

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

Monday, 8 September 2025 at 6.00 pm at Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury, B69 3DB

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Chair)

Councillors: Ashraf (Vice-Chair) S Gill Kordala	Councillors: Owen Uppal Williams
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Officers: Sally Giles (Executive Director of Children and Education); Mandip Chahal (Interim Assistant Director Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement); Claire Tate (Interim Commissioning Manager Children's Services); Lisa Harvey (Elective Home Education Service Manager) and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer)

In attendance: Dawn Dean (Service Manager – Adoption@Heart); Graham Archer (Chair – SCT); Emma Taylor (Chief Executive – SCT); and Steve Liley (Head of Transformation – SCT).

28/25 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Choudry, Pall and Randhawa.

29/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

30/25 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 June 2025 are approved as a correct record.

31/25 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

The Board received the Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2024/2025.

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 Service Manager of Adoption@Heart provided an overview of the annual review to the Board, where the following key headlines were noted:

- there were 76 adopter households approved in 2024/25 which was the highest number to date (17% increase on last year, 85% increase on two years ago);
- there had been an increase diversity, with 46% adopters from ethnic minority backgrounds;
- there had been 21 early permanence approvals, 26 for 0–2 year olds;
- there was a strong pipeline with increased enquiries and Return on Investment submissions;
- Adoption@Heart was bucking the national trend on recruitment, which had been a result of a lot of focused work;
- there had been 126 Adoption Orders granted in 2024/25 which was a 59.5% increase from 2023/24;
- all four Black Country local authorities recorded increases in matches, placements and orders;
- timeliness delays were explained by a child-centred matching approach;
- Adoption@Heart was in a strong financial position, with an underspend in 2024/25:
 - monies associated with the underspend had been returned to the local authority;
 - reserves held by the adoption agency were protected;
 - investment continued across the adoption agency;
 - the financial position was allowing a better service to children and their families;
 - the adoption agency was focused on income generation;
 - there was a reduction in agency and inter-agency placement costs.
- there was a sufficiency and strategic focus on an increased in-house adopter pool;
- the reviews of the structure and funding formula confirmed that the model was working;
- it had been identified that there was a need for additional support capacity in Adoption Support and pan-regional commissioning;
- the Adoption@Heart 2025/26 priorities aligned with the national adoption vision;
- Sandwell had increase adoption orders in 2024/25 up to 29 when last year it was 18;

- there was a strong match to placement conversion and work continued to support and place children from minority backgrounds;
- there remained challenges around the ongoing delays in processing and placing of children and addressing the caseload complexity.

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

- timeliness in terms of matching children remained a significant challenge, while there was a sufficiency in improving adopters, having the right adopters for the right children was an ongoing challenge;
- a marketing campaign was being looked at to extend the offer for adopters, there was a focus on increasing the number of sibling groups and LGBTQ adopters;
- issues around timeliness were associated with the difficulty in placing children who had additional needs;
- Adoption@Heart met with partners on a monthly basis to consider the cases that were not progressing as expected, staff changes across the partners had meant the joint working approach had not been operating as effectively as it could have done;
- Adopter knowledge was arguably not as well known in Sandwell compared to other Black Country authorities, this was being addressed through the sharing of best practice between teams;
- best practice was shared across partner authorities where necessary to enhance practice across the region on a monthly basis, this was also done on an agency level at a national level at a quarterly basis;
- adopters were 'sold' to other Black Country partners and nationally, for example Sandwell had a higher rate of Asian adopters, which was not the case across Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton and other areas, so they can be sold to them which allowed Sandwell to receive interagency fees;
- in some cases adopters were looking for a particular child to adopt which may mean looking outside of their area to another agency, adopters were on a system called LinkMaker which was a national platform which identifies matches with children they were looking to place;
- Adoption@Heart made 31 inter agency placements through 2024/25;
- it was important to engage and approach inter agency adoptions in a timely manner to ensure matches were found;
- if adopters were being sold, it was being done to because it was deemed the most appropriate matching for the child and the adopters;
- any remaining money that was not spent during the financial year was depending on inter agency spend, how this would impact spend in 2025/26 was unclear as it was dependent on the number of inter agency fees;
- there were around 60 children who the agency were 'family finding' for on LinkMaker, as matches were unable to be found in Sandwell, if matches were found for these 60 children, it would have a significant impact on the budget;
- increasing the number of adopters in Sandwell would enable these adopters to be sold inter agency if matches were not found locally;
- the average number of days children have to wait to be adopted was 621 days which was the highest in the Black Country, the national target was 460 days;

- the number of days children wait to be adopted was dependent on the child's situation and if extended family links could be explored or not prior to a placement order being issued;
- the monthly meeting between the Black Country partners with the agency enabled them to address regional issues affecting adopters and the services provided across the region;
- to understand the situation in Sandwell and address any issues and concerns, the adoption agency along with the Sandwell Children's Trust and Sandwell Council meet regularly;
- adoption issues were also addressed between the Trust and the Council during contract meetings between the two as well as with partners;
- meetings across the Trust and adoption agency were minuted and decisions and actions recorded to ensure progress and quality assurance;
- any underspend incurred by the adoption agency returned to the Council as the contract for the agency was a joint arrangement with the Black Country authorities and it was not included within the Contract Sum.

33/25

Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Report / Performance Update

The Board considered the Sandwell Children's Trust's latest Performance Update from the Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT). The Trust was contractually obliged to report to the Board twice a year, the last update being in March 2025 (see Minute No.15/25).

The Chief Executive of SCT Provided an overview of SCT performance to the Board, where the following key headlines were noted:

- there had been an MHI Ofsted focused visit on the 15 and 16 April 2025, the visit had looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan, specifically:
 - children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions;
 - children in need at risk of family breakdown; and
 - the quality of decisions about entering care.
- there had been considerable progress in the recruitment and retention across the Trust workforce:
 - the overall vacancy rate had fallen from 11.11% in May 2022 to 2.4% in July 2025, similarly the vacancy rate amongst social workers had fallen from 24.3% in May to 7.4% in July 2025;
 - the permanent workforce rate had improved from 85.67% in May 2022 to 90.14% in July 2025;
 - agency works had dropped from 14.33% in May 2022 to 9.86 in July 2022 and amongst social workers had fallen from 25.5% in May 2022 to 18.1% in July 2025.
- in terms of initial contact and referrals, partnership working and the implementation of the Star model had had a positive impact on the 'front door';
- overall rate of referrals had stabilised and were lower than statistical neighbours, as well as the West Midlands and England averages;

- re-referral rates were in line with statistical neighbours, as well as the West Midlands and England averages over the last 6 months;
- there had been a total of 972 contacts in July 2025 which was down from 2405 in March 2024;
- re-referral rates were 19% in July 2025;
- the rate of single assessments per 10,000 over the last 12 months was 463, which had reduced, and was indicative of the impact of the partnership work and a very strong and consistent children's services front door;
- the timeliness of single assessments was above statistical neighbours, as well as the West Midlands and England averages. Performance between January to July 2025 was 87.2%;
- quality assurance showed that the quality of assessment continued to improve, which was indicative that practitioners were recognising and responding to risk, need, and vulnerability in a timely and purposeful way;
- Section 47 Enquiries' rate of 156.6 per 10,000 (based on last 12 months) was below statistical neighbours, as well as the West Midlands and England, the Trust continued to ensure that statutory intervention was appropriately targeted and trauma-informed;
- initial child protection conferences timeliness was 80% which was below the West Midlands average but slightly above statistical neighbours and England averages;
- there were 695 children with a children in need plan which was significantly below statistical neighbour averages but in line with the West Midlands and England averages;
- quality assurance indicated reduced instances of drift and delay due to more dynamic planning;
- since August 2024 there had been a notable reduction in the rate of Child Protection Plans (rate per 10000 children was at 44.6 per 10,000, which was below the statistical neighbour average and slightly above the England average);
- only 4 children (1%) had remained on a Child Protection Plan for 2+ years, which was below statistical neighbours, as well as the West Midlands and England averages;
- the number of children subject to a second or subsequent plan within two years remained exceptionally low, with only 1 child recorded evidencing the sustainability and effectiveness of initial interventions;
- the number of children we care for was 820 as of July 2025;
- the rate of children exiting care was 24.9 per 10,000 - below the statistical neighbour average of 36.6% and comparable to the West Midlands average of 26% indicating stable and planned transitions out of care;
- the rate of care entrants over the past 12 months was 27.9 per 10,000, evidencing effective family interventions when compared to the statistical neighbour average of 36.1 and aligning closely with the regional average of 27;
- the Intervention Hub continued to play a critical role in reducing the number of children entering care, through targeted support and early engagement with families (94% of children supported remained at home, and 98% children supported remained with their family);

- there were 411 care experienced young people aged 18 and over, all of whom were allocated a Personal Advisor, ensuring continuity of support into adulthood;
- suitable accommodation outcomes for 19–21-year-olds were above the statistical neighbour, West Midlands, and England averages, reflecting strong placement stability;
- education, employment and training for 19–21-year-olds was currently below statistical neighbours, West Midlands, and England averages, highlighting a need for strengthened understanding and multiagency intervention.

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

- there was a concern that the numbers of young people who were not in education, employment or training was too high, and the Board would continue to monitor and review progress to reduce the numbers;
- the 'grow our own' strategy had enabled the Trust to reduce the number of agency staff, newly qualified social workers and students had been welcomed into the Trust as part of this strategy and supported in their development to enable them to stay at the Trust;
- an academy within the Trust focused on developing newly qualified social workers and wider staff, allowing for continuous development and support programme;
- retention rates demonstrated a year on year improvement for staff and newly qualified social workers across the Trust;
- social workers wanted to be in an organisation that was well lead and where they would be well supported and able to do their best and it was the aim of the Trust to enable social workers to do that;
- visits undertaken by the Board to the Trust had enabled the Board to see the work that had gone into the development of the 'grow our own' strategy and how it enabled the development of staff;
- exit interviews allowed the Trust to identify any themes or recurring issues with staff who left the organisation;
- retaining staff was a national issues for the social care sector given the competition within the sector and number of options available;
- child protection and court teams continued to experience challenges in terms of staff retention;
- fewer children on child protection plans was a result of the Trusts approach to risk and how the Trust worked with regional partners, developing a good understanding across the partnership had allowed for a more confident approach to risk and need requirement that did not require a child protection plan;
- the STAR practice model allowed the Trust to be proactive and targeted in the support provided to children;
- it was always a balance when plans were reduced, and the Trust continued to work to ensure children received the right support to address need;
- quality assurance meant that the right children were on the right plans;
- the Step Aside project was a pilot assessment tool that enabled the Trust and partners to better assess the needs of children and young people and monitor and track their progression across services;

- it was hoped that use of the Step Aside project tools would allow for better understandings of a child and young person's progress and where appropriate step them down from services, which was good for the development of the child and young person, but also for the Trust in terms of monetary savings of which seven figure sums had been saved;
- questions were raised around the evidencing the stepping down of children and young people from protection plans, it was now standard practice that in stepping down children a closure form was completed, this form detailed what had been done to address the needs of the child or young person, what outstanding needs remained and what other service involvement was still required;
- following the Ofsted inspection in April 2025 a thematic review was undertaken across the Trust to allow for a deep dive into services and address any concerns raised;
- across teams the team manager had a responsibility to review quality, this was further enforced through quality assurance from outside the operational teams within the Trust, along with dip sampling from senior managers;
- when the decision was made to end involvement with a family it needed to be evidenced based and with the agreement of partners;
- within the Strengthening Families service, when children were placed there progress would be tracked to allow for evidence to be collected and demonstrated on what progress had been made;
- within quality assurance, rather than a procedural practice review, it is much more evaluative, which means evidence was collected on the impact of the Trusts involvement with a child;
- the Trust had implemented a new approach to ending involvement with families, which looked though quality assurance aimed to ensure consistency across reviews and closure reviews;
- thematic reviews were part of the Trusts quality assurance programme which take place across the year;
- thematic reviews were undertaken within the Trust, but within the independent arm of the organisation, the staff undertaking the reviews were not involved in the operation of the teams;
- the Trust Board and Strategic Partnership Board at all of its meeting received a quality assurance report;
- the Intervention Hub was financially secure and the Trust worked closely with the Council to negotiate a Contract Sum to enable the operation of the service, in terms of scaling the service, the national reforms would indicate that the Trust wherever possible should work to enable children and young people to stay with their families;
- the Council and the Trust were in the final process of negotiating a three-year Contract Sum arrangement;
- within the national reforms, there was a greater focus on Family Group Conferencing and additional money was available through the Government for that and scaling the service;
- the Trust along with a focus on 'grow our own' also wanted to keep experienced social workers, there were internal development opportunities, and it was hoped that experienced social workers felt heard and appreciated;

- the most challenging teams were the child protection and court teams, a lot of responsibility was placed on the experienced social workers within those teams;
- the Trust and the wider partnership were committed to safeguarding and addressing any concerns raised, the Trust and partners had launched a new safeguarding strategy and pledge, and they were committed to driving forward the strategy to improve outcomes;
- at the current time no 16 year old had been allocated a personal advisor, the Trust was still working on getting all 17 years a personal advisor.

34/25 Extending the Duration of the Meeting

Resolved that the duration of the meeting is extended for a period of 20 minutes to allow for the business of the meeting to be concluded.

35/25 Elective Home Education Improvement Plan

The number of children and young people who were home educated had risen significantly since the Covid pandemic in both England and Wales. The reasons given by parents both locally and nationally were varied but the pandemic introduced many families to remote learning, and some discovered that their children thrived in a home-based environment. Families discovered home education could allow for a more tailored approach to learning, where children could progress at their own pace. For those families that choose home education as a lifestyle choice it enabled them to incorporate values, cultural education, or alternative teaching methods that align with their beliefs and goals.

There were, however, some parents who were driven by factors of dissatisfaction or frustration. Parents report being dissatisfied with the quality of education and ethos in mainstream schools with some feeling that schools were not adequately addressing their child's specific learning needs, especially for children who were neurodivergent or had special educational needs. Further concerns were raised by parents about physical or mental health risks in school environments, including bullying, peer pressure, or exposure to illness.

Parents who home educate their children and decided not to engage with support from the local authority risked compromising not only educational attainment but their child's social development and emotional resilience due to lack of peer interaction, lack of access to the personal, social, health and emotional curriculum.

The Council acknowledged that it was the right of all parents to choose to home educate their children and that they should not be unduly prevented from doing so if it was in their child's interest. However, every child had a right to receive the best possible education within a safe environment which enabled them to reach their potential and thrive.

It was the responsibility of parents, not the Council to ensure that their child received a suitable education. The local authority however, needed to be assured as to whether the education being provided was suitable. Provision did not need to follow specific examples such as the national curriculum, but the education did

need to be suitable for the child. In addition to the Council being assured on the suitability of education there was also a statutory duty to safeguard children where there was evidence that they may be at risk of significant harm. Both duties provided a challenge for Councils as there was no legal requirement for parents to engage with or accept any support from the Council.

Sandwell had a dedicated Electively Home Educated team which was placed within the Children and Education Directorate and worked closely with the Schools Attendance Support Service, Children Missing Education, MASH Education Safeguarding Team and schools.

The EHE team consisted of:

- 1x Safeguarding and EHE Service Manager (non-case holding)
- 1x Lead Elective Home Education Advisory Teacher
- 3 x Higher Level Teaching Assistant EHE Advisors

Currently there was no legal requirement to hold or maintain a register of children who were electively home educated nor track the number of registrations and de-registrations. However, the Council did maintain a register of children who the Council were aware of via school off rolling or the MySandwell portal that they intend to or were home educating.

The Electively Home Education team also had a robust reciprocal arrangement whereby other local authorities would alert the Council to home educated children moving into Sandwell and Sandwell would alert them to home educated children moving out of Sandwell. The Electively Home Education team did not release oversight of any child until confirmation was received that they had been picked up by the receiving local authority.

In Sandwell every family was contacted at the point of referral for Electively Home Education and offered support. Initial consultations allowed the team to establish the reasons a child may be being home educated and to begin to risk assess if home education was appropriate and subsequently discussed with parents and other professionals.

Each young person was risk rated (RAG - Red, Amber, Green) based on a set of criteria using previous safeguarding concerns, support declined and SEND with support aligned to the rating.

Support was bespoke and flexible for each family. An allocated case officer would focus on building and forming a trusting relationship with the whole family. This encouraged families to be more accepting of a wider offer of support in times of need.

There were multiple ways families could engage/interact with the Electively Home Education team:

- telephone, email, video call, home visits, and visits to locations in the community;
- the team produce a newsletter, welcome pack, placing arts and crafts resources in libraries across the six towns and book resource boxes in key venues too;
- community activities;

- SEND assessments, referrals and signposting which help demonstrate to home educators the Council were not here simply to assess suitability but also to offer practical support;
- via the Portal for parents to log their intention or their current situation regarding Electively Home Education.

Councils were responsible for assessing the suitability of the education provided to children who were home educated, although there was no duty on families to engage so it was recognised that not all families would accept support.

In Sandwell formal reviews of learning were done with every family every 12 months but there was also an offer of support at any time outside of this.

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

- when a child was educated at school and the decision was made to home educate and take the child out of school, a letter was required from the parent / guardian to tell the school that they no longer wanted their child in the school and they were instead going to home educate;
- the school on receipt of a letter informing them of the parents decision to home educate would notify the attendance service at the Council;
- the Council would investigate any safeguarding concerns along with any additional needs when a child was moved to be home educated;
- the Council could have more of an impact with a decision to home educate when the child in question was at a special school and had an EHCP;
- legally once the decision by the parents had been made, the child was required to be off rolled from their school;
- the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that was going through Parliament, would require local authorities to maintain an up to date list of all children in the borough who were electively home educated;
- the service in Sandwell did maintain a list of all children in the borough who were electively home educated;
- the resource implications of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill were already under consideration;
- there was an agreement between local authorities locally who would inform each other if an electively home educated child moved from one authority into another;
- there was no legal requirement for parents to let the Council know if they move into the area that they had an electively home educated child;
- there would be a small proportion of children in Sandwell who the Council did not know they were home educated;
- a portal had been developed to allow parents to notify the Council that their child was being home educated;
- it was difficult with a small team to have oversight over the numbers of children who were electively home educated;
- working in partnership with other agencies, allowed the service to identify any issues or concerns with children and families;
- children never enrolled in a school would be unknown to the service unless this was picked through accessing other services;

- the Family Hubs supported the service in identifying children who were home educated;
- there were some parents who had declined support from the Council where safeguarding concerns had been raised;
- the service was very data driven and work was ongoing to ensure data was being used to improve service outcomes and delivery;
- the improvement plan allowed the service to address challenges and improve and prioritise service delivery;
- the Safeguarding Hub had established links with GPs whereby once they were aware of a child being home educated a notification would be sent to the GP so they were aware;
- the service was on track to meet the majority of deadlines within the action plan;
- School Attendance Orders could be utilised, however, often parents would move to place a child into school once the process had begun;
- there were a number of schools who were on the radar, and work was underway with schools admission teams to understand patterns;
- reasons for home education were always taken from the parent, often this would be left blank, however, often dissatisfaction with their child's school would be a reason for home education;
- schools were now being asked as part of the off roll form what they believed the reason was for the child being move to home education;
- if a child was moved out of the country, unless the service was told they would not know, safeguarding concerns would however be followed up with the necessary authority.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Cabinet Member for Children and Families provides a plan on how the Elective Home Education team will be resourced and supported to address a continued rising workload and new statutory responsibilities associated with the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.
- (2) that a further investigation is carried out to understand why Sandwell was experiencing such a high increase in parents and families opting to Electively Home Educate their children.

36/25

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

The Board noted the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2025/26.

Meeting ended at 8.16 pm