

Children, Education and Skills Sub-Committee

18 November 2021

Present: Councillor M Thirlaway (Chair)
Councillor J Cassidy, H Johnson, C Johnston, P McIntyre,
J Montague, P Oliver, S Phillips and M Wilson.

Rev M Vine - Church Representative
Mr S Fallon – Church Representative

Apologies: Councillors M Madden, A Newman and E
Parker-Leonard

CES15/21 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members

CES16/21 Declarations of Interest

Councillor P Oliver declared a personal interest in Item 6 Support for Children with Special Needs and Disability during the Covid-19 pandemic as a family member has special needs.

CES17/21 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 9 September 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

CES18/21 Overview of the impact of Covid in schools from September 2021

The Committee considered a report on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and education, including the number of outbreaks from September 2021 and an update on the vaccination programme in schools.

As highlighted in the recently published report the 'Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and socio-economic inequalities in North Tyneside', children and young people had been disproportionately impacted in terms of missed education and social interaction.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already a significant gap in educational attainment between children living in deprived areas and their peers within North Tyneside. Many children experienced digital exclusion and were unable to access remote learning as families did not

have laptops or internet access. The disruption to school-based learning during the pandemic is thought to have further widened that gap.

Across the North East, the learning loss for primary school pupils throughout the year was 2.8 months, which increased to 3.3 months for secondary school pupils. Nationally, pupils in schools with high take up of free school meals experienced the largest learning loss, which has likely widened the attainment gap.

In reply to a question regarding the learning loss for primary school pupils and secondary school pupils in North Tyneside it was noted that accurate information on the impact of Covid-19 on North Tyneside pupils would be obtained in the summer in 2022 when the Council would have data on the outcomes of national tests and national comparators.

As the Government moved to step 4 of the roadmap in July 2021, a new phase of continued caution came into operation to manage the risks of COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the new academic year in September 2021 the national and local priority was to protect time in face-to-face education, minimise disruption and ensure the response to COVID-19 was proportionate to risk to children and young people. The risk of severe illness in children and young people was low, however in contrast there were significant harms associated with missed education.

Self-isolation guidance changed on 16 August 2021 and children below the age of 18 years and 6 months were not required to self-isolate if they were identified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19. Close contacts were now advised to take a PCR test but could remain in school as long as they did not return a positive result or display symptoms.

Education settings were no longer directed to maintain “bubbles” or for staff or pupils in secondary schools to wear facemasks, but the following control measures were maintained:

- Ensuring that there was good hygiene for everyone.
- Maintaining appropriate cleaning regimes.
- Keeping occupied spaces well ventilated.
- Following public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Education settings were no longer responsible for contact tracing for single positive COVID-19 cases in their settings, but they needed to notify the local authority if they reached thresholds for an outbreak and had up to date risk assessments in place, in line with DfE guidance.

Lateral flow testing was encouraged for all school staff and for secondary age pupils before they returned to school in September 2021 and continued to be encouraged twice weekly.

Local Authorities, Directors of Public Health and Health Protection Teams continued to be responsible for managing localised outbreaks and providing support and advice to education and childcare settings.

An update was given on infection rates and outbreaks since the start of the new academic year and it was noted that on 18 November 2021 there were 17 outbreaks in schools and the 7 day North Tyneside infection rate was 450 per 100,000.

Additional short term public health measures had been introduced in education settings from 1 November 2021.

The school-based vaccination programme in North Tyneside was on track and 5,000 students had been vaccinated in schools.

A Member commented that the vaccination uptake for home educated students was low and asked how that uptake could be improved and the Senior Manager Public Health undertook to provide an update on how the Council were working with and targeting home school children.

Despite the higher numbers of cases and outbreaks in schools there had been less disruption overall to schools and far fewer instances of classes or schools having to move to remote learning.

Local Authority Officers from a range of departments would continue to support schools to prevent and protect the onward transmission of COVID-19, with the expectation that the rate would peak and would continue to decline.

The full extent of the impact of two interrupted academic years of education was yet to be realised, however this was being monitored at both national, regional and local level on an ongoing basis.

Reference was made to the Mental Health pilot project and it was confirmed that fifteen schools had taken part in the first tranche of mental health awareness training with positive outcomes and the second tranche of training in schools had begun in autumn 2021. Four mental health workers would be working in further schools in January 2022.

It was **agreed** to note the contents of the report.

The Chair thanked the Senior Manager Public Health and the Assistant Director of Education for the informative report and for attendance at the meeting.

CES19/21 Support for children with Special Needs and disability during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Sub-Committee considered a report on the support for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the Covid-19 pandemic which included funding to schools for support for children with SEND and an update on data on SEND support, children's attendance and exclusion data.

The local authority tracked the levels of young people accessing SEND support through the North Tyneside schools, as well as those who were supported with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

The overall number of children and young people who had the support of an EHCP continued to rise and North Tyneside remained an outlier in terms of the proportion of the local population who had a plan.

The number of requests for assessment had not slowed down during the last twelve months and this suggested that North Tyneside would continue to be an outlier when compared to national figures. This high rate of children and young people with identified additional needs would put pressure on the service and those of the Council's partners.

Education in the academic year 2020/2021 had rapidly evolved to meet the dynamically changing needs of children and young people in North Tyneside. Local authority officers from a range of departments continued to support schools to navigate the plethora of legislation and guidance documentation presented by government. This had been the same for all identified groups of children and young people. An additional set of guidance and expectations were made for children and young people with EHCPs or those who were deemed to be vulnerable - the key difference being that full attendance was encouraged earlier. Whilst this additional guidance for children and young people with EHCPs was available, these groups were no less influenced by outbreaks of Covid-19 and periods of isolation.

The academic year 2020/2021 was beset by further disruption to pupils' education, because of Covid-19. High rates of outbreak within schools and repeated periods of enforced isolation led to an extended period of closure in the spring term 2021. It required schools to move to online learning swiftly. Whilst schools had developed better access and content, it was recognised that generally children and young people with additional needs were challenged by this way of working. However, some were able to access this way of working very successfully. Early indications were that the outbreaks and infection rates had no more or less impact on the group of young people with additional needs.

Continuing high levels of infection during the summer term, particularly within the 10-14 years age range, led to further disruption for pupils. By the time schools began summer holidays, more than half were deemed in outbreak. Whilst there was no evidence that those children and young people who had additional needs were unduly impacted when compared to their peers, the full extent of the impact of two interrupted academic years of education on this group was yet to be realised.

The return to school in September 2021 had seen continued outbreaks, albeit not at the rate seen in the summer term.

Despite the challenges that Covid-19 has brought, local authority officers continued to work with schools to support recovery and to tackle the priorities outlined within the Ambition for Education Strategy and the SEND Inclusion Strategy to improve outcomes for all pupils and specifically those with additional needs.

The social work teams continued to provide support and assessments throughout the pandemic and continued to visit if deemed essential. Visits had now returned to pre-pandemic frequency.

Short breaks for children and young people with disabilities had continued throughout the pandemic, though reduced numbers of places were offered at the height of the pandemic, dependent on risk assessments on clinical vulnerability. Provision was now back to pre-pandemic levels.

There was currently no waiting list for the overnight short breaks service within North Tyneside.

The Report also included an update on access to other services including those provided by health partners, funding and SEND support, attendance and exclusion.

Reference was made to some schools in the Borough which had a disproportionate number of children with EHCP's.

A Member commented that some EHCP Plans had 10, 15 or 18 hours which depended on the diagnosis and the needs identified. The EHCP Plan was the end of a gradual process and a passport to further support for a child and schools saw it as a right for a child with special needs.

Reference was made to the increase in the number of exclusions for behavioural issues, persistent disruptive behaviour and defiance and it was noted that these young people were supported by cognitive behaviour therapies.

It was **agreed** to note the contents of the report.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director of Education and the Interim Assistant Director, Whole Life Disability, Gateway and Emergency Duty for the informative report and for attendance at the meeting.