

19 May 2020

Children's Scrutiny - Standing Overview Group

Present

Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Su Aves, Frank Biederman, Julian Brazil, Christine Channon, George Gribble, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Richard Hosking, Philip Sanders, Andrew Saywell, Debo Sellis, Margaret Squires and Mrs Christina Mabin (Church of England)

Cabinet Member for Children and Schools: Councillor James McInnes

Children's Services: Jo Olsson (Chief Officer for Children's Services), Vivien Lines (Improvement Director) Dawn Stabb (Head of Education & Learning) and Jenny-Ellen Scotland (Locality Director – Exeter)

Independent Advisor: Kevin Crompton

Schools Update

The Head of Education & Learning provided members with an update on schools. During discussion reference was made to the following:

- Officers advised that in terms of pupils having a phased return to school, the risk of COVID-19 cannot be fully eliminated as the virus is likely to remain present in the general population for some time but want to ensure the risk is at the lowest level possible.
- School return on 1 June 2020 for nursery, reception and Y1. Y6 return is likely to be later. Schools have been given this notice period to plan for reopening if it was safe to do so. In the secondary sector there may be some face to face time for Y10 students but not full time.
- The focus by Government on the return of nursery, reception and Y1 relates to younger children being harder to teach online, and a more detrimental impact on missing school for the younger age groups.
- Key worker and vulnerable children are the priority groups. With the recent easing of some of the lockdown measures, there has been a significant increase in key worker children returning to school as their partners have also returned to work. Some schools have seen a 40% increase in numbers.
- The Department for Education (DfE) does not advocate schools adopting a rota approach to pupils' returning, and the County Council supports this. Rotas create difficulty with cleaning and transport in terms of exposure and infection risk. Social distancing on school transport is a particular challenge.
- Members raised concern about 1 June 2020 date and noted anxiety from the public that this is happening. Officers reported that the safety of children and staff is the key priority. Recognise there is a balance as some children will be desperate to return, while others from possibly more disadvantaged backgrounds may have had more limited access to home learning.
- In terms of the percentage of pupils currently attending school, Devon's is higher than the national average at 3.6% to 2.4%. In early years Devon is at 10.4% to the national figure of 5%.
- The Data Team within Education & Learning have done a fantastic job in terms of collating data, tracking children's school attendance, and assessing pupil vulnerability. Partners have worked closely to give wrap around support to children and families, be that from Early Help, School Improvement, safeguarding teams, SEND advisors, Public Health, commissioned services etc.
- Schools have adopted a broad range of approaches to try to support children's home learning.

- Significant work has been undertaken to ensure that children entitled to Free School Meals have access to the food whether they are in school or out.
- Transition for Y6 to secondary school. Developing a matrix to try to support each group of children to meet their needs. Significant work is going on in terms of managing this transition, which Babcock are involved with as well. The general view on holding pupils back a year, is currently that it is better to move forward and pick up any gaps as they are identified.
- Members were encouraged by the percentage of children attending Devon schools being above the national average, but still expressed concern about the most vulnerable and how they are identified.
- Clear escalation process in terms of assessing and picking up the most vulnerable young people. For school age children, officers are confident that they are getting weekly contact. The risk is much greater to those under 2s, Ofsted has reported a 50% national rise in incidents involving infants (under 12 months). It is those younger children who are not yet known who are of most concern.
- Officers reported that all schools, regardless of their type, have worked closely with the County Council during the pandemic.
- Members questioned whether there could be a more localised response to school opening given some areas having no COVID-19 for in excess of 10 days. Officers advised that all schools are working to DfE guidance.
- The Church of England (CoE) representative believes that in the region of 50% of CoE may not be sent back to school if it does resume for those age groups on 1 June 2020.
- School staff are really worried about their capacity, in terms of being able to also set and monitor work to those pupils who do remain at home. It is a worry it might not be sustainable.
- PPE not required in school in terms of COVID-19 unless a child becomes symptomatic.
- It is unlikely all primary school children will be back before the end of term unless there is a change to social distancing measures.
- The Head of Education & Learning has been continuing to work with school headteachers closely throughout the pandemic and is also well aware of a potential second wave of COVID-19.
- Quality assurance work on independent schools taking place in terms of their current offer.
- Members expressed concern about EHCPs not being completed. Officers are trying to do this virtually and for those young people moving school those plans have been done. Annual reviews are being undertaken wherever possible but is difficult when children are not in school. Outstanding EHCPs will be undertaken as a matter of urgency in the Autumn.
- The Cabinet Member thanked officers and also the schools for their collaborative work across the board, as well as the Head of Education & Learning and all her staff for the tremendous work that has been taking place. These thanks were endorsed by the Chair.

Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services January 2020 - Improvement Plan / Response to COVID-19

During officer discussion with members the following issues were raised:

- 93.6% completion rate of risk assessments. The uncompleted cases relate only to new referrals and those at early stage of assessment. Been effective at establishing who are the most vulnerable young people in the system.
- Members questioned how effective the County Council has been at identifying the level of risk. Officers reported a high level of quality assurance including dip sampling from senior management. Around 85% confirmation of original assessment – about 15% were discussion about the thresholds. This approach has worked well. Risk arrangements will need to be reviewed if offer in school changes to vulnerable young people over the forthcoming weeks.

- Very clear message from the County Council that vulnerable young people should be in school unless there is a good reason for them not to be.
- Also maintained a focus during this time on the groups Ofsted identified, such as those in inadequate housing.
- Officers conduct scrutiny of weekly reports on care leavers in unacceptable accommodation and challenge and tracking of actions in relation to circumstances of 6 current cases.
- Officers also undertake continued scrutiny of weekly reports and challenge to progress; 3 children currently.
- Officers are focussing on chronic neglect and abuse and are using a former Ofsted inspector to help on developing practice. Whole system approach; County Council legal team, CAFCASS and Courts. All cases have been reviewed and clear plans are in place and being tracked.
- Considerable work has been undertaken in terms of permanence. In May 2020 Independent Reviewing Officers confirmed that 96% of relevant cases had a Permanence Plan in place.
- Members discussed the number of referrals and what more can be done to reach the children most in need. Officers reported a reduction overall in referral rates, although there has been a significant increase in the number of referrals from the community, which is positive and something which the County Council will continue to promote. Expect increase in referrals as more children go back to school.
- Most significant vulnerability is with the younger children. It has been a difficult period for some families who may not have the resilience to cope with being in lockdown with young children. There is an important role for members to reassure their communities that the County Council is here to help, not to take away children. The local authority can have a role in terms of having conversations about emotional health and bringing families into early help. A whole system response is required.
- Members concern about the [Ofsted report](#) and that Children's Scrutiny had not been aware of the problems the inspectors revealed. The Chief Officer for Children's Services had not expected the inadequate rating, so was unable to brief members on the risk. A 2018 peer review and focussed visit had been positive, with nothing to suggest what was to come with Ofsted. There was however no criticism of the scrutiny function in this year's Ofsted report.
- Concern about 93.6 compliance statistic – not 100% because cases come in before can meet families and children – inevitably some lag to achieve.
- The system is extremely robust in terms of early years and those in school. Cannot guarantee every child protected from an incident at home with parent drug abusing etc. System as robust as it can be given the situation with COVID-19 and the current restrictions.
- Members recognised dedicating a considerable amount of time to the schools' item and it was therefore agreed that any outstanding points not given the time to be covered properly in this session would be addressed in a meeting with the Chief Officer for Children's Services and the Chair / Vice Chair.

Next Meeting

10.30am 21 July 2020

COUNCILLOR HANNAFORD
CHAIR