

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 25 March 2024 at 6.00pm
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

- Present:** Councillor Hinchliff (Chair);
Councillors K Allcock, Chambers, Hemingway, Pall and
Weston.
- In Attendance:** Rt Hon Jacqui Smith (Chair of Sandwell Children's Trust
Board) and Emma Taylor (Chief Executive of Sandwell
Children's Trust).
- Observing:** Cllr Davies.
- Officers:** Sally Giles (Assistant Director - Strategic Partnerships and
Commissioning), John Baker (Service Manager –
Development Planning and Building Consultancy), Gillian
Ming (Children's Safeguarding Partnership Business
Manager), Rosa Da Silva (Corporate Parenting Project
Officer) and Alex Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

10/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashraf,
Choudry, Mayo and Uddin. Apologies were also received from
Revd Canon Barrie Scott (co-opted member).

11/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.



12/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2024 are approved as a correct record.

13/24 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

14/24 **Sandwell Children’s Trust Performance Update**

The Board considered the latest Performance Update from the Sandwell Children’s Trust. The Trust was contractually obliged to report to the Board twice a year, although since the last update in September 2023 (see Minute No. 31/23) the Trust had also welcomed Board members to visit its offices and speak to Trust staff.

The Chair and Chief Executive of the Trust attended the meeting to present the update and answer questions from the Board.

The Trust’s Transformation Programme had been developed to take it through to the next stage of improvement. The Programme was wide-ranging and cohesive and linked to a programme of budget saving measures.

It was noted that despite workforce pressures, the Trust was able to evidence improvements over the last 6-12 months. It was acknowledged that this needed to continue.

Key headlines from the presentation included:-

Workforce issues remained challenging, but there had been progress, with both recruitment and retention rates improved, along with a lower agency worker rate. It was reported that the vacancy rate had reduced considerably and was now better than Sandwell’s statistical neighbours and the England average.



There remained a need to reduce caseloads however as these remained above averages. This was partially caused by the success of recruiting staff who had trained and completed their first year of social work with the Trust; caseloads had to be carefully managed for this cohort of staff.

Referral rates to the Trust had remained fairly steady overall and remained lower than statistical neighbour, regional and national averages. Re-referrals had increased six months ago, but with work this was now on a downward trajectory.

Timeliness of assessments had decreased, but was on an improved trajectory and was better than statistical neighbours, regional and national averages. Improved oversight and a stable workforce would help to ensure quality of assessments continued to improve.

Section 47 enquiries were on a downward trajectory. The Trust and partners were shifting to a stronger focus on risk, with a collective decision with partners on how to best support the family rather than automatically proceed to an investigation.

Child Protection Plans had experience a slight increase, but with stronger procedures this was now reducing, after a peak in January 2024. This peak triggered a deep dive review which identified some causes including larger families involves and older children experiencing exploitation and needing a different pathway to support.

All children on plans for more than two years had been reviewed and were in process where specialist assessments were needed.

There had been an increase in late 2023 of Children in Care, with a sharp increase in unaccompanied asylum seeker children. The downward trajectory had now resumed and rate of entrance into care was lower than Sandwell's statistical neighbours.

The Trust worked with the Council and local businesses around apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers. It was acknowledged that emotional stability and confidence could be barriers for care



leavers accessing such opportunities and the Trust and Council were working in partnership around an Emotional Wellbeing Service.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were provided and issues highlighted:-

- Members highlighted the impressive participation work that was carried out with young people in care and care leavers.
- Feedback from the Scrutiny Board's visit to the Trust was positive, in particular the feedback provided to members by Trust employees.
- The impact of the Workforce Strategy was positive, but there remained challenged in the Child Protection and Court Teams. The reduction in agency staff would achieve some savings and the Trust was working with the Council on this.
- The Trust had launched a House Project with a national charity which would work with individual care leavers taking a bespoke approach, working with them to enable them to move into their own home with wraparound support. An update on this would be brought with the next scheduled report from the Trust to the Scrutiny Board.
- Members felt that the visits to Sandwell Children's Trust should take place annually, and the next visit should include the Intervention Hub.

Resolved that the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board undertake annual visits to the Sandwell Children's Trust.

15/24

Residential Sufficiency and Audit of Planning Applications for Children's Homes

The Board received a report in response to questions from members about the sufficiency of residential provision and the planning application processes for Children's Homes. Whilst it was acknowledged that there were reasons why some children and young people needed to be placed outside of Sandwell, it was



important to secure suitable accommodation in, or close to, the borough for most children and young people in care.

There had been a 67% increase nationally in children living in residential placements, which had a huge cost implication, putting pressure on finances.

The Board was informed that there had been 19 applications for children's homes over the last two years – 11 of these were for a change of use and 8 were for lawful development certificates.

Nine of the change of use applications had been refused following significant numbers of local objections. In addition statutory consultees such as Highways or Public Health raised objections where there were specific concerns related to their areas.

The development of webpage with specific advice around children's home planning applications was being considered by Planning and Children's Services to help applicants understand and better communicate to their local communities their proposals.

Unless there were Sandwell children in care in a children's home the Council would not have oversight of that facility as it was the responsibility of Ofsted.

There was a project underway to look at potential in-house residential homes and an options paper was being developed following discussions with other local authorities on their approaches.

Resolved that:-

- (1) the Cabinet be asked to include in the options appraisal looking into residential children's homes, good practice from other local authorities and partnership working between the Council and the Sandwell Children's Trust to inform the appraisal and any future decision making on the topic over the next 9 months;



- (2) the Assistant Chief Executive and Interim Director of Children's Services include in the Corporate Parenting Training offer placement sufficiency, including the planning process and internal provision and the role of ward councillors as advocates.

16/24

Corporate Parenting Board 12 Month Update

The Board received an update on the work of the Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) over the last 12 months. This included an overview of the areas that were included in the CPB's remit:-

- The child and young person's voice
- Education
- Skills, Employment and Training
- Physical Health
- Emotional, Wellbeing and Mental Health
- Access to Services
- Safeguarding, Fostering and Stability
- Preparation for Adulthood

Over the last 12 months the CPB had refreshed how it operated, taking a more strategic approach with annual work programmes planned out. The work programme included deep dives which brought partners together, carried out self-evaluations and identified ways of making improvements.

The key areas of focus for the CPB in the past 12 months were:-

- The education, employment and training of care experienced young people, age 19+
- Placement sufficiency including Foster Friendly Sandwell: The development and implementation of Foster Friendly Sandwell programme to aid with the recruitment and retention of highly skilled and able foster carers for Sandwell's children in care
- Physical, emotional wellbeing and mental health provisions to support children in care and care experienced young adults
- Access to Services: Local offer



- Enabling elected members and partners to have a better understanding of their service areas and provide effective change

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were provided and issues highlighted:-

- Numbers of care leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET) were higher than statistical neighbours and other West Midlands authorities. Anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder were reported to particularly impact on care leavers accessing opportunities.
- All Council reports now included implications of the proposals in relation to Corporate Parenting.
- In Corporate Parenting Week 2023 a piece of work was done by Assistant Directors across the Council, following a discussion with an apprentice who was a care leaver. Corporate Parenting was now embedded in business planning.
- For Corporate Parenting Week 2024 there would be a campaign to raise awareness amongst officers, elected members and partners about the corporate parent role. The theme of the week would be “Less Corporate, More Parent”.
- Health partners engaged well with the Corporate Parenting role.
- Issues raised for care leavers included a lack of birthday and Christmas presents and no allowance.
- There was an annual training programme available for elected members and partners, which embedded Total Respect training elements, key to which was understanding that a child is first a child, and a child in care second.
- A report was scheduled to go to Council in July 2024 seeking approval to locally classify ‘care experienced’ as a protected characteristic. Members were supportive of this initiative.
- There was a working group with Sandwell Children’s Trust and Housing as part of the Foster Friendly Sandwell workstream. This would look at ways to help support fostering within the borough.



- It was suggested that care experienced young people could access work experience opportunities as part of the Holiday Activities and Food programme.
- The Chief Executive was working with local businesses to identify suitable training or work experience opportunities. He was looking to embed this within the social value elements of contracts with the Council.
- It was acknowledged that diversity was vital to providing foster placements in a wide variety of cultural settings. Sandwell Children's Trust confirmed they were actively recruiting foster carers from diverse backgrounds.

17/24

Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2022/23

The Board received the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership's annual report for 2022/23. The Partnership included the Council, Sandwell Children's Trust, West Midlands Police and NHS partners amongst others.

The report provided an overview of the work of the Partnership including its core functions, priority areas and the views of the Independent Chair and Scrutineer. The report outlined achievements made in 2022/23 which included the formation of a Sandwell Safeguarding Network group with representation from faith and voluntary sector organisations across Sandwell.

The three priority areas were:-

- Tackling Neglect
- Child Exploitation
- Early Help

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were provided and issues highlighted:-

- The Early Help Strategy had been refreshed and awareness raising was taking place with practitioners, but there were still



too many referrals without evidence of early help being offered and provided.

- There was a need to rebalance children’s social care from crisis intervention which was high-cost, to planned and integrated support from an early stage.
- A series of seven minute briefings had been held to disseminate learning from regional and national reviews.
- Alongside the Sandwell Safeguarding Network a cultural competence training programme was developed. This commenced in December 2023 and had been regionally recognised.
- The standardised tool for neglect was underutilised. This was due to staff receiving the necessary training and then leaving Sandwell. The aim was for all frontline practitioners to be trained going forward.
- Although it was recognised that the majority of case referrals around Domestic Abuse would come from the Police, members sought clarity around numbers of referrals from other sources (such as Schools, Black Country Women’s Aid or other voluntary sector organisations).

18/24

Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations

The Board noted progress on actions and recommendations from previous meetings.

Meeting ended at 8.22pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk

