

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children's Services and Safeguarding)	Date of Meeting:	Tuesday 26 January 2021
Subject:	Covid Management in Schools		
Report of:	Interim Head of Education Excellence	Wards Affected:	(All Wards);
Portfolio:			
Is this a Key Decision:	No	Included in Forward Plan:	No
Exempt / Confidential Report:	No		

Summary: The purpose of this report is to provide a summary update to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, outlining the safeguarding arrangements for vulnerable children who did not attend school during the COVID-19 first lockdown, between March 2020 to June 2020. The report will also reference information relating to the wider reopening of schools following this period.

Recommendation(s):

(1) That the report be noted.

Reasons for the Recommendation(s):

To appraise the Committee of the safeguarding arrangements for vulnerable children who did not attend school during the COVID-19 first lockdown between March 2020 to June 2020.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected: (including any Risk Implications)

N/A

What will it cost and how will it be financed?

(A) Revenue Costs N/A

(B) Capital Costs N/A

Implications of the Proposals:

Resource Implications (Financial, IT, Staffing and Assets): All Council resources required to support safeguarding arrangements for vulnerable children who did not attend school during the COVID-19 first lockdown, between March 2020 to June 2020 were contained within existing budget provision.
Legal Implications: COVID Act 2020 has removed statutory enforcement of school attendance.
Equality Implications: The actions undertaken encourage the most vulnerable to attend school and education settings.

Contribution to the Council's Core Purpose:

Encourages our most vulnerable pupils to attend school

Protect the most vulnerable: We know that children are safer when they are attending school and accessing education and we want all children to achieve their full potential.
Facilitate confident and resilient communities: As above
Commission, broker and provide core services: as above
Place – leadership and influencer: N/A
Drivers of change and reform: Actions undertaken contribute to the continuous improvement for school attendance of vulnerable pupil
Facilitate sustainable economic prosperity: N/A
Greater income for social investment: N/A
Cleaner Greener N/A

What consultations have taken place on the proposals and when?

(A) Internal Consultations

The Executive Director of Children Social Care and Education. Children’s Social Care, Virtual School, Early Help have been involved in the consultations and changes to practice in relation to school attendance for vulnerable children.

Report requested by the Persistent Absence Members Working Group.

Executive Director Corporate Resources and Customer Services (FD6269/21) and the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer (LD4470/21.) have been consulted and any comments have been incorporated into the report.

(B) External Consultations

None

Implementation Date for the Decision

Immediately following the Committee meeting.

Contact Officer:	Tracy McKeating
Telephone Number:	Tel: 0151 934 3269
Email Address:	tracy.mckeating@sefton.gov.uk

Appendices:

There are no appendices to this report

Background Papers:

There are no background papers available for inspection.

1. Introduction/Background

From 20th March 2020, parents were asked to keep their children at home, wherever possible. Schools remained open, only for children who are vulnerable, and children whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response and who cannot safely be cared for at home.

In Sefton, throughout the COVID-19 crisis, all schools and colleges remained open with a significant number remaining open during the school holiday periods, with some schools staying open during bank holidays as well. As part of the partnership response to COVID-19 an ‘Education cell’ was established, providing business continuity, planning, advice, support and local information to support families ensuring that schools received the relevant public health advice. As part of this business continuity framework a specific task group was put into place to review vulnerable children and school attendance, to ensure the interventions would be fit-for-purpose for responding to the pandemic.

2. VULNERABLE PUPILS GROUP ATTENDING SCHOOL GROUP:

- 2.1 A weekly meeting was put into place in April 2020, to look at the attendance of vulnerable children. The membership included Children's Social Care, Early Help/school attendance, Virtual School and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).
- 2.2 A checklist register was submitted weekly including those children who were Looked After, or known to the partnership through Child Protection, Children in Need, or Early Help and those that schools had identified as vulnerable. The checklist also enabled schools to add comments and informed the Council what interventions/support has been offered for those children not attending. Children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) were dealt with by the Special Educational Needs Service through the completion of risk assessments with schools.
- 2.3 There was an expectation that vulnerable children who have a Social Worker and those children supported by an EHCP Plan will attend an education setting, so long as they do not have significant underlying health conditions that put them at risk.
- 2.4 Those children with an EHCP were risk-assessed by School in consultation with the Local Authority (LA) and parents, to decide whether they need to continue to be offered a School place in order to meet their needs; or, whether they can safely have their needs met at home.
- 2.5 This weekly meeting has focused on monitoring attendance and identifying what some of the barriers have been for children eligible to access a school place. If any challenges have arisen in relation to children not attending school, one of the groups have addressed this. Good practice across schools and other services supporting the child has also been identified.

3. ATTENDANCE INTERVENTIONS

- 3.1 From Monday, 23rd March 2020 until schools reopened for all pupils, the DfE confirmed schools were not required take the normal attendance register. Schools had to submit a status form daily, that contained the data in relation to vulnerable and key worker children.
- 3.2 The attendance legislation was changed by the Coronavirus Act 2020, to ensure that parents do not commit an offence if their child is not attending school regularly.
- 3.3 Schools and education settings had to produce an addendum Child Protection/Safeguarding Policy outlining the arrangements for monitoring children who were not in school and the contact arrangements.
- 3.4 Children open to Social Care were visited by Social Workers. Those supported by Early Help Plans were monitored by Early Help with both door step visits and digital interventions. To address any concerns about those children who were not

on a plan, a team of Early Help School Attendance Workers visited them undertaking door step visits.

- 3.5 The School Attendance Panel function had to be adapted. Prior to calling the School Attendance Panel meeting, the school must submit evidence to show that they have tried to improve the pupil's attendance. The LA invites the parent and the school to a panel meeting. At the meeting, the School Attendance Lead issues the parent with a formal warning and advises that the LA will instigate legal proceedings if attendance does not improve. The pupil and parents are given the opportunity to explain the reasons for the poor attendance and explore any ways in which the Panel can provide support. Addressing bullying is embedded into this process. The Panel then produces an action plan based on the strengths-based model of practice. If the family are involved with other agencies they are encouraged to attend. As there is a pandemic this panel has not been able to go ahead. What has been agreed is that the attendance lead will see these families in the family well-being centre which will help address problems that may be beyond the capacity of the school to deal with unaided.
- 3.6 To assist in the promotion of attendance of vulnerable children, a leaflet aimed at encouraging parents and children to see the benefits of their attendance at school, has been sent out.

Correspondence has been sent to parents encouraging children to attend. Promotional materials have been posted on social media platforms including videos reassuring parents about safety measures have been produced by children in schools and the 0 to 19 service school nurses.

- 3.7 Due to the COVID pandemic we could not have the face- to -face annual attendance network. An attendance surgery was set up virtually whereby schools can come and discuss school attendance issues. The surgeries are aimed at school strategic leader for attendance and the school attendance administrator. This provided an opportunity to share good practice and develop strategies for schools to implement and report back on, in subsequent Network meetings.

4. CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION

- 4.1 Sefton Council continued to operate the Children Missing Education procedures and all children who came into the LA requiring a school place accessed an education setting without delay.

5. ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION

- 5.1 The numbers of families requesting to home educate their children increased significantly from September re-opening of schools and through the Autumn term. Sefton had an overall increase of 25% by the end of December. The total number of Elective Home Education new requests received since term started is four which means our current total in Sefton currently stands at 200. This would indicate that the rapid rate of deregistration from September has gradually reduced though numbers have remained high overall. 63 pupils have been closed to EHE since

September 2020 through re-engagement with school settings or moving out of area.

Although numbers remain significant and of concern, this increase has been below the national average reported increase of 38% (ACDS Annual Home Education Survey).

- 5.2 A significant number of parents/carers were citing anxiety about COVID19 as the reason for choosing to home educate. Covid related concern is now ranked third in the list of reasons that parents provide for requesting deregistration.
- 5.3 We have asked our headteachers to work with parents to ensure that they fully understand that by electing to home educate, their child will be removed from a school roll and will therefore not access the school's remote learning offer. We have requested that headteachers ensure parents have access to the 2019 DFE guidance to parents considering elective home education. Heads are actively encouraged to inform EHE officers in situations where parents are contemplating EHE to ensure that where possible any issues or disputes can be resolved.
- 5.4 For all new de-registrations, families are being contacted by LA officers who during initial contacts discuss with parents the reasons why they want to home educate. Staff ensure that parents who are not sending their child to school because they are anxious about Covid 19 related issues understand their options and the implications of continuing to provide home education. The team also provide information to parents on home education and continue to establish whether the education provided by the parent is suitable for the child.
- 5.5 Sefton has a clear policy on EHE which is in line with DFE guidance for Local Authorities and for Parents.
- 5.6 Arrangements are in place through the In Year Fair Access Protocol to return children to school should elective home education be deemed as unsuitable or if parents change their minds about their decision.

6. AUTUMN TERM

- 6.1 During the Autumn term despite being in tier 3 Sefton overall absence in schools and education settings was above the national average.