

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

Monday, 10 November 2025 at 6.00 pm at Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury, B69 3DB

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Chair)

<p>Councillors: Ashraf (Vice-Chair) 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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Officers: Sally Giles (Director of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board); Sue Moore (Assistant Director for Education Support Services); Julie Andrews (Assistant Director for Education Services); Judith Nash (Head of SEND Services); Samantha Harman (Children's Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement); Kate Griffiths (Strategic Lead for Early Help); Anna Blennerhassett; Alison Fletcher (Early Years Teaching and Learning); Angelina Dawson (SEND Transport); Michelle Carolan (Managing Director for the NHS Black Country Integrated Care Board); and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

37/25 Apologies for Absence

An apology of absence was received from Councillor Choudhry.

38/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

39/25 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2025 are approved as a correct record.

40/25 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

Children's and Family Strategy - Outcomes Framework

The Board considered the Children's and Family Strategy - Outcomes Framework.

The purpose of the Children and Families Strategic Partnership was to bring together senior representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies responsible for working with children, young people and families in Sandwell and to ensure that they were working together strategically to improve the lives and outcomes of children and young people in Sandwell. Its terms of reference included the responsibility for producing a Children and Families Strategy.

A local Children and Families Strategy provided a strategic framework through which local agencies and partners work collaboratively to improve outcomes for all children and young people. It established a shared vision, clear priorities, and measurable objectives that guided the collective efforts of education, health, social care, police and voluntary sector partners. These complement Sandwell's corporate ambitions as set out in the Council Plan 2024 – 2027. The outcomes framework that sat alongside it enabled senior leaders in the children's system to monitor whether outcomes for children were improving in Sandwell. As delivery progresses and the outcomes framework becomes more embedded, it will enable partners to identify commissioning gaps and areas for further improvement.

The development and implementation of a Children and Families Strategy allowed senior leaders in the children's system to ensure that key priorities are being delivered and provide a robust governance framework which consolidated ongoing workstreams within the children's system.

The purpose of the Children and Families Strategic Partnership was to strengthen a whole system, partnership approach to improving outcomes for all children across the borough.

Partners had identified the key areas that should be the focus of an overarching strategy. In some cases, programmes of work already existed, in others, work was being undertaken, but a strategic approach was less evident. The four key areas the partnership identified were: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; Family Help; Childrens Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing and Early Years.

- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities incorporated the ongoing work within the SEND Transformation Programme in response to the Ofsted/Care Quality Commission joint inspection in July 2023 and the recommendations from this inspection and led by the SEND and AP Improvement Board.
- Family Help incorporated the work in response to national reform in children's social care and early help Stable Homes Built on Love and the Childrens Wellbeing and Schools Bill emphasising a whole system approach to helping families and led by the Family Help Board.
- Early Years incorporated the work in response to national policy change, implementing the National Wraparound Programme and Extended Entitlements Offer improving workforce stability, raising standards and

supporting the most vulnerable children and led by the Early Years Partnership Board.

- Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing was developed in response to recommendations from Sandwell's Thrive Board and the national Future in Mind policy, which urged transformation of services for young people. The Thrive Board directed local plans with partners.

The Strategy ensured all programmes were working towards common goals which could better support local transformation and national reform within a robust framework for decision making, accountability and resource allocation. It streamlined efforts, improves accountability and supports a whole system approach to delivering improved outcomes.

The Outcomes Framework underpinned the delivery of the strategy, setting out clear and measurable goals for all partners. This framework enabled progress tracking and maintained a focus on achieving meaningful improvements in the lives of children and young people. By aligning priorities and coordinating activities, the framework helped prevent duplication of effort, support the identification of successes, and highlight areas that require further attention.

The Children and Families Strategic Partnership was the highest level of governance in the borough which oversaw outcomes for all children and young people and was the first Sandwell Children and Families Strategy with a shared partnership outcomes framework which identified where improvements needed to be made to children and young people's lives.

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

- the strategy and its components was welcomed and it was clear that it complemented the Council's corporate ambitions;
- partnership working was a big part of the strategy and it was hoped this would continue;
- as part of the Family Help work domestic abuse support was a key component, a newly introduced pilot programme 'Oldbury Family First' brought together partners sooner ensuring families accessing services were provided with a collaborative and wrap around response;
- domestic abuse support was a focus for any intervention, Black Country Women's Aid was now involved in family allocation meetings, a large number of cases had presented which involved domestic abuse;
- the family safeguarding model included a domestic abuse support response, any pilot programme would work to embed best practice;
- there was a trauma informed approach across the partnership, and training had been embedded across service areas;
- there was a mental health support team model in place across Sandwell to support individuals and families;
- the four priority areas identified were separate, they all had individual workstreams, overseeing boards and funding programmes;
- funding streams across the four priority areas was both done from within the Council and through external funding through the DfE;

- there was engagement with young people through schools and colleges and more directly with the SHAPE Forum that fed into the work of the partnership;
- coproduction was a key part of partnership working and engaging with children and young people was used to ensure the child's voice was included in decision making;
- the SEND service operated a Lived Experience Framework which had been recognised nationally as ensuring the parent/carer and child voice in the decision making process;
- the Council was working to become a 'Child Friendly Borough' and as part of this the child's voice was a key component;
- the SEND service was working with partners Genuine Partnerships, who were national leads on embedding coproduction across services; the SEND service was leading with the embedding of coproduction across the Council, Trust, schools and other partnership services;
- building on best practice using Genuine Partnerships would allow for coproduction to be enhanced across the partnership;
- earlier attempts had not been so wide reaching, it was now expected with the new national partner that coproduction could be expanded and best practice shared more widely with partner agencies;
- working with schools meant engaging with formal structures such as the school partnership and executive meetings;
- the digitally healthy workstream had involvement from headteachers to ensure the voice of schools was heard, across workstreams, headteacher references groups were used to work in partnership with schools;
- the significant backlog of EHCP cases had been cleared in August 2025;
- the 0-5 pathways for those children with SEND had been enhanced, it was important for equal assessment opportunities across the whole 0-25 span;
- the focus on 0-5 in early years had led to a spike in EHCP requests;
- work with schools had been undertaken to enable schools to understand that the needs of children and young people could be met without the need for an EHCP;
- the SEND service was experiencing a high level of demand, while the service was operating within the national averages it had fallen short of these in some stages due to the volume of assessments;
- there was an Early Years Strategy in place and was being updated;
- workstream progress was measured in terms of health and wellbeing through the outcomes framework that was reported nationally;
- those children who were 0-5 prior to the changes within the SEND service only 0.8% of EHCP assessment were being undertaken at this stage, changes in workstreams and focus to 2-5 and 3-5 stages, meant that now 38% of assessments were now under 5 years;
- the amount of work that was being undertaken and the four priority areas would warrant greater consideration by the board and if possible be a baseline for the Board's work program in 2026-2027.

SEND Travel Assistance Update

The Board considered the SEND Transportation Update.

The Council had a duty to make such travel arrangements as they consider necessary to secure suitable home to school transport arrangements were made for eligible children in accordance with Section 508B of the Education Act 1996. This related to children of compulsory school age (5 - 16) and ensured transport was free.

Councils were required to prepare and publish an annual transport policy statement specifying the arrangements for the provision of transport or otherwise that the authority considered necessary for facilitating the attendance of such persons.

The Local Authority was subject to statutory obligations and had powers to make travel arrangements for children with special educational needs and disabilities to facilitate their attendance at an appropriate education provision.

Children who were eligible for travel assistance, could apply for support with travel training, parent mileage, a personal transport budget or home to school transport. Where transport was provided the Council ensured it's appropriate to meet the needs of the child.

The introduction of a Flexible Purchasing System (FPS) in August 2024 had helped to reduce the cost of home to school transport without impacting on the quality of service or safeguarding of children and young people with SEND and their families.

The FPS offered a range of benefits including scope for new suppliers to join during the lifetime of the contract arrangement, a more flexible application process to attract small, medium and large-scale enterprises to apply. The market was far more competitive with 29 operators on the framework many of whom were local to Sandwell, that had proved economically advantageous to the Council.

There were also regular opportunities for new companies to apply to join the FPS which had significantly reduced the risk to the Council of being unable to fulfil contracts, with many councils struggling to meet increased demand as the number of children with SEND continued to rise.

Work was broken down into individual schools' contracts with varying contract lengths from 1-3 years to support and drive value for money and ensured there were regular new tender opportunities for operators. Currently the service was managing 132 contracts delivered by 14 different operators.

The robust contract monitoring of each contract supported regular benchmarking to ensure the average cost per passenger was still offering value for money and there was no deterioration in the level of support or the quality of service provided, either by the Council or the operator.

To ensure value for money the Council transport arrangements were reviewed annually as a minimum. This could lead to increased anxiety for children and

their families. Where it was deemed necessary to make changes children and their parents/carers were kept informed of the changes and offered a meet and greet with the new operators to support a smooth transition.

As part of the contractual arrangements and to support the commitment to continuous improvement operators were required to undertake customer satisfaction questionnaire in the Summer with children and parents/carers. The responses had been shared with the Council for analysis and action where necessary, however no significant issues were identified. This would be followed up by a customer feedback survey in the New Year, once new transport arrangements had settled.

The use of data was critical in supporting better demand and financial forecasting to inform the Councils medium and long-term budget planning process especially given the expected continued growth in numbers of children with Education and Health Care Plans.

With the expected increase in the number of children with SEND the focus was very much on reducing demand/need for transport and increasing children accessing travel training or families taking up the offer of parent mileage or a personal transport budget.

The introduction of the locality model, Stronger Communities Brighter Futures would support more children to have their needs met in local mainstream and special schools, closer to home with a reduced reliance on specialist and out of borough provision which was disproportionately more expensive, both in terms of the provision and transport with the average cost 25% more.

The cost of SEND home to school transport in 2024/25 was £18.033m a saving of £1.138m against a budget of £19.171m. This included several legacy contracts carried over from the DPS framework that were subsequently renewed during the academic year 2024-25. This was done to better manage disruption to children, their families and schools, and avoid all arrangements for over 1100 children being changed at the same time.

The projected cost of travel assistance for 2025-26, inclusive of travel passes parent mileage and personal travel budgets was £15,937,086 with a projected saving of £2,883,914 against a budget of £18,821,000. This was based on there being 1,250 passengers on transport by March 2026, currently there were 1,123.

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

- there was a projection that by March 2026 there would be a need to accommodate 1,250 passages through the service;
- the improvement in data collection and management meant that the service could predict more efficiently what service need would be;
- the service continued to build its data collection to allow for more informed decisions;
- the transport service was able to work with the EHCP service to identify which children with plans may need to access the transport service, allowing the team to forward plan effectively, it was expected that as the data gets more numerous, that it would allow for more data driven decisions;

- as of the 11 October 2025 the service was providing transport to 1,146 children and young people;
- in the long term the transport service would look to introducing key performance indicators but this would require ongoing consultation with the wider market;
- the focus for any introduction of key performance indicators would be an improvement in the quality of the service provided, it would be something that was rolled out gradually, that allowed the service to take the market with them;
- the introduction of the TAS Badge for drivers was a decision made by Sandwell to ensure all drivers were suitable to work with the most vulnerable children and young people;
- the requirements for a TAS Badge now included being trained to use an epi-pen;
- there had been a substantial lack of complins from parents since the introduction of the Flexible Purchasing System and the increase in providers;
- the transport service continued to engage with families to seek their opinions and thoughts on the service provided;
- the introduction of the Flexible Purchasing System had enabled the service to get costs under control, they system had demonstrated its value;
- the priority had been to get a grip on spend, now that had been achieved the service could focus on quality and service delivery;
- the option for the Council to operate a fleet of vehicles, with the potential to utilise those vehicles operated by Adult Services had not progressed, it was however still an option that was there for consideration;
- the use of larger vehicles had also been considered, the variety of routes however, meant it was impractical and would require additional investigation;
- suppliers were required when tendering to provide details on costs, as well as the number and size of vehicles;
- the Flexible Purchasing System now had 29 suppliers within the system who could apply for any contract;
- the Council could not do anything about who owns certain companies;
- the service worked with families to ensure they could access transport when they were entitled to;
- the Flexible Purchasing System had allowed the market to be expanded and therefore reduce costs;
- there were no longer any legacy contracts in place, all contracts had now been through the Flexible Purchasing System;
- there was no regional or national data on cost per head or SEND transport in general when related to the transport of children, the Council had raised the issue both on a regional and national level;
- it was recognised that every local authority procures SEND transport in a slightly different way and one to one comparisons would not be appropriate;
- cost per head in Sandwell was higher than the Council would want it to be, this was due to the number of children transported out of borough;
- the locality model was part of the SEND Transformation programme, which would see decision making being taken at a local level.

43/25

**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.

Resolved that a future item on school attendance is added to the 2026-27 work programme.

Meeting ended at 7.45 pm