

**IMPROVING LIVES SELECT COMMISSION  
Tuesday 9 March 2021**

Present:- Councillor Cusworth (in the Chair); Councillors Jarvis, Beaumont, Buckley, Clark, Elliot, Fenwick-Green, Khan, Marriott, Pitchley, Senior and Simpson.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillor Hague.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

**140. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 26 JANUARY 2021**

**Resolved:** - That the minutes of the meeting of the Improving Lives Select Commission held on 26 January 2021 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

**141. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**142. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

There were no items that required the exclusion of the press or public.

**143. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS**

There were no questions from members of the public or press.

**144. COMMUNICATIONS**

The Chair advised that a written report regarding the most recent meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel would be circulated to members.

Members were reminded that the next meeting of the Improving Lives Select Commission would take place on Monday 22 March at 5:30pm.

**145. EDUCATION IN ROTHERHAM - COVID-19 RESPONSE AND FORWARD PLANNING**

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services, the Strategic Director – Children and Young People's Services, the Interim Assistant Director - Education, the Head of Service, Early Years and Childcare and the Head of Access Services attended the meeting to provide a presentation on the response from the Education Service to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In introducing the presentation, the Interim Assistant Director – Education noted his thanks to all those involved in delivering educational services

across the Borough for their work over the previous year during the pandemic.

The Interim Assistant Director provided a summary of the how the Education service had responded to the pandemic including information on:

- the Education service had been at the forefront of the Rotherham Covid response and how the co-production work with schools had ensured a strong and coordinated response to the challenges that had been faced.
- how work across the key areas of challenge had included Free School Meals, digital poverty and supporting schools to interpret updates to statutory guidance.
- how Education Services had adapted to ensure that statutory responsibilities continued to be delivered effectively.
- how the council had provided a strong leadership during all stages of the pandemic. This included collaboration with DfE, Ofsted, other Local Authorities to address emerging challenges and to support schools with future implementations of defined 'catch up' funding from central government.

The Interim Assistant Director detailed areas of concern regarding the Education service that had resulted from the impact of the pandemic, including:

- the increase in numbers of students in receipt of Elective Home Education that raised concerns around vulnerable students.
- concerns around the wider impact that the Covid- 19 pandemic was having on the education of children and young people, including significant gaps in missed education through school closures or reoccurring periods of self-isolation.
- the wellbeing of school staff.
- the long-term impact of pandemic on the education of vulnerable groups of students not yet being fully understood.
- the lack of assessment of students' academic progress across all key stages in the period of the pandemic and into summer 2021 and how this would inhibit understanding of the educational progression at key stages of educational transition.

The Head of Service, Early Years and Childcare provided an overview of activity surrounding Early Years provision, including:

- how the Early Years and childcare sector had played an essential

to part in the whole system approach regarding education across Rotherham during the pandemic.

- how the resilience of the sector remained challenging due to issues around funding, take up of places, viability of businesses and Covid related pressures including parental anxieties, Covid testing processes and fatigue across the sector from the pandemic.
- the ongoing support that had been provided to the sector.
- how the medium-term impact of the pandemic would need to support improved take up of places, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The work that had been carried out across the Early Years and Childcare sector to improve Speech and Language outcomes that had continued across last year, and that remained a key strategic priority.

Members asked for further information on how the pandemic had impacted on the number of providers and the number of places in the Early Year and childcare sector and whether there was a plan to increase the total number of places available. The Head of Service, Early Years and Childcare advised that there had been a good response from the sector, with services being available throughout the pandemic with services being fully accessible to all children from September 2020. The Head of Service noted that there had been some reduction in the number of places available due the impact of restrictions related to the pandemic but advised that some childminders who had not been operating would be reopening shortly.

The Head of Service noted that despite the pandemic, that the turnover of childminders had been at normal levels but advised that there had been some delays in new childminders becoming operational. The Head of Service noted that due to changing work practices that the demand for childcare places could change in the future. The Head of Service advised that the provision of services during school holidays was less certain and assured members that the situation was being carefully monitored.

The Interim Assistant Director detailed how the pandemic had impacted on the delivery of Primary Education, including:

- how the pandemic had had a significant impact across Primary education with low levels of attendance and disruption to children's progress.
- how schools had had key role in leading the community response to the pandemic and how they had played an important role in safeguarding.
- how schools had adapted and moved quickly to provide a strong

remote learning offer since January 2021.

- that Primary attendance had been significantly higher during the national lockdown in 2021 across all vulnerable groups and critical worker children.
- that there had been no assessments across primary key stages during 2020 and 2021.

The Interim Assistant Director detailed further how the pandemic had impacted on the delivery of Secondary Education, including:

- the significant impact on secondary school attendance across Rotherham created by the challenges of the pandemic, including low attendance during the first lockdown and the continued significant impact on school attendance during the Autumn term reopening.
- the successful delivery of the secondary school curriculum via remote learning.
- how in the absence of GCSE examinations in 2020 or 2021, centre assessed grades would determine academic progression.
- the significant role that secondary schools had played in leading the community response to pandemic and in safeguarding.
- that school leaders had offered strong levels of support to the most vulnerable families during the pandemic, working outside of their educational remit to support emerging challenges including Free School Meals, IT access and in managing the sustained impact of confirmed positive Covid-19 cases in schools.

The Head of Access Services noted how successfully schools had embraced the challenges that the pandemic had created, and how they had managed to successfully implement new Government guidance, often at very short notice.

The Interim Assistant Director advised that experience had shown that schools had not been sources of increased virus transmission, but that they had been impacted by how they reflected rates of virus transmission in their communities.

Members asked that with the successful implementation of online lessons while schools had been closed to most children, whether they would continue to enable children who were having to isolate at home for a period of time to be able access lessons and learning. The Interim Assistant Director advised that alternative ways to access education would continue but noted that while this would be challenging with the full return to schools of all children, there was a commitment across the education sector to the continuation of online learning for those children

and young people who required it.

Members asked how the pandemic had impacted on the delivery of before and after school activities. The Interim Assistant Director advised that these had resumed and noted that online provision of extracurricular activities had also been taking place and would be expanding further.

Members asked when data would be available on the numbers of pupils who had returned to school since schools had reopened to all pupils on 8 March. The Interim Assistant Director advised that early data had shown that 73% of pupils had returned to school. The Interim Assistant Director noted that the phased approach to the return being used by secondary schools in order to allow for routine testing would have impacted on this figure and advised that more reliable data would be available a couple of weeks after schools had fully reopened.

Members asked for further information on the financial assistance that had been announced for schools by the Secretary of State to help pupils catch up academically, and the subsequent announcement that the funding could also be used to provide activities focussed on health and wellbeing. The Interim Assistant Director advised that the focus of activities that would be supported by the catch up premium had evolved and widened over time and noted that the focus on how the premium was spent would vary across the country. The Interim Assistant Director advised that the focus of how the premium was spent was the subject of discussions with the Department for Education and assured members that they would be kept updated with how the funding was being used in Rotherham.

Members noted how important after school clubs and extracurricular activities were for the overall health and wellbeing of children and young people. The Chair noted that it was essential that this type of provision was developed as the personal and social development was closely linked to educational attainment.

The Chair asked for information on what access to learning children would have who were not in school due living with someone who was shielding. The Interim Assistant Director assured the Chair that in these circumstances suitable arrangements would be made for any child who was off school for this reason. The Interim Assistant Director advised however that the issue of greater concern was regarding children who were not returning to school due to parents anxieties over safety. The Interim Assistant Director advised that schools would be taking all possible actions to ensure that these children returned to school and that officers would support schools, if needed to ensure children returned to classes.

The Interim Assistant Director detailed further how the pandemic had impacted on the delivery of Higher and Further Education, including:

- the significant disruption across education and the move away from face to face learning for significant periods of time.
- how practical learning subjects had been severely impacted.
- the ongoing disruption with A Levels and BTEC qualifications being impacted in both 2020 and 2021.
- the transition for students into FE/HE education had been impacted greatly with continued uncertainty across these education areas raising continued concerns around mental health and wellbeing of young people.
- how opportunities for young people driven by the skills agenda and Sheffield City Region workstreams would support future developments across these phases of education.

The Interim Assistant Director concluded by outlining future areas of focus, including:

- how the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and those working in education settings, and how the understanding of children and young person's experiences of the pandemic would be central to recovery planning activity.
- how with measurements of academic progress yet to be determined for a number of cohorts, it was essential that the most vulnerable students were supported to overcome any barriers that the pandemic posed to future education progression.
- the role of the Rotherham Education Strategic Partnership and the SEND Board.
- the continued development of the co-productive partnership with parents and carers across any Covid recovery.

The Chair asked about the role that the Regional Schools Commissioner's Office had played during the pandemic. The Interim Assistant Director advised that meetings had been held weekly with the Commissioner's Office and assured the Chair that the relationship with the Regional Schools Commissioner's Office was strong and would be central in delivering the recovery from the pandemic. The Chair welcomed these assurances.

The Strategic Director – Children and Young People's Services thanked the Interim Assistant Director for the presentation and noted that she hoped the information provided had provided the assurances that members had sought regarding educational provision in Rotherham during the pandemic. The Strategic Director noted how well all schools across the Borough had responded to the significant challenges that the pandemic had created, not only in how they had delivered education but how they had supported families and how they had played a

significant safeguarding role.

The Chair, on behalf of members commended the work of all those who had been involved in delivering educational services during the pandemic. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services noted several areas of concern regarding how the pandemic had impacted on children and young people regarding their education and development including the lack of social mixing and how this would negatively impact on speech and language development, and the lack of access to practical learning in subjects such as science.

Councillor Steele, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, who had been in attendance at the meeting noted the comprehensiveness of the report that had shown how well the council had responded to the pandemic in regard to education. Councillor Steele noted that it would be vital for the council to work with the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority to create jobs for young people to go into after education. Councillor Steele commended how the council had brought maintained schools and academies together to work together and to share expertise throughout the pandemic.

The Chair thanked the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services, the Strategic Director – Children and Young People's Services, the Interim Assistant Director - Education, the Head of Service, Early Years and Childcare and the Head of Access Services for attending the meeting and answering member questions.

**Resolved: -**

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the information contained in the report be used to inform the development of the Improving Lives Select Commission's 2021/22 Work Programme.

#### **146. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered its Work Programme for 2020/21.

**Resolved: -**

- 1) That the Work Programme be updated as discussed.
- 2) That the Work Programme for 2020/21 be approved.

**147. IMPROVING LIVES SELECT COMMISSION - MONITORING REPORT**

The Committee considered the outstanding actions on the Monitoring Report.

**Resolved:** - That Monitoring Report be noted.

**148. IMPROVING LIVES SELECT COMMISSION - SUB AND PROJECT GROUP UPDATES**

The Chair provided a progress report on sub and project group activity.

**Resolved:** - That the update be noted.

**149. URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business.

**150. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING**

**Resolved:** - That the next meeting of the Improving Lives Select Commission take place on Monday 22 March 2021 at 5:30pm as a Microsoft Teams meeting.