

# People and Health Scrutiny Committee

**Date 8 June 2021**

## **How has Covid-19 affected children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and their families?**

### **For Review and Consultation**

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

**Local Councillor(s):** All

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**Report Status:** Public

#### **Recommendation:**

That the Committee note and support the work being done to support children and young people (CYP) with special education needs and disabilities (SEND). That the Committee provides challenge and support to improve the experience of CYP with SEND.

#### **1. Executive Summary**

This paper sets out the experience of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic and how Dorset Council Children's Services responded alongside its partners.

During the Covid-19 pandemic there have been over 300 pieces of guidance and policy changes that have had an impact on children's services requiring a response, one of the most significant was the decision taken to close schools for

most pupils on the 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 with no clear timeline for when they would re-open. Our education community has never worked more closely together. Through a period of crisis, schools, education settings, community partners, health partners, children, young people and their families with the Council have generated innovative solutions to challenges faced during Covid-19. The partnership mobilised, responded quickly, demonstrated agility and most importantly lived a one team, one Dorset, approach to support our vulnerable children and young people.

To coordinate our responses, we set up a network of headteachers, representing geographical and phase clusters that met daily to plan together and address concerns. We focused on supporting the most vulnerable children and young people, who would not be able to be in school. Together we developed a business intelligence tool called the vulnerable children's tracker and focused on key data to support our decision making with Public Health to ensure our schools had the information they needed to respond. We set up new communications channels and redeployed council officers to work alongside schools to support them to remain open over the Easter holidays and beyond. We collaborated on identifying those who would benefit and/or needed IT equipment and support, sharing of resources for support and learning and the creation of advice and support lines.

During Covid-19, services have been given greater permission to share information to better identify and support families with needs resulting in new ways of working, increased agility in the workforce and more timely and co-ordinated interventions. We were able to use the vulnerable children tracker to have oversight of attendance of all vulnerable children and young people, but in particular those with SEND.

## **2. School attendance tracker**

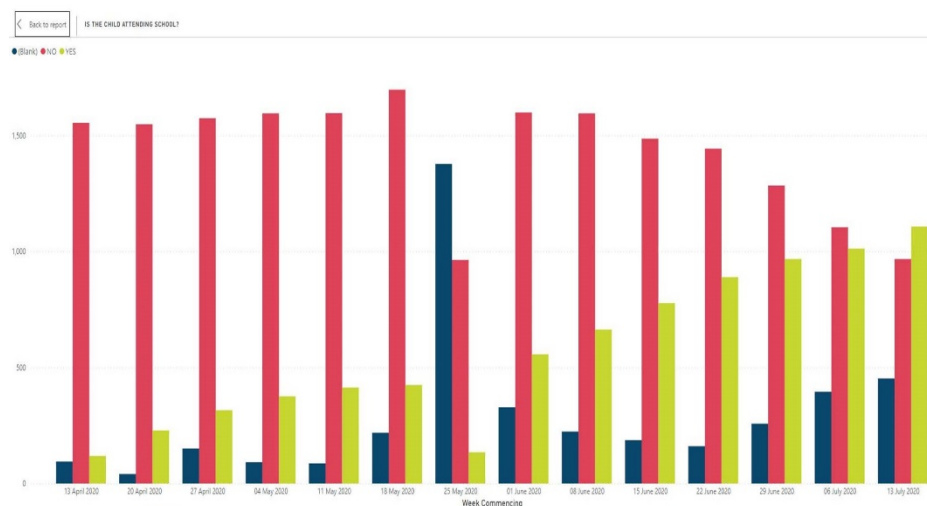
In response to school closures we created and implemented a new system to track attendance and risk of vulnerable children. The list of children was brought together based on the DfE definition of vulnerable children in order to respond to changing circumstances as families adjusted differently to life in lock down.

Each school, regardless of whether they are an academy or maintained, was allocated a link worker from the early help workforce and educational psychology service. All maintained special schools had an educational psychologist as their link worker. The link worker had a weekly meeting with the school. The regular meeting of school cluster leads and link workers provided a key avenue for communicating with schools and helped to set up a successful monitoring process which included collecting attendance and risk judgement data from schools on a weekly basis to allow early intervention where issues were identified (such as low attendance of key cohorts).

We also developed links with non-maintained schools and settings and had internal Council departments link with different settings to collect weekly attendance and risk data.

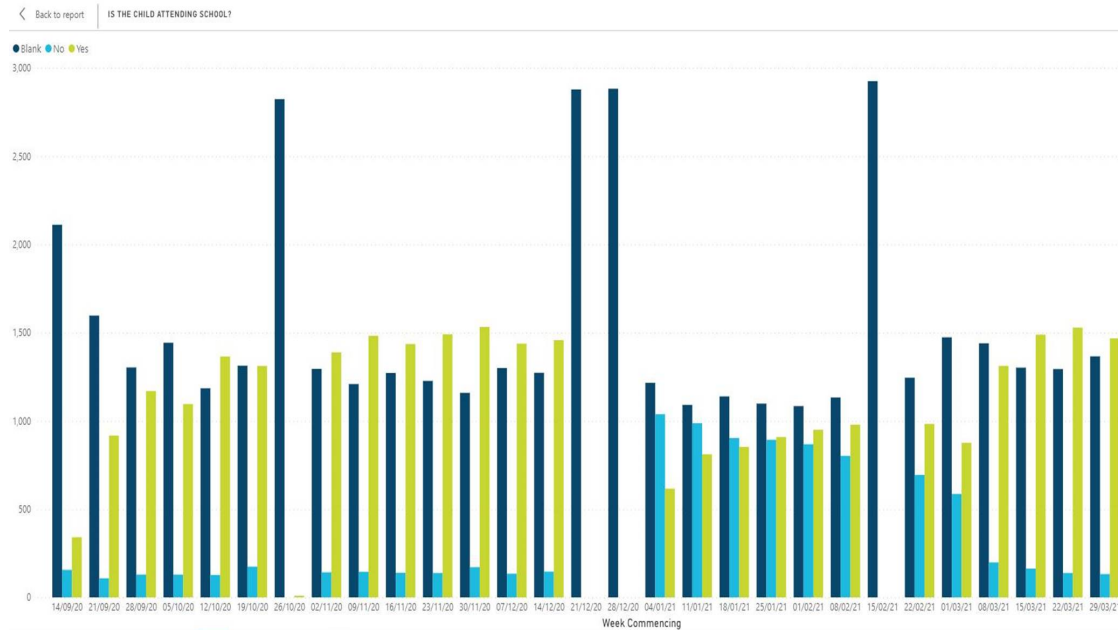
From April 2020 to July 2020 we could see that the attendance for CYP with an EHCP increased.

The Figures below set out examples of the live dashboard used to track data.



*Figure 1: Focus on children with a Dorset EHCP attendance over the summer term, demonstrating the success of getting more pupils back to school each week:*

We have continued to use the vulnerable children tracker with the support of our schools and can see how the attendance was sustained during the autumn term 2020 despite a lockdown during the month of November.



*Figure 2: Focus on children with a Dorset EHCP attendance over the autumn term 2020 to March 2021.*

Regarding our work with schools, we had particularly good responses from the Dorset special schools, with 100 percent response rate for every week of the summer term. In the final week of term for special schools, 61% of children attended school. We continued to track attendance in the Dorset maintained special schools and to have regular link worker meetings.

During the Autumn term the attendance increased considerably and in many of the schools this was over 90%. In January this dropped during the third lockdown period, we continued to work with the schools and families to provide home learning activities and to ensure they were safe and receiving meaningful learning activities for their age, ability and aptitude. Our services worked together and with the schools to identify support that was needed from a range of other professionals. The schools worked with the families and children and our SEND provision Leads to ensure the CYP were receiving appropriate provision.

The figure below sets out the attendance in our maintained special schools.

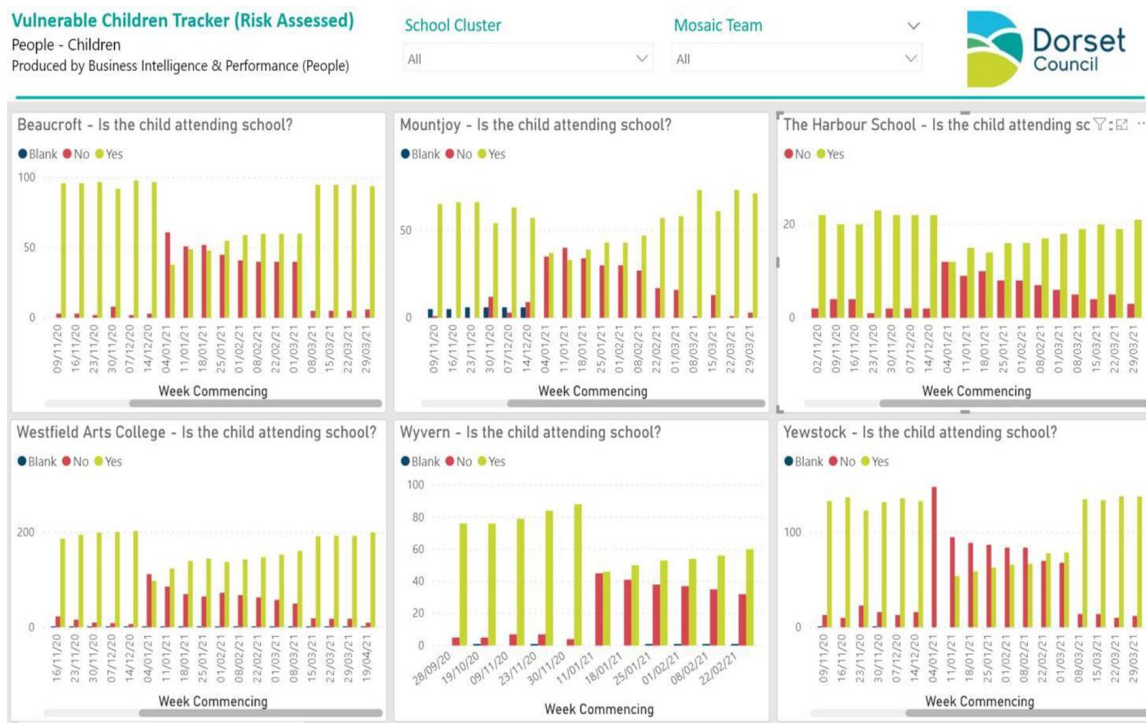


Figure 3: Focus on children with a Dorset EHCP in our maintained special schools

### 3. Education Health Care Assessments

During the period from April 2020 to end of March 2021 we continued to receive the same number of requests for Education, Health and Care Assessments as in previous years, irrespective of schools being partially open for many months during this period. 598 requests were received of which 463 were agreed to take forward for EHC needs assessments. Professionals providing advice towards the assessment adapted their approach and moved many of the services and assessments to online assessments.

Families were offered a choice as to how to carry out the assessment. For some agencies such as the speech and language therapy service this proved to be more of a challenge due to the nature of the assessments carried out and the need for face to face interaction to complete quality assessments.

Despite these challenges we continued to meet the 20 week issuing of final EHC Plan deadline for most of the EHC needs assessments. Of the 463 agreed EHC needs assessments 446 led to an Education Health and Care Plan of which 79% on average (for the 2020 calendar year) were completed within the statutory 20 week time scale. Achieving this was dependent on receiving professional advice in a timely manner and working with the families, schools and education settings as well as the professionals and maintaining an open communication to ensure the families collaborated in the process.

The service published revised annual review guidance in collaboration with the Dorset Parent Carer Council for schools and professionals, to enable reviews to continue to take place throughout the pandemic in an inclusive way.

#### **4. Education Psychology Covid-19 parent helpline**

At the outset of Covid-19 parents and carers of children and young people with SEND had increased worries about education, routines and the challenges of home schooling given the level of support our children and young people receive at educational settings. Working together with the Dorset Parent Carer Council (DPCC) the service agreed to set up a telephone helpline to respond to queries they were receiving from parents, offering telephone consultations with an education psychologist five days a week morning and afternoon. The helpline was open to all families, not just those with SEND.

The helpline was clearly promoted both through DPCC but also through the Council's communications, website, the SEND newsletter and via schools.

Between 27<sup>th</sup> April – 26<sup>th</sup> August a total 115 telephone consultations took place

Most of the enquires related to children and young people who attended a Dorset school including two independent schools. At least two of the children and young people were electively home educated.

The nature of the calls focused on:

- Raised anxiety of both children and young people and parents and managing behaviors at home
- Relationships between siblings and managing fallouts

- Support and advice for children and young people with neurodevelopmental difficulties such as Autistic Spectrum Condition and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and managing these at home
- Home learning and how to support their child with SEND
- Shared care between parents and how to manage this during lockdown with an anxious child
- Access to other agencies and mediating between home and school
- Anxiety about return to school and getting ill
- How to support their child when schools reopen
- Transition to a new school when the usual transition process has not been available
- Seeking support to talk school and other agencies for support what to do and who to talk to

Parents and carers who would not typically have accessed support from an Education Psychologist were able to get support quickly and in a reassuring way. The service was able to email helpful resources to parents such as social stories and five point scales to give parents and carers tools to support.

This support in addition to the support parents and carers were receiving from schools was an additional layer of essential support to our children and young people. Education psychologists were able to follow up consultations with schools and other agencies where additional support was needed, creating a valuable front door to access services for our families.

We have continued to provide this offer throughout the pandemic. Since 13 October 2020 to 24 April 2021 we have received 57 calls. 44 of the calls were during the period of January 2021 to end of March 2021. We will continue to offer this helpline as we progress.

## **5. Education Psychology Covid-19 parent helpline**

In March 2020 there were 32 (10.1%) 16-17yr old with an EHCP who were NEET (1 teen parent, 8 taking break due to illness and 20 seeking EET). Of the 18-24-year olds with an EHCP 54 were NEET (15.2%), 18 of whom were seeking education, employment or training and 4 were volunteering. During Covid-19 the

number of 16-17-year olds with an EHCP who are NEETs has not changed, while the number of young people between 18-24s has dropped to 43 who are NEET.

Ansbury's service also offered support to prevent young people becoming NEET. This included contacting all young people who were in transition to check and support their planning and support needs. Council SEND caseworkers had more time to update EHCP plans and social workers returned calls quickly following up any queries.

In response to Dorset Council's commitment to re-engaging NEET young people during Covid-19, Ansbury have reorganised their teams to work alongside the Council's new locality model and they have put more advisors into NEET support. Ansbury have trained more staff to work with the EHCP cohort and ensured that they know about provision locally and nationally. Using the positive experiences advisors will seek to continue to speak to parents when we make telephone contact and to involve them in supporting their child where possible. Advisors will collate more information on individual needs, including identifying gaps in provision and support for young people that may be preventing them from moving into EET outcomes. Dorset Council are bidding to JobCentre Plus for a Dorset Youth Hub to support 16-24-year olds who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment.

## **6. Mainstream inclusion and expansion SEND provision**

Dorset Council is ambitious for all its children and young people with SEND and increased vulnerabilities and is committed to providing a great education and supporting strong life outcomes.

Dorset is committed to inclusion in mainstream and we firmly believe every teacher is a teacher of special needs. Therefore, building the capabilities of our mainstream schools to support more children and young people with SEND will ensure more children can attend a local school. Strengthening the capacity of our maintained school system to support more children in mainstream and meeting need at the lowest level is at the core of our strategy. However, we recognise that whilst most children and young people will be supported in a mainstream school, some need more specialist support in specialist provision.



The Dorset Council Plan 2020-2024 sets out that the Council will provide more specialist education for children with complex communication and learning needs. The published Children and Young People Plan 2020-2023 develops the strategy further within its key priority area: Best Education for All. This priority area is supported by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Capital Strategy 2020-25, which will create approximately 500 places across Dorset, including 280 places at the former St Mary's site from January 2022.

We currently have two Free School (Special School) projects underway with the Department for Education (DfE) to expand specialist provision for Dorset.

The first of these is Harbour School, which is set to create 140 places for children and young people with Autism. The school is currently open with a small number of students in temporary accommodation while the DfE build a new school on the old Bovington Middle School site. The project has a planned completion date of September 2022, following several construction delays. We continue to liaise with the DfE who are the lead for this scheme and have raised our concerns about the delays incurred and the impact on our children and young people.

The second project is a proposed 75 place free school which was granted a capital allocation in 2019. The DfE have undertaken a long-term feasibility study on a site and after much delay, have indicated that there are issues from the study which may prevent them using this site for their new build. The Council team will meet with the DfE this month to discuss the outcome of their feasibility and next steps for this important project.

## **7. Preparation for adulthood and transitions**

Dorset Children's Services and Adult Social Care Strategic leads have agreed a project to scope the existing services, structure, processes and data relating to transitions and preparation for adulthood for our young people in both Directorates and present proposals for a redesign of Children's and Adult Services provision to deliver an ambitious 0-25 service offer for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) including a preparedness for adulthood approach.

The Care Act 2014 places a duty on Local Authorities to conduct transition assessments for children, children's carers and young carers where there is a

likely need for care and support after a young person turns 18 and a transition assessment would be of 'significant benefit' at a point in time.

Practice suggests that many young people who come to the attention of adult social care at or after the age of 18 are typically known to children's services by virtue of social care and / or a special educational need.

The Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan introduced in the Children and Families Act 2014 promotes the closer collaboration between professionals to support children and young people with SEND including the promotion of information sharing. This is a consistent theme in much of social care practice.

Sign off of the new approach is expected to be achieved in July 2021.

## **8. Risk Assessments**

From the outset of Covid-19 Dorset worked with the schools to establish a shared system for schools to share their evaluations about the vulnerabilities of children and young people within their settings. This included those children and young people with an EHCP and specifically any children being supported through SEN Support that the school felt required a risk assessment. Schools developed their own risk assessments based on the DfE guidance and we worked closely with schools to use their own professional judgements in partnership with the parents and carers.

The risk assessment process was triangulated with our professional services and SEND team judgements based on a simple proforma asking the following questions:

- How are you keeping in contact with ...? How often is this?
- What activities and how are you providing for ...?
- How are you trying to maintain progress towards the EHCP outcomes?
- What are you doing to maintain a sense of belonging to the school community?
- Do you or the family need additional support with any of the above or anything else? If so, what do you think would be helpful?
- Can any of the SEND specialist services fulfil this? EP, SENSS, HVSS, PMNS

- How do you know that ... is safe?
- Do you speak to ... or have you seen them virtually?
- What is in place for the family if things change? Who would they contact?

## **9. Summer in Dorset**

Over the summer holidays with schools taking a break from providing regular contact, we wanted to make sure these children and young people could still access positive activities and support.

Our ambition was to ensure sure these children and young people experienced a summer of hope by:

- supporting the development of our most vulnerable children
- helping children and young people to socialise
- helping children and young people to make sense of the wider environment

A programme of activities was led by a mix of commissioned providers and Children's Services locality teams. Summer in Dorset passes were issued to 5,300 children and young people to be exchanged an unlimited amount of times at these activities and other existing activities that were accepting the passes.

Our desire to deliver Summer in Dorset was in part driven by the lack of activities scheduled for the summer, due to concerns about Covid-19. Working with support from Public Health Dorset and with the financial support of Dorset Council, providers were encouraged to deliver activities. Whilst this was not a government scheme and was developed locally, there was positive feedback from Ofsted during their visit in October 2020 on the impact of this scheme.

Of the 5,361 vulnerable children and young people eligible for a Summer in Dorset pass, 2,837 have an allocated SEND caseworker. Their pass granted them free access to 142 activities happening during the month of August. The range of activities was wide and included Circus skills; Paddle boarding and canoeing; various indoor and outdoor sports; Theatre skills; Nature walks; Musical instrument group sessions and Outdoor adventures.

Uncertainty on the changing government guidelines for large gatherings and our providers lack of surety to put in place arrangements, resulted in the decision to

press ahead with the Summer in Dorset programme on a reduced planning timetable. This provided some key challenges. Whilst comprehensive, the programme of activities was weaker in some areas including our offer of activities for young people aged 18-25 years with an EHCP and the spread of activities for children with a disability across the county. The passes and information to book arrived very close to the start of August before all activities were listed. Some activities were booked up very fast, giving the impression that there were limited options.

From the survey of families that accessed activities the activities have been rated at an average of 4.6 out of 5; 80% respondents said Summer in Dorset has really made a positive difference and 20% said it has made some difference. We have surveyed families who received a pass but didn't attend a session. The most popular reason given for why: "There were no suitable activities for my child/young person".

Summer in Dorset had a very positive impact for a good number of families in Dorset, however we have learnt through the process that with greater planning we can do more. Several families have asked that the initiative be repeated next summer (or even sooner). Our locality teams have demonstrated their ability to deliver brilliant activities tailored to the children and families in their area. This will be factored into our Early Help Strategy as part of, and independently of any county-wide initiatives. We have worked with existing providers in a new and flexible way and commissioned new providers during this programme. The feedback has been very positive about working in a coordinated and joined up way. Providers valued the additional support and assurances provided by the Council in an uncertain environment. There is an opportunity to develop these opportunities, build capacity, and see an increase in activities for vulnerable children throughout the year.

An on-line offer was provided to families over the Easter 2021 break along with a small number of face-to-face activities, over 700 young people took part.

## **10. Next steps**

We do not yet know the full extent of the impact of Covid-19 on our children, young people and families, but together as partnership we will make sure we are

able to respond effectively and continue to support our most vulnerable children both through the pandemic but also as services increasingly move to educational recovery activities.

We are taking forward the positive learning from our experience in Covid-19 to help us accelerate our work to deliver the best services for children and young people and to support professionals to work across organisational boundaries in the interests of improving family and child outcomes.

We have sought, throughout this period to keep listening to the experiences of our children, young people and families through the creation of regular foster carer forums, young people forums, formal and informal view seeking. We also recently undertook the Annual SEND Survey as a reflection on 2020 and will be using the outcomes of that to inform the Council's next three year SEND Strategy.

Practice observation has continued, and following a brief break, we have recommenced our auditing process. Close working with our Dorset Parent Carer forum to both hear and respond together to the issues expressed by parents of children with SEND has grown and strengthened through this pandemic. Co-production is embedded and joint work on our communications is becoming ever more established. We fully recognise that this has been a time of great anxiety for children, young people and families and continue to work together to respond to priority issues and concerns in our continuing response to this pandemic.

As multi-agency leaders we continued to focus on our collective ambition for all our children, young people and families to deliver our new Children and Young People's Plan and the implementation of our new model of Children's Services delivery - Dorset Children Thrive.

## **11. Financial Implications**

The government provided significant levels of additional financial support to Councils throughout 2020/21 pandemic with the majority of funding targeted to support increased costs in adult social care and lockdown grants to support local businesses. There was minimal additional funding ringfenced for Children's services meaning that any covid related pressures had to be absorbed by existing budgets.

We do not yet know the full extent of the impact of Covid-19 on our children, young people and families, and there may well be additional cost pressures in the future. These will need to be assessed and where appropriate incorporated in the Council's medium term financial plans.

## **12. Well-being and Health Implications**

Emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people with SEND is a priority for our services. We are working with colleagues in the CCG and from Dorset Healthcare Trust to strengthening our services for our most vulnerable children and young people with SEND.

## **13. Climate implications**

No climate implications have been identified in this report.

## **14. Other Implications**

No other implications have been identified.

## **15. Risk Assessment**

No Risks identified

## **16. Equalities Impact Assessment**

No equality impact assessment has been prepared as the report does not recommend a change of policy.

## **17. Appendices**

There are no appendices.

## **18. Background Papers**

There are no background papers.