their children returning to school, however this had become a national problem.

*Outcomes:*

- Members acknowledged that the full review of EHE services was being carried out to ensure that support was provided appropriately, including a review of the existing EHE staffing levels, and the relationship between

EHE support and other Education, SEND, Public Health, Connexions, Children Missing Education and Social Care Services.

- The Acting Director of Children's Services agreed to prepare a letter for the signature of the Chair, to the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP, highlighting the grave concerns of the Committee in relation to the increasing numbers of those applying to home educate their children, and that the area of EHE was largely unregulated.

### **Summer Provision and September school update**

Members considered the overview of the summer provision in Dudley; an analysis of secondary and college provision; an analysis of Virtual School events and of the Dudley Performing Arts (DPA) events, together with a summary of the Local Authority's support for schools in September 2020.

*Outcome:*

- That Special Schools and their provisions be carried forward as an item for Scrutiny with respect to the support for schools in September 2020.

### **Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020**

A report that provided assurances of the effective functioning of the Safeguarding and Review Service, that had operational line management of Independent Reviewing Officers for children subject to Child Protection Plans, and effective care planning for Children in Care was considered by Members.

*Outcome:*

- Members requested that as part of the children and young people's reviews, the IRO's be requested, by the Service Director of Children's Social Care, to consult with children and young people in order to capture the voice of the child and improve and develop services.

### **Fostering and Permanence Service Update**

Members considered a report in relation to Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Service, and it was noted that adoption for children was located within a Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption@Heart and details of the different placement settings for 635 children in care in Dudley were provided to Members.

*Outcomes:*

- Further updates in relation to Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Services would be submitted to future meetings.
- The Acting Director of Children's Services was requested to provide clarification in relation to the number of children who were in fostering to adopt settings, for fostering purposes only or were to be adopted.

## Children in Care and Care Leaver Service – Care Leavers Update Report

The scope and detail in relation to Dudley Care Leavers, together with the Care Leavers Strategy and the means of keeping in contact with Care Leavers during the pandemic was considered by Members.

### *Outcomes:*

- Members requested that the report be submitted to a meeting of the Children’s Corporate Parenting Board.
- The Acting Director of Children’s Services was requested to: -
  - Refer the suggestion to encourage those who were awarded contracts with the Local Authority, to offer apprenticeships to care leavers, and the possibility of consulting with Housing colleagues in order to achieve that to the Children’s Corporate Parenting Board.
  - Provide Members with data in terms of percentages of care leavers attending further education or obtaining employment, and the outcomes for those young people.
  - Provide Members with details of Young People’s Advisors
  - Consider the possibility of utilising the Council’s former Children’s Home in Brierley Hill for a base for young people to meet their Young People’s Advisors.
  - Provide Members with a breakdown of the number of females and males not in education, employment or training.

## Medium Term Financial Strategy

A joint report of the Chief Executive, Chief Officer Finance and Legal Services and Acting Director of Children’s Services was considered with the emphasis on proposals relevant to the Committee’s Terms of Reference, specifically Children’s Services.

### *Outcome:*

- The Acting Director of Children’s Services was requested to provide further information to Members relating to the home to school transport pressures, and how the budget savings in relation to the review of the home to school transport for SEND children, the managed step down from external residential placements and the movement of external placements into internal residential placements were to be achieved.

## Education Report

Members considered a report on the Education Strategy, Interim Ofsted Visits, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), the Alternative Provision Strategy, Illegal off-rolling and the Dudley Virtual School.

### *Outcomes:*

- The Head of Education Outcomes and Inclusion was requested to provide Members with the data in relation to the number of children attending

mainstream school with SEND.

- The Acting Director of Children's Services was requested to raise the issue of completing the Equality Impact Assessments within reports accurately in the future.

## **Other Items Considered by the Scrutiny Committee in the 2020/21 Municipal Year**

### Scrutiny Development Working Group

- Early Years Transformation Academy

## **Items to be Considered by the Scrutiny Committee at the meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

- Dudley Safeguarding Children Partnership Group Annual Report 2019/2021
- Children's Services Improvement Plan
- Update on the Youth Offending Service Inspection Plan
- Unregulated Provision in Dudley

## **Items for inclusion in the Annual Scrutiny Programme for 2020/21 are listed below: -**

Items suggested for inclusion in the work programme for 2021/22: -

- Early Years Transformation Academy
- School Readiness
- Children's Services Verbal Updates
- Children's Services Complaints, Comments and Compliments Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.
- The Effect of Vaping on Unborn Children
- Elective Home Education
- Special Schools and their Provision with respect to Support for Schools
- Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021
- Fostering and Permanency Services
- Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Education Report