

Minutes of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

24th April, 2017 at 5.00 pm
at the Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Underhill (Chair);
Councillors Allen, Ashman, Hickey, Phillips,
Preece, Taylor and White.

Apologies: Councillor, EM Giles and Reverend P French (Co-opted member).

In Attendance: Vince Clark, Director - Children and Families;
Tracy Collins, Group Head Looked After Children;
Jim Leivers, Interim Director- Children's Services.

10/17 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 20th March, 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

11/17 **Fostering Services**

The Interim Director – Children's Services highlighted the importance of scrutiny focus on children's services and the need to prioritise improvements to fostering services.

The Board was advised that demands on fostering services were rising and the number of young people coming into care was increasing weekly. The stress on resources and shortage of in-house foster carers meant that too many young people were in placements with either private fostering services or outside the Sandwell area.

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The Board was advised that current issues were the result of the thresholds for children's social work set in previous years based on professional advice. The thresholds were not what OFSTED inspectors had expected to see in Sandwell which traditionally had a high deprivation factor. The pressures on services had reflected in staff morale and performance and resulted in consecutive inadequate OFSTED inspection outcomes.

The current position was a result of Secretary of State intervention to transfer Children's Services into a Children's Trust. Work on the Children's Social Care Trust was underway and it was expected to be operational in the autumn 2017; the Trust was different to other charitable Trusts in that it would be owned by Sandwell Council.

The Interim Director – Children's Services highlighted that there would be several areas for scrutiny to focus on during 2017-18 to get the building blocks in place for children's service improvements, including children in care, child protection, children in need and relationships with schools.

The Board received a presentation from the Group Head Looked After Children which covered the following areas for discussion by the Board:

- fostering service composition;
- expenditure on fostering activity 2016/17;
- fostering activity;
- recruitment activity;
- offer to foster carers;
- how do we compare;
- where our children are placed with internal carers;
- what do we need to do.

The Board discussed the previous decision to outsource fostering assessments and the need to now bring the assessments back in-house to improve efficiency and better integration of services. The Director of Children and Families highlighted that in-house service would need to be better supported with regular training for and supervision of assessment staff. The Board was advised that the resources allocated for external assessment would be re-directed for training and support of in-house staff.

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The Group Head, Looked After Children, advised the Board that the fostering budget for 2016-17 had been slightly underutilised and assured them that the full budget would be used in 2017-18 to increase numbers of in-house foster carers in Sandwell.

In response to questions, the Group Head clarified the difference between foster carers and connected persons foster carers, and advised that connected persons would normally be an extended family member but could also be a godparent or godparents. She further explained that the connected person's foster carers would be trained and that the Council was approaching them to become mainstream foster carers, to foster children that were not part of the foster carer's extended family.

The Group Head advised that there had been 15 foster carer resignations in 2016-17 for a variety of reasons, such as change of personal circumstances, ill health or that foster caring was not what they had expected. She confirmed that there was a need to get a better understanding why people had left foster caring and to determine what worked and what did not work. Regular meetings with foster carers had taken place to talk through issues and look at ways forward. The Group Head indicated that the best promotion amongst potential foster carers was word of mouth from existing foster carers.

The Board was advised that the cost of a foster placement in-house was £23,000 and that the agency cost was £40,000; the Board highlighted the need to recruit more foster carers in house and welcomed that 8 mainstream fostering assessments were underway and 3 foster carer couples had been booked onto skills to foster training.

The Board was advised that the training had to follow the relevant steps of getting references, attending courses and finding a placement; each case had a different set of circumstances and there would be some flexibility depending on the individual case.

The Board was advised that incentives for foster carers had been considered by comparing it to good practice in other local authorities. The Interim Director - Children's Services indicated that Sandwell Council had to be in the market to be an employer of choice and to do so the Council had to be more flexible and more competitive.

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In relation to where children were placed across the six towns and the equality of opportunity for foster carers, the Board highlighted the need for the fostering offer to reflect the diversity of communities of Sandwell. The Director - Children's Services advised the Board that this had been identified and that the Council aimed to invest in the diversity and the geography of the area to ensure the fostering, adoption and care leaver's offers. He clarified that more resources had to be allocated to meet this aim and to recruit more foster carers and social workers. The Director - Children and Families highlighted the need to pull together a more detailed plan to recruit from a wider range of communities in Sandwell and agreed it was about the community links and community groups.

The Vice Chair emphasised the need for recruitment to focus on the communities in Sandwell, to go into Churches and mosques and talk to the people who knew the diversity and deprivation in localities and where there were potential connected persons foster carers or foster carers that may need support and information to come forward.

A case was highlighted by a member where a single Muslim woman had felt unsupported by the social worker and unaccepted by the community when trying to become a foster parent and that the six towns had a wide mix of ethnicity and diversity. It was suggested that officers further reduce target areas for the fostering campaign to focus on specific communities with in each of the six towns.

The Group Head Looked after Children outlined the next steps in the presentation with a focus on recruitment, connections, geographical information and the need to focus on types of foster carers. She advised that there was also a need to encourage an initiative 'Foster to adopt', to develop the offer for the emergency carer's pool and to focus on retention of foster carers who had recently retired from full time foster caring.

The Board was advised that the motivator for becoming a foster carer was not usually money related often the person may want to give something back to society, make a difference and give a child stability. The Board was informed of a three-year placement strategy for young people in transition from the care system and felt this was a positive experience.

The Board emphasised the need for more in-house foster carers to be recruited and was advised that the aim of Children's Services

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was to appoint 30 foster carers per annum, year on year to build a consistent foster carers offer.

The Chair thanked officers and the Board for a very informative and open discussion. She welcomed the proposed campaign to recruit foster carers and asked for further consideration of the councillors' role in relation to promoting foster care and the recruitment of foster carers in communities.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Director of Children and Families provide fostering updates as a regular item to each meeting of the 2017-18 Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board;
- (2) that the Director of Children and Families include councillors in the campaign to promote and recruit foster carers to reach out to local communities.

12/17

Children's Social Care Trust Update

The Interim Director – Children's Services and Director of Children and Families provided an update to the Board. The Director Children and Families advised that the new management team was progressing actions identified with a focus on improving social worker practice standards on the ground.

The Board was advised that the Chair of the Trust position had been advertised but as this was a Secretary of State appointment it would not be completed until after the General Election on 8th June 2017. The target date for the Sandwell Social Care Trust to commence was 2 October 2017, however the date was now likely to be delayed.

The Board was advised that there were plans to refurbish Council accommodation for the Trust and that this was likely to be ready at the end of October 2017.

The Board was advised that Children's Commissioner was pleased with the progress.

The Director of Children and Families gave an update in terms of practice improvement. He advised that there needed to be a

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reduction in the number of caseloads allocated and following a bench marking exercise with other authorities 18 cases per social worker had been identified. There was recognition that in some parts of the service more would be needed and in others less. He advised that work was progressing with Group Heads in terms of raising standards of support, supervision and team management and that the senior management would set the framework to give time and space for the social workers to undertake their duties satisfactorily.

The Board was advised that once the framework was in place there was an expectation that the quality of work and performance would improve and that audits and quality assurance would be monitored and address any actions highlighted to put processes and checks back in place.

The Director - Children and Families confirmed that the service had been universally poor, however, realistically it would take two to three years to re-build the service and imbed improvements.

The Board was advised that the working environment had improved since members had visited Children's Services offices on 10th November 2016 as part of the scrutiny work stream of recruitment and retention of social workers. The Director - Children and Families invited the Board to revisit children's services offices and meet with social workers.

In response to questions, the Board was advised that managers had not satisfactorily carried out supervision or auditing of social worker caseloads. They were re-assured that senior officers were working with social workers and managers to consider the issues, learn and close the loops.

The Chair thanked officers for a clear account of the matters relating to the Sandwell Social Care Trust and requested an update report to the next meeting.

Resolved

- (1) that the Interim Director - Children's Services be requested to provide an update on the Children's Trust to the next meeting of the Board;

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- (2) that the Director - Children and Families arrange a visit for members of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board to visit children's services offices and meet with social workers.

13/17

Updates from the Chair and Vice-Chair

Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers

The Vice-Chair advised that the recommendations of the work stream group had been drafted and agreed to circulate background papers and summary of findings to the Director of Children's Service, The Director - Children and Families and Group Head of Looked after Children.

(Meeting ended 6:26pm)

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