

People and Health Overview Committee

6 July 2021

The impact of Covid on schools and youth provision

For Review and Consultation

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

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

That the Committee note and support the work being done to support Dorset schools and youth providers and the efforts of schools that have continued to deliver support in their communities.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This paper sets out the impact during the Covid-19 pandemic on schools and youth provision in Dorset and how schools, Dorset Council Children's Services and partners responded together.

There have been over 300 pieces of guidance and policy changes from the DFE and other government departments relating to children's services delivery. One of the most significant was the decision taken to close schools for most pupils on the 18th March 2020 with no clear timeline for when they would re-open.

Our education community has never worked more closely together. Schools, education settings, community partners, health partners, children, young people and their families have worked together with the Council in generating innovative

solutions to the 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.

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.

Leadership timeline of our response to Covid-19

The Dorset Council Children's Services Leadership Team worked closely with systems leaders in other parts of the council; Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group; Public Health Dorset; educational settings; NHS health providers; police, fire and rescue; town and parish councils as well as the community and voluntary sector to deliver our ongoing response to the pandemic.

The leadership task throughout this period was four-fold:

1. providing organisational responses to government advice, guidance and new duties;
2. coordinating and participating in partnership responses;
3. to deliver business continuity responding to questions and concerns about how employees could undertake their work and most importantly providing information to; and
4. responding to feedback on the impact of the pandemic on children, young people and families.

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, who would not be able to be in school, setting up a local school voucher scheme on behalf of Dorset schools, prior to the national scheme, to address issues of supplier failure as well as meeting the needs of a rural county. Together we developed a Vulnerable Children's Tracker which focused on attendance, shared risk assessments and worked with Public Health to ensure our schools had the information they needed to respond to outbreaks. We set up new communications channels and redeployed council officers to work alongside schools to remain open over the Easter holidays and beyond.

We have refined our partnership approach to working together to meet the needs of children and young people with weekly partnership meetings to highlight and address risks and issues for the most vulnerable. More recently we have worked as multi-agency partners to support the return to school through the provision of information, advice and support to those that may have found it more challenging, in particular smaller schools.

We sought, throughout this period to keep listening to the experiences of our children, young people and families. Close working with our Dorset Parent Carer Council (DPCC) to both listen to, and respond together to, the issues expressed by parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

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.

1.2 School attendance tracker

In response to school closures we created and implemented a new system to track attendance; the list of children was brought together based on the Department for Education definition of vulnerable children.

Each school, regardless of whether they are an Academy, Free or Maintained, was allocated a link worker from the Early Help workforce or 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 children and young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan increased.

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

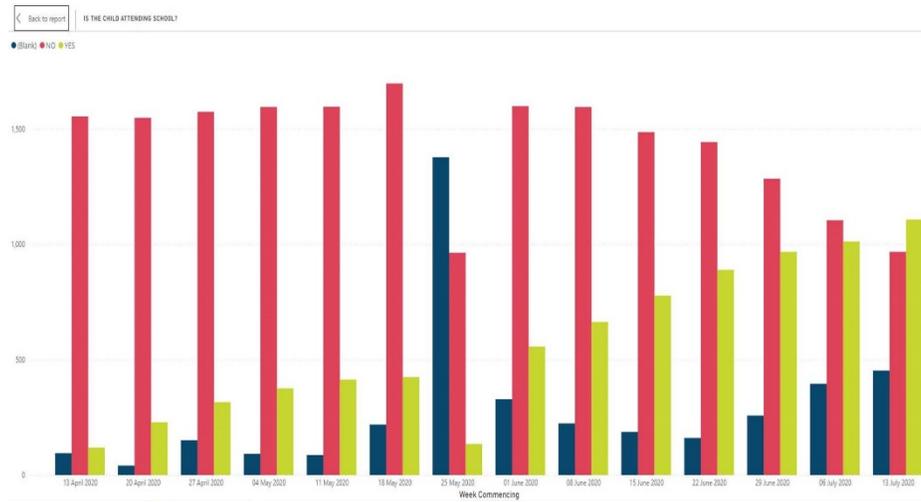


Figure 1: Focus on children with a Dorset Education, Health and Care Plan attendance over the summer term, demonstrating the success of getting more pupils back to school each week:

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.

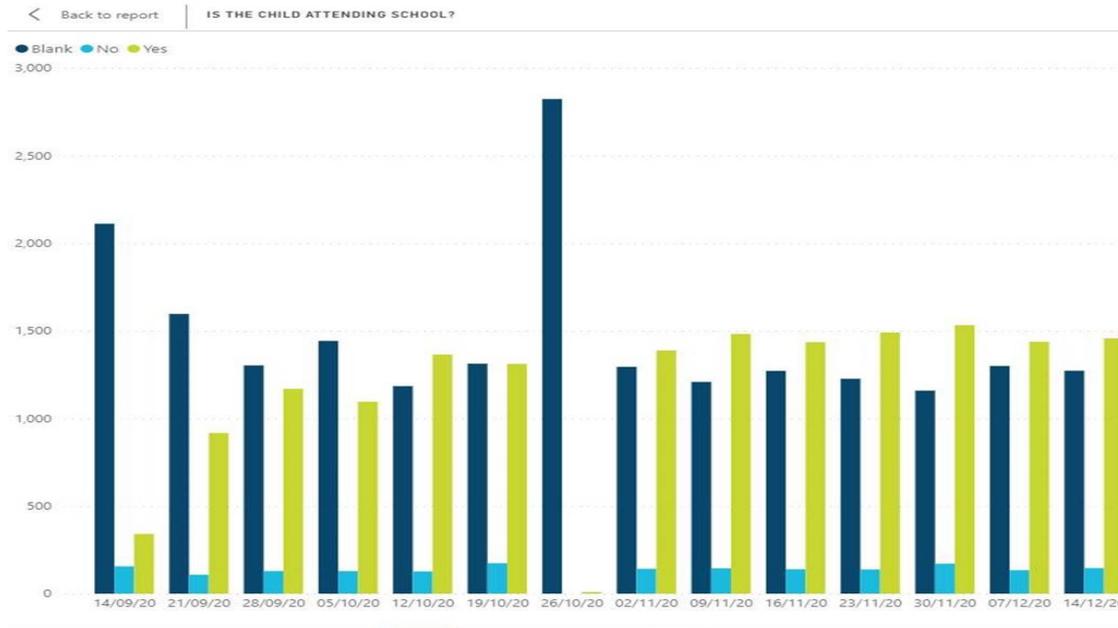


Figure 2: Focus on children with a Dorset Education, Health and Care Plan attendance over the autumn term 2020 to March 2021.

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 2021 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 children and young people were receiving appropriate provision.

1.3 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 27th April – 26th August a total 115 telephone consultations took place

Most of the enquiries 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 behaviours 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. We have delivered all of this within existing resources.

1.4 Risk Assessments

We 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 Education, Health and Care Plan 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 Education, Health and Care Plan 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?

1.5 Youth Club and Youth Centre re-opening – June 2021

In Dorset youth clubs are provided by community led organisations. In the larger towns, these operate from purpose-built youth centres, with smaller towns and villages providing a youth club from a wider community buildings, such as village halls.

The current pandemic has had a significant impact on youth centres and youth clubs and almost all clubs ceased their open access youth provision in March 2020 with the original lockdown. Most youth clubs made use of the furlough scheme, but some did keep a level of youth work capacity in play, offering some virtual youth work sessions to young people in their community, or engaging in detached youth work. There was a limited re-opening in the autumn of 2020 but most closed again for the duration of 'Lockdowns 2 and 3'

Those that did maintain a level of alternative youth provision were key partners over the different lockdowns. In some cases, these were the only professionals in regular contact with isolated young people and their families. These virtual sessions were helpful in supporting those that missed social contact the most.

The other alternative provision that emerged was several youth centres began to deliver detached youth work or increased their existing detached youth work to more evenings or different locations. This has been vital in engaging young people to prevent the spread of Covid, but also reducing anti-social behaviour and addressing the risks of County Lines and Child Exploitation. One of the legacies of the pandemic has been that several clubs have continued their commitment to detached and outreach youth work in their communities, which will continue to support our efforts to tackle these issues. There have also been

several community groups exploring outreach vehicles for youth work delivery including buses and a converted ice-cream van.

Alongside the contribution of our voluntary sector partners, Children's Services took a lead role in co-ordinating a response to young people throughout the pandemic. Shortly after the first 'lockdown', each locality team identified a youth 'lead' to link together voluntary sector and community organisations, schools, police, town and parish councils to ensure a joined up approach to supporting young people in their community.

As we have pressed ahead with our Dorset Thrive Model, we have recruited a Targeted Youth Worker for each locality and produced a Targeted Youth Work Offer, which members contributed to via the Executive Advisory Panel. Central to our Targeted Youth Work offer is to provide continuing support to voluntary sector youth clubs and youth centres.

In addition, these roles are central to our Contextual Safeguarding approach to address some key challenges we face around child exploitation and 'county lines'. The link meetings established during the first lockdown have provided a platform for a new monthly Youth at Risk Meeting for each locality, looking at young people at emerging or moderate risk of child exploitation.

Of the youth clubs that Dorset Council is aware of, 19 have re-opened, one is currently offering detached youth work and three more are currently doing the planning work needed to re-open. Understandably, current provision is limited to a degree in order to comply with Covid restrictions as youth clubs take a measured approach to how long they re-open, how often and for how many, but most are planning to be back to normal when restrictions end.

In addition, many clubs are now beginning to plan summer activities programmes for young people to take part in over the summer holidays, supported by funding from the Youth Fund approved by Dorset Cabinet and the funds available through the Holiday and Activity Fund from Central Government. These activities will supplement the programme being planned through Summer in Dorset.

1.6 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. Climate implications

No climate implications have been identified in this report.

5. Other Implications

No other implications have been identified.

6. Risk Assessment

No Risks identified

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

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

8. Appendices

There are no appendices.

9. Background Papers

There are no background papers.

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Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.