

**Minutes of the Children's Services and Education
Scrutiny Board**

**11th September, 2017 at 5.00 pm
at the Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Underhill (Chair);
Councillors Allen, Ashman, Hickey, Phillips and
Rouf;
Mrs T Majid (Co-opted Member).

Apologies: Councillors L Horton, Preece, Shaeen, White and
Reverend P French.

17/17 **Minutes**

In relation to Minute No. 16/17, the Chair advised that the work group led by Councillor Phillips would concentrate on fostering because care leavers was the focus of work being undertaken by the Corporate Parenting Group.

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 24th July, 2017 be confirmed as a correct record.

18/17 **Readiness for School – Ready Steady Learn**

Saeeda Norris, Parent Partnership Early Learning (PPEL) Manager provided a presentation relating to School Readiness – the Ready Steady Learn Programme.

The Board received an information pack from the Sandwell Family Information Service which aimed to help parents find information and advice relating to childcare and local family services in Sandwell. A handout from the Parents Early Years and Learning (PEAL) Organisation was also considered which demonstrated how parents help babies and young children learn.

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The Early Learning Manager presented slides relating to the following:

- early years provision in schools;
- private, voluntary and independent early years providers;
- early years data and key trends;
- current position and project objectives;
- children's Centre partnership working;
- parents comments and input;
- national reputation;
- early years and 30 hours funding.

During the presentation, the following points were raised:

- the team was working with foster carers along with Early Years practitioners across Schools, Day Care, Pre-Schools, Children's Centres and Childminders and work force development team to ensure that advice, training and legislative updates were current;
- the work presented had been acknowledged nationally and the team was very proud of that;
- the data relating to expected level for 5 year olds had shown a 2% decrease, from 9% to 7% last year, but the biggest challenge for Sandwell families was boys writing;
- the Ready Steady Learn programme objectives highlighted that parents needed to talk to their babies and verbalise what they were trying to portray;
- developmental information was translated into numerous languages to assist parents for whom English was a second language;
- Sandwell parents were reported to have great aspiration for their children but not much aspiration for themselves;
- the benefits of parents working with their children on a one-to-one basis 'fundamental home learning', was very important;
- listening, talking and thinking from the PEAL workshops was reported to be the hardest things for Sandwell parents to do with their children;
- Sandwell's Early Years' Team had developed opportunities for parents to learn things that they had not done before, for example, one parent was able to bake fairy cakes for the first time. The activities helped parents to build self-esteem and achieve new things, which encouraged them to spend time showing children how to do things and talk with their children;

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- the Early Years Group Manager advised that Sandwell was the only Council working with the National Children's Bureau on working with parents in this way on REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy with Under Twos).

During a question and answer session the following points were considered:-

- there were approximately 10,000 children in Sandwell schools and pre-school, with 108 nurseries including private sector nurseries which also carried out outreach work;
- a higher proportion of children in Sandwell enter nurseries operating below national expected levels than most other parts of the country. Our work has helped to close the gap by the end of early years - indicating that the measures in Sandwell were making a difference;
- parents needed support in Sandwell; many unskilled parents were given opportunity to access outreach work to raise parental aspirations;
- the pilot area was chosen to get an idea of the baseline for further roll out, a questionnaire would have to further test the baseline. This would be a longer-term project across the six towns;
- to encourage take up of support for parents who were hard to reach using mechanisms to involve other parents to work with them;
- 65% take up and 35% non-take up rates were explored. The Council had data to show where families that did not take up the offer were situated and could work with them. The Government had built choice into the legislation, as such there was no requirement for two year olds to attend nursery and children were often looked after by extended family. It was the Council's aim to get to 90% take up of nursery spaces.

In relation to a question about developing applications (APPS) to develop reading skills in two year olds, it was suggested that the child needed to develop interaction with others and that could be achieved by reading and talking about books which was thought to benefit both parent and child. Interaction by talking and asking questions about the story and the characters developed communication and literacy skills. The Chair questioned how parents with low literacy levels would cope and was advised that the books approach was very practical, it was recognised that every parent had a different starting point and that the action of going to a library, choosing a book and

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exploring the book with your child either in the library or at home afforded the parent a range of experiences, getting them out of the house, meeting people at the library and children interacting with other children outside of the home environment were all good experiences.

The Board highlighted that the early exposure to books and communication could also help with the early identification of special educational needs (SEND).

The Chair thanked the Early Years Manager for her presentation and acknowledged that the programme was helping to open doors for parents and children in Sandwell.

Resolved that the presentation on Ready Steady Learn be received and relevant information shared with the Fostering and Special Educational Needs (SEND) Scrutiny Work Groups.

19/17 **Update on the Children's Trust**

Tara Malik, Service Manager Chief Executives Change and Communications Team and Darren Carter, Executive Director - Resources provided an update on the current progress, timelines and work completed in the move towards the Children's Trust.

The presentation considered mechanisms for scrutiny of the Children's Trust and of services that would remain in the remit of the Director of Children's Services.

The Board was advised of the progress to recruit key posts to the Children's Trust. The closing date for applications for the post of Chief Executive was 29th September 2017. The overall timeline for the Children's Trust going live depended on the successful appointment of a Trust Chief Executive. The Shadow Board would meet on 26th September 2017 to consider an update.

In relation to funding, the Board was advised that the Council had secured all the funding set up costs from the Department for Education (DFE) including the cost of Non-Executive Directors for a five-year period.

The Service Manager advised that the office accommodation at Metsec and Wellman Building was the largest cost to the Council and that £1 million had been set aside to prepare the buildings for use by the Children's Trust. She advised that office layouts had been agreed

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and the contract had been awarded to commence on 1st October 2017. Interim family conferencing facilities had been created to continue service improvement whilst the buildings were being made ready.

The Executive Director advised that there would be significant investment from the Children's Services budget, not due to the change to a Children's Trust but due to the increasing pressures on Children's Services such as looked after children (LAC). He advised that the Department for Education advisors were working on factors that informed the baseline and that support services would be provided by the Council via a service level agreement for a period of 12 months.

The Executive Director advised that the Council was prepared and had been building associated costs of the Children's Trust into the budget for months. He advised that the Government would also fund the VAT liability.

The Service Manager outlined the Council's capacity after the Children's Trust went live; the remaining services would be education related with some elements of the Children's Centres and would fall under the remit of the Director – Education, Skills and Employment.

The Board was advised of the role of scrutiny in relation to Children's Services and Education. The Chair advised that she had contacted Slough and Sunderland local authorities to find out more about their scrutiny arrangements with their Children's Trusts. The Service Manager advised that scrutiny arrangements were stated in the contract and that there was a need for a good relationship between the Council and the Children's Trust. The Chair advised that she had met with Jacqui Smith, Chair of the Children's Trust Board and that she had indicated that she would look at all scrutiny work carried out and would welcome any invitation to attend scrutiny moving forward. The Chair clarified that the Cabinet Member would carry out a monitoring role and that she would work with the Cabinet Member and the Chair of the Trust to agree a clear role for scrutiny moving forward and in order to develop the way forward, it was important to meet regularly.

The Chair thanked officers for a comprehensive update.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member for Children's Services be requested to hold regular meetings with the Chair of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board and the Chair

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of the Sandwell Children's Social Care Trust to agree the way forward for scrutiny of the Trust.

20/17 **Retention and incentives for social workers**

Vince Clark, Interim Director – Children and Families provided an update of recruitment and retention of Social Workers with emphasis on incentives for retention.

The Interim Director referred to the availability of experienced social workers and indicated that this was not an issue unique to Sandwell, he clarified that the current recruitment plan related to four strands of activity:

- ongoing recruitment activity – 59 appointments in the first 6 months of 2017;
- a dedicated recruitment partner to recruit 45 experienced social workers and 11 managers targeted by the end of November 2017;
- volume recruitment campaign to provide 15 social workers for immediate start whilst permanent staff were appointed;
- recruitment of 20 newly qualified social workers to start before the end of October 2017.

The Interim Director advised that the recruitment was tracked on a weekly basis and the current position revealed that there was a target of 184 staff and currently with the changeover from agency to permanent staff, this number had been surpassed. He explained that there was interim cover for social workers on sick leave and that some staff would be released and replaced with permanent staff, the aim being to develop a quality work force.

Once in place, the retention of staff would be dependent on several factors including balanced caseloads, office environment, flexible working and the level of supervision. The Interim Director indicated that the level of supervision, information technology and office accommodation had moved forward in the last six months and the Sandwell offer to social workers was coming together. He advised that morale was in a much better place.

The Chair highlighted that neighbouring local authorities were competing to recruit the same people and that staff could move around the area. The Interim Director acknowledged that this was the case but advised that the agreement held between councils was

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that the pay offer would not be increased, ultimately there would be no benefit to the Council as costs would increase. He advised the Sandwell offer would focus on proper support and training.

The Board welcomed the progress and noted the update.

(Meeting ended 6.35 pm)

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