

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

Monday, 30 June 2025 at 6.00 pm at Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury, B69 3DB

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Chair)

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| <p>Councillors: Ashraf (Vice-Chair) Chambers S Gill Kordala Owen</p> | <p>Councillors: Pall Randhawa Uppal Williams</p> <p>Barrie Scott (Church of England Co-opted Member)</p> |
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In attendance: Jevon Levy (Forum for Independent Young Adults).

Officers: Sally Giles (Director of Children and Education Services); Judith Nash (Interim Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion); Mandip Chahal (Interim Assistant Director Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement); Samantha Harman (Commissioning Manager Strategy and Partnerships); and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

21/25 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

22/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

23/25 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2025 are approved as a correct record.

24/25 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

Education Health and Care Plan and SEND Update

The Board considered the Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Update.

Sandwell had experienced a significant increase in Education Health and Care needs assessment requests, with projections indicating over 1,200 new applications in 2025. The number of children and young people with Education Health and Care Plans in the borough had reached 4,359 in June 2025, a 75% increase over the last five years. This growth had placed substantial strain on the Education Health and Care team's capacity to meet statutory deadlines and manage casework effectively. Caseloads were significantly above national benchmarks, and timeliness for issuing plans remained below target.

In response, a 12-month recovery plan had been being implemented in partnership with education, health and care stakeholders. Key actions included the recruitment of interim staff, improvements to data and communication systems, and the development of the Additionally Vulnerable Learners Pathway to prioritise support for children with the most complex needs, including those who were looked after.

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

- six additional interim staff members had been recruited from January 2025 to deal with the ongoing backlog within the EHCP service;
- the backlog was being addressed and the trajectory was that it would be cleared by the end of July 2025;
- a different approach had been undertaken when undertaking Annual Reviews of EHCPs; SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) within schools had been trialling undertaking the reviews and making any amendments to the EHCP within the review meeting;
- the new approach was to be officially launched in September 2025, and monitored to ensure the best approach for children and young people was undertaken;
- the backlog of EHCP assessments had been brought down from 510 in January 2025 to 318 by June 2025; the team were confident that the backlog would be fully resolved by the end of July;
- the changes to how the Annual Reviews were undertaken emphasised the level of support the child/family needed, for example:
 - Group A – were those children whose EHCP was not subject to any major or significant change, outcomes and decisions would be agreed at the meeting with the child and family;
 - Group B – would be those children and young people that required additional support for which officers would be present at the meeting;
 - Group C – would deal with high level decisions that would require multiagency involvement / three way approach.
- once the backlog had been addressed the team would be undertaking a restructure to better position staff to address service need;
- the EHCP team needed to be fit for purpose and have the capacity to address ongoing and future challenges;

- the new working model that had been implemented distributed workloads more equitably, which had reduced individual caseloads to an average of 370. This was working towards the national benchmark of 150–200;
- the team was organised to undertake the statutory responsibility, ongoing challenges were national and regional and not unique to Sandwell;
- work was underway to address shortcomings, the inclusion strategy would identify areas for improvement and allow Sandwell to develop the right capacity within the system to support children and young people;
- the increase in children and young people with SEND had increased since the pandemic, often the children and young people had additional and complex needs associated with autism and social and mental health challenges;
- the sufficiency strategy was under development which would set out a clear five year plan and ensure the correct provision was provided;
- the Council worked with SENCO's proactively; spotlight sessions were being held regularly to address ongoing challenges and share best practice. Over 100 SENCO's had joined the June 2025 meeting;
- the number one priority was stabilising the EHCP service and ensuring it operated effectively and to statutory deadlines;
- systems in place had allowed the service to operate more effectively, since January 70% of all EHCP assessments had been completed within the statutory deadlines;
- EHCP assessments were a joint effort and required joined up working with partners across Sandwell;
- responses from partners had increased enabling the meeting of EHCP assessment deadlines;
- the graduated approach worked to enable support children and young people in mainstream, early inclusion was now sought to meeting needs in mainstream;
- it was important that legislation and the Code of Practice were followed and statutory responsibilities met;
- heads and SENCOs were engaged to ensure improvements were seen across all settings;
- through an EHCP schools can be directed to take a child; children and young people would often be directed to schools that could meet their needs, where needs cannot be met in borough, out of borough placements would be sought;
- an EHCP would provide additional funding, however, this would not be one to one support in most cases but rather shared support;
- work was underway to support schools prior to an EHCP being agreed, and support was been provided to schools to enable them to understand the EHCP process;
- for those who struggled in a school setting, partnership working was undertaken to address underlying concerns and develop a learning pathway often with the support of Pupil Referral Units;
- the Sufficiency Strategy would work towards reducing the number of children and young people placed out of borough;
- the system as it was, was often reliant on emails, but work was underway to change and adapt to how customers interacted with the service,

- the use of SharePoint was being explored, allowing a space where information could be shared and enable staff to focus on case work; online platforms were also being explored to enable a more streamlined service;
- artificial intelligence was being explored as a means to speed up assessments and reduce EHCP assessment timescales;
- artificial intelligence would enable the baseline of assessments and reviews to be completed which would then be added to, to reflect the individual and personal information of those accessing the service;
- a service dashboard had been developed that would allow the service to access live data and identify gaps in delivery;
- work had been done to ensure staff were supported in addressing their workload and training had been established to support new starters within the service.

26/25

Sandwell's Children and Families Strategy

The Board considered the Children and Families Strategic Partnership – Children and Families Strategy.

The Children and Families Strategy outlined Sandwell's commitment to ensuring all children and young people in Sandwell had the opportunity to thrive. Developed in collaboration with key partners and informed by children, young people, families and communities it set out a shared vision for a future where every child was safe, as healthy as possible, happy, and achieved their full potential.

Sandwell faced significant challenges as one of the most deprived areas in England. Many children and young people lived in poverty, experienced poor health outcomes and barriers to education. Children and young people's perception of Sandwell as a place, remained negative, attributed to levels of crime and deprivation and the ongoing cost of living crisis impacting on them and their families' daily lives.

The Children and Families Strategy was an overarching strategy and the mechanism for delivering Sandwell's commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. It was informed by legislation and statutory guidance and reflected the forthcoming national reform agendas across education, children's social care and health.

The strategy was underpinned by a shared approach to working with families within a trauma-informed way. The ST*R practice model focused on building trusted relationships with families, understanding the trauma they may have experienced and the impact this has had. This enabled them to confidently seek support when needed to achieve lasting, positive change and ensure more children and young people remained safely at home within their own families and communities.

The four priority areas of Family Help, SEND, Early Years and Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing had been agreed with partners to work on collectively over the next three years and these were underpinned by four distinct, yet aligned delivery plans that would deliver on the Council's intentions.

The Children and Families Strategic Partnership, as the accountable body, would oversee the implementation of the Strategy within the four priority areas, reporting to the Health and Wellbeing Board.

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

- the Children's and Families Strategy provided the overarching aim of the partnership, while the four key areas for delivery would each have their own delivery plan;
- the delivery plans had been developed by the partnership across Sandwell, each would work to improve outcomes for children and young people;
- there would be key performance indicators against the outcomes within the noted plans;
- the Partnership which brought together partners from across the Sandwell Children's Trust, Health and Police met quarterly to assess the impact of the Strategy and address any concerns;
- the Sandwell Children and Families Strategic Partnership brought together senior representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies who provided services for children, young people, and families;
- four priority areas had been agreed with partners, each with their own distinct plans which included Family Help, SEND, Early Years and Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing.

(Councillor Williams left the meeting)

27/25

Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2025/26

The Board considered the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2025/26 and the suggested items that had been agreed at the Work Programming meeting on 2 June 2025.

Resolved:-

- (1) that Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2025/26 is approved;
- (2) that the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board establish a working group to undertake a scrutiny review into the Transition to Adulthood services for young people who we care for and those who are care experienced.

Meeting ended at 7.15 pm

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