

# Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 9 September 2024 at 6.00 pm**  
**in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

- Present:** Councillor Hinchliff (Chair)  
Councillors Fitzgerald, Ashraf, Chambers, Choudhry, J Giles, Haq and Kordala.  
Co-opted member - Barrie Scott (Church of England Representative).
- Officers:** Sally Giles (Director of Children and Education Services); Mandip Chahal (Interim Assistant Director Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement); Maxine Burrows (Family Hubs Strategic Lead); Claire Tate (Senior Commissioning Manager for Statutory Services) and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).
- In attendance:** Emma Taylor (Chief Executive SCT), Tara Malik (Director of Resources SCT) and Simon Green (Adoption@Heart - Head of Service).

19/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Khan, Pall, and Mayo. Apologies were also received from Katherine Parks (Co-opted member).

20/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

21/24 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 March 2024 are approved as a correct record.

22/24 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

23/24 **Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2023/2024**

The Board received the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2023/2024. Adoption@Heart was a Regional Adoption Agency, providing adoption services on behalf of the City of Wolverhampton Council, Sandwell Children's Trust, Dudley Council and Walsall Council. The provision of an adoption service was a statutory requirement, and the Council was required to monitor the provision of adoption services. The agency had been operated since April 2019, following a government direction for all local authorities to deliver their adoption services through a regional agency, funded by the Department for Education.

The year 2023/24 had been positive with a number of achievements including:

- reversing the downward trend in adopter recruitment;
- financial management;
- tracking and management improvements;
- workforce stability;
- governance strengthening.

The key priorities of the adoption agency in 2024/25 were:

- focusing on in-house placements and reducing reliance on interagency placements;
- recruit more adopters than ever before, building on the successful strategies implemented in 2023/24;
- addressing the challenges around adoption support services;
- improving processes and practices to facilitate more in-house placements;
- innovation and collaboration with other regional adoption agencies;
- improving service quality through enhancing the participation and involvement of adopted people, adopters and their families in services.

Budget management continued to be a focus for the adoption agency, and despite the possible overspend, a diligent recovery plan and robust financial management alleviated concerns and the agency concluded the year on a positive note.

Over the last five years there had been an overall decline in children leaving care achieving permanence through adoption, special guardianship and child arrangements order or returning home. However, the highest decline for these children had been in adoption orders.

Adopters were in greatest demand for the children who typically wait the longest to be adopted - children over 5, children under 5 with multiple needs, brother and sister groups, and children from Black and mixed heritage backgrounds.

The Ending Racial Disparity in Adoption report conducted by the agency noted that:

- Black children were overrepresented in the care system;
- Black children waited longer for adoption than white children;
- Black children were the least likely to achieve the lifetime stability and permanency of a family through adoption.

At the end of March 2024 there were 808 children in care at a rate of 94.1 per 10,000 children. At the end of March there were 31 Sandwell children with a Placement order waiting to be placed. Of these 27 had been waiting a minimum of 90 days since their placement order.

The number of children adopted in the 12-month period 2023/24 had fallen compared with previous year's performance. In Sandwell 17 children were adopted in 2023/24 compared to 34 in 2022/23. The overall number of adoptions across Adoption@Heart had fallen compared to 2022/23, from 103 to 70 in 2023/24.

There had been an increase in the number of adopters approved in 2023/24, with performance in 2023/24 at its highest for the last 3 years and second highest level since the inception of Adoption@Heart.

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

- there continued to be difficulties and challenges around the adoption for those looked after children from an ethnic minority background;
- the agency was committed to ensuring all levels of the service provided the same outcomes to all children regardless of race and ethnic identity;

- the agency was working to address any ongoing issues and concerns and ensure all barriers were understood and acted upon;
- it was important that all aspects of the adoption process was accessible to everyone and potential adopters could see themselves within the process;
- increasing the number of adopters was an ongoing change, there had been an increase in 2023/24 but it remained a focus and area for improvement.

24/24

## **Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update**

The Board considered the Sandwell Children's Trust's Annual Review and latest Performance Update from the Sandwell Children's Trust. The Trust was contractually obliged to report to the Board twice a year, the last update being in March 2024 (see Minute No.14/24).

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

The Chair of Sandwell Children's Trust the Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith had recently stepped down following her appointment as Minister of State at the Department of Education, the new interim chair was Linda Sanders who had been a non-executive director at the Trust since it was established.

Providing an overview of performance to the Board, the following key headlines were noted:

- workforce challenges continued to improve with the vacancy rate now below the national average;
- average workloads remained higher than the national average;
- the referral rate over the preceding 12-months had been 496 per 10,000, the rate was below the West Midlands and national average;
- re-referral rates remained between 20% and 23% over the preceding 6 months, above the West Midlands average but below national average;
- single assessment completed within 45 working days had ranged between 72% to 92%, challenges had been addressed and the continued improvement was indicative of more consistent decision making at front door;

- the average for Section 47 Enquiries was 163 per 10,000, the team had developed more confidence in managing risk, and the results were below regional and national average;
- initial child protection conferences completed within 15 working days had equated to 86% over 12-months which was above national average;
- child protection plans had decreased since January following a deep dive into practice and increased management oversight, the number was as of July 2024 49.4 per 10,000 which was below national average;
- children subject of a child protection plan for 9 months +, 12 Months +, 15 months + and 2 + years was as of July 2024 150, 92, 45 and 20 respectively;
- the 20 children on child protection plans over 2 years all had senior management oversight and majority were in pre-proceedings;
- there were 817 children in care in July 2024 which was a reduction from 837 in May 2024;
- the number of children in care was lower than statistical neighbours;
- exits from care was 25.3 per 10,000, which was on par with the West Midlands authorities;
- 11.4% of children had 3+ moves in last 12 months which was above the national and regional average;
- 64% of moves were for positive reasons, such as returning home or being adopted;
- for care experienced young people, 17-18yrs- 67% were in employment, education or training, 19-21yrs- 40.8% were in employment, education or training (59.2% were not in employment, education or training);
- care experienced young people accommodation rates for- 19-21yrs was 90.1%;
- residential placements and sufficiency was a continued focus and area for improvement;
- there was an aim to reduce the proportion of young people placed outside of borough;
- through influencing the market, it was hoped that the Trust would build partnerships, shape provider development, and develop Sandwell's own children's residential provision;
- the sufficiency strategy would allow for detailed data, demographics and intelligence information to understand Sandwell children's care needs.

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

- the Trust had a good participation/voice team ensuring service users and those involved with services had the opportunity to feedback, the Corporate Parenting Board also allowed children and young people to feedback to the Trust and service providers;
- there was no correlation between the number of referrals and the number of staff, however, workforce challenges can impact assessment timelines and this was understood and mitigated against;
- challenges around assessment timelines was as a result of the specialist teams being understaffed, areas for improvement had however, been identified and mitigation had been put in place;
- the workforce was not at full capacity; however, it had improved significantly in recent months;
- a deep-dive into those young people not in employment, education or training would be beneficial to the Board;
- a joint task and finish group between the Trust and Council was in the process of putting together a strategy around the establishment of residential care homes within Sandwell;
- the decrease in those children and young people with protection plans was a result of a change in approach, many children and young people had been on plans when they didn't need to be, the service had also improved its risk management and was able to support children and young people without a plan.

The Board received an update on Sandwell Children's Trust Transformation Programme and noted the following points:

- the Trust was underpinned by its five priorities driving change and improvement;
  - People – the priority would develop the workforce strategy, enable the Trust to 'grow its own' and allow staff to develop and build a career, being supported in their work and development;
  - Practice – the Trust would champion a Partnership Practice Model, plans and interventions would work to make a difference to children and young people's lives and enable the correct supervision to improve outcomes;
  - Partnerships – services would be designed to reflect local and individual need, it would ensure an inclusive and culturally sensitive approach, it was important to engage with families early to provide the best outcomes;

- Integrated Approach to Care – data would continue to be used to understand need, a sufficiency strategy would enable the Trust to understand needs across Sandwell, there would be a focus on practice, process and systems, preparing young people for adulthood;
- Striving for Excellence – the Trust would continue to work with children and young people in co-production of their support, transformation would utilise technology to deliver better outcomes and a focus would be on the experience of service users and how this can be improved.
- the transformation programme provided the strategic framework and narrative for the Trust’s development;
- the transformation programme linked directly with the Trust’s Medium-Term Financial Plan, with savings plan activities aligned and embedded within the programme;
- around 30 projects were anticipated to improve all aspects of the Trust.

25/24

## **Family Help Update**

The Board received an update on the Children and Families Strategic Partnership in the development and implementation of a Family Help system in Sandwell.

The Children Act 2004 established the concept of ‘Early Help’. It required local authorities to coordinate activities by the Partnership to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Working Together was statutory guidance that set out how all agencies and professionals should work together to promote children's welfare and protect them from abuse and neglect. The most recent update was launched in December 2023 and introduced some significant changes compared to previous iterations of the guidance.

Working Together 2023 brought together new and existing guidance to emphasise that successful outcomes for children depended upon strong multi-agency partnership working and principles for working with parents and carers which focused on the importance of building positive and trusting relationships and expectations for multi-agency working that applied to all individuals, agencies and organisations working with children, young people and families.

Both Working Together and the Government response 'Stable Homes Built on Love' to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care emphasised the need for a strengths-based approach to working with children and families and providing support before the needs of children and families escalated to the point of needing statutory services.

Work had been taking place in Sandwell in response to the release of Working Together 2023 and Stable Homes Built on Love. A bid was submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) in December 2023 for Sandwell to become a Families First for Children Pathfinder, this bid was agreed by the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership statutory partners and had 'buy-in' from the voluntary sector. The aim of the pathfinder was to test new ways of working to help more children stay with their families, and further strengthen the Early Help partnership to ensure families suffering from issues such as domestic abuse, addiction, and poor mental health, could receive Family Help at the earliest opportunity.

Sandwell received positive feedback on the bid from the DfE but was ultimately not successful, however statutory partners agreed to take forward the key principles of the bid and move towards a 'Family Help' system that supported more integrated, community services and helping families at an earlier stage.

The Homes Built on Love, Working Together 2023 response by Government set out the shared responsibility across the sector with clear roles for multi-agency working which would enable support and protection in and outside of the home. The concept of Family Help would bring together multi-agency working within wider family networks. The principals for working with parents and carers enabling positive, trusting, co-operative relationships, and tailored support, in helping families stay in their communities with the help they needed.

Family Help was built on shared responsibility; successful outcomes for children depended on strong multi-agency partnership across the whole system. Multi-agency expectations were that everyone was involved in safeguarding and child protection from all relevant services and sectors. It was important that children and young people were identified as needing help at the earliest opportunity and provided with the necessary support. Support would be provided across agencies utilising collaboration, co-ordination and cooperation.



The Early Help Strategy 2022-24 committed the Council to greater collaboration and intervention for families who needed help at the earliest opportunity – ‘the right support, at the right time, in the right place’. The outcome of the strategy was to strengthen the Early Help Partnership and enable it to mature and set an example of collaboration and challenge.

Sandwell had developed the ‘Family Hubs Programme’ to improve access and support for those families who needed it. Sandwell had received funding to deliver the Family Hub 3-year programme between 2022-2025. The vision was to provide families with the integrated support they needed to care for their children from conception to the start of adulthood, and to enable parents to establish a firm foundation for their children, from which to meet their full potential in life.

The creation of the Family Hubs had enabled:

- a published start for life offer and strong partnerships with Health colleagues, delivering services in Family Hubs;
- seven family hubs, two satellites, seven spokes and a mobile spoke offer with clear branding and a website providing a range of support and information;
- a hybrid approach to programme delivery includes home visits, face to face and virtual support;
- the family hub workforce to receive a wide range of training to support meeting the needs of families;
- a wide and varied universal offer across our Family Hub model. The reach had increased by over 4000 in 12 months;
- developed 14 new partnerships, working together to meet the needs of families.

The Family Hubs would enable a community first model that was centred around the six towns of Sandwell, the Hub allowed for the co-location of support teams and enabled the Hubs to target early help and specialist service intervention.

Family Help would enable the partnership STAR practice model where, through strength based practice, trauma informed practice and relationship based practice, a wide range of intervention could be offered including participation and coproduction, motivational interviewing, wraparound support and supervision.

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

- a joint partnership approach with health colleagues would enable a more joined up approach when it came to mental health support;
- a culture change was required and was being encouraged with colleagues within the school sector enabling them to refer and support children and young people at the first sign of any difficulties;
- better communication was required with school partners to ensure the best outcomes for the joined-up approach and for children and young people;
- the application to become a Child Friendly Borough was at the heart of all work to ensure services reflected the needs of children and young people in Sandwell.

26/24      **Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

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

27/24      **Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan as it related to Children, Young People and Education.

28/24      **Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2024/25**

The Board noted the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2024/25 and the suggested items that had been agreed at the Work Programming meeting on 25 July 2024.

**Resolved** that Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2024/25 is approved.

Meeting ended at 9.35pm

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