

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

**23 September, 2019 at 5.00 pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

- Present:** Councillor Singh (Chair);
Councillors Ashman, Chidley, McVittie and
Shackleton.
- Apologies:** Councillors Allen, Carmichael, Costigan, Z
Hussain, Preece and Phillips;
C Ward-Lewis and T Majid (Co-opted members).
- In attendance:** Councillors L Giles and E M Giles
Lesley Hagger, Executive Director Children's
Services;
Chris Ward, Director of Education, Skills and
Employment;
Jacqui Smith, Chair Sandwell Children's Trust
(SCT);
Frances Craven, Chief Executive SCT;
Pauline Turner, Director of Operations, SCT).
Sally Dowie, Family Information Service.

16/19 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 22 July,
2019 be approved as a correct record.

17/19 **Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review 2018/19 and
Improvement Plan 2019/22**

The Board received a report from the Sandwell Children's Trust relating to the Annual Review 2018-19 and the Improvement Plan 2019-22. The Chair and Chief Executive of the Trust presented an overview and update relating to the Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) and highlighted the main points from the reports.

The Chair of the Trust advised that the Annual report covered the period April 2018 – April 2019, the Trusts first year of operation.

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She highlighted that there had been nine Ofsted visits and the leadership had been renewed and secured in the first year of operation, giving grip on the service.

The Board noted the following main messages from the report:

- 778 children were in care when the Trust started in April 2018, on 23 September 2019 there were 921 Looked After Children in Sandwell. There was clear stabilisation in the profile of trajectory and the Trust was now starting to see a reduction in numbers of Looked after Children;
- the Trust had inherited a system that was slow in moving young people children through the care system, this was starting to change, due to measures put in place;
- the Trust was supported by the DFE, looking at the edge of care and was looking at practice in Wolverhampton and Essex;
- the cost of placements for Looked After Children in residential accommodation was more than in foster placements, however the external foster agencies and independent providers of residential accommodation were not providing value for money;
- the Trust had taken a lead role across the West Midlands on foster placements to consider how the market could develop;
- staffing at the Trust was more stable and there was a permanent leadership team in place;
- the 12 reasons to work in Sandwell initiative was introduced last year to encourage people to work in Sandwell; recruitment and retention of social workers and foster carers was a priority;
- there was a £3 billion shortfall from the Government across the UK for children in social care, Sandwell was facing an overspend of £3.26 million in 2018-19;
- the Trust had worked on the Medium Term Financial Plan and £40,000 savings had been identified, they were working with the Council to agree the contract sum for 2019-20. The Trust was confident that costs could be brought down to the level when the Trust was entered into in April 2018;
- the Trust advised that there had been highlights and challenges during the first year and they were grateful for the support of the Council and of the hard work of all involved.

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The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions: -

- in relation to the services making referrals and thresholds: The CE of the Trust advised that there was an issue with people not understanding the thresholds, however the Trust was working with a Headteacher Reference Group to look at real life cases where no further action had been taken on a referral and considering why the matter was not progressed through the system. The Trust advised that there was a similar thing happening with Health Partners;
- there was provision of training for officers in Health services and schools relating to when to make a referral;
- concerns were raised about the number of school place moves and early intervention to prevent matters escalating;
- local safeguarding governance arrangements were being replaced nationally and conversation between Partners was ongoing;
- the Trust was scrutinising which agencies were making referrals and had started to amend the thresholds. The real-life cases were proving very good to learn from and were helping to raise awareness;
- the Trust and the Council were clear that they did not want people to hesitate when a young person may be in need of support in relation to prevention and protection, and that the early help services and the voluntary sector were trying hard to raise awareness to protect and prevent young people from neglect, at the earliest stage;
- in relation to the need to recruit foster carers the Trust advised that foster carers may choose to go to the external foster agencies because the financial reward may be more. Some foster carers chose to move to be a Council Foster carer for a safer job; there were several older foster carers who were looking to retire. The challenge was to recruit and develop foster carers in Sandwell and to retain them as Council employees;
- placement of Young People in Care was, whenever possible, within a 20-mile radius. Where a young person was placed outside 20-mile radius a social worker visited every six weeks to

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- ensure the placement was working and they were getting good care. The statutory requirement for visits was three monthly;
- since the February Ofsted 'inadequate' rating for fostering, there had been training and close working with practice improvement officers from Doncaster, there would be a further Ofsted visit in November 2019;
- the morale of frontline staff was highlighted, and the Board was reassured that senior officers do walkabouts to talk to staff. It was reported that the atmosphere was quite buoyant, many staff wanted to work in the new offices and people were seeing the benefits of the Beyond Auditing (BA) work and additional support. They had moved from just chasing compliance to feeling it;
- the Trust had delivered the three things that staff had said they wanted:
 - managers that do not change
 - a nice place
 - leadership.
- staff were not scared to voice opinions and say what their issues were, they felt valued;
- in relation to the 30% agency social workers and the differential with Council employed social workers, the costs were not that different, but the more senior the role the larger the differential. To appoint permanent staff the Trust was competing with 14 other Local Authorities, some offering £4,000 golden hellos;
- the agency workforce was transient, choosing where and when they wanted to work, especially in summer and Christmas periods when staff were on leave and agency workers may have chosen not to work the holidays. This was reflected in the performance information. The Trust advised there would be better planning next summer;
- the Board raised concerns about young people getting lost in the system during the summer and Christmas periods, when staffing levels and performance dropped. In particular at one point 38 young people were not allocated a place. The Trust advised that the figures changed almost every day and that every young person would have been allocated within the five-day requirement;
- the Board voiced concern about the inconsistency in the performance indicators. The Trust advised that there were

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- inconsistencies and it was challenging work, but that this report was about year one and that there was a trend emerging for improvement;
- the Board was concerned that caseloads were still too high, the Trust advised that the target was an average of 18 cases and that currently the indicator was 18.27 caseloads on average, but that it was recognised that this figure could vary considerably;
 - there was a concern that the performance indicators were being missed and that the report did not show the improvement being made. The Board was advised that Ofsted would look at quality, numbers and the main targets to improving;
 - the Board highlighted several performance targets that were not being achieved, asked what the risks were of not meeting the targets and what was being done to mitigate the risk. The Trust advised that performance was monitored, and exception reporting was carried out and addressed through supervision sessions, training and buddying arrangements, and that team leaders covered for each other to ensure someone was there for staff to report to;
 - the Board highlighted the issue of County Lines and was advised that the Trust, the Council and Partners were part of the Exploitation Hub. The Hub focus was the prevention of exploitation and protection of young people and schools, police, health and other partners all work together in the Exploitation Hub on the issue highlighted.

The Board had highlighted the need to report to Scrutiny with up to date information and performance data. It was suggested that this could be six monthly. The Trust advised that performance was monitored and reported monthly.

The Chair thanked the Trust for attending and responding to the questions.

Resolved

- (1) that the comments of the Board be referred to the Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life;
- (2) that a performance update report be requested the Scrutiny Board in 6 months.

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18/19

Sandwell Childcare Sufficiency Report 2019-2020

The Board received the Sandwell Childcare Sufficiency report 2019-2020. The Director of Employment Skills and Education outlined the main messages and the 9 recommendations arising from the report.

The Board noted that the Children and Families Act 2014 stated that local authorities should report annually to Elected Council Members on how they are meeting their duty to secure sufficient childcare and that the report should be made available and accessible to parents.

The Director of Employment Skills and Education advised that during preparation of the Childcare Sufficiency Report evidence was investigated to indicate numbers of childcare places, demand and supply of places, and to identify gaps against demographic data and supply of childcare.

The Board was advised that findings from evidence gathered in Sandwell overall, and for each of the 24 wards in Sandwell had informed the report. It was noted that subject to scrutiny comments being reported to Cabinet, and Cabinet agreeing the report and recommendations, the Childcare Strategic Action Plan for 2019-2020 would be developed, implemented and monitored.

The Board noted the following main points and comments:

- it was reported that childcare was becoming more difficult to sustain as a business in Sandwell and that ten childcare providers had been lost in recent months;
- there were sufficient childcare places in Sandwell but there were gaps in the provision across the six towns as identified in the report;
- there was no access to out of school care at Hanbury in Greets Green and Lyng and Wednesbury South;
- there was a sufficiency of places for 2-year old offer, 15 hours entitlement and 30 hours on school nursery provision. It was reported that the incentives for 15 and 30 hours were particularly good but that there was a differential between 15 and 30 hours – across the six towns in Sandwell;
- the Board indicated there was a need to encourage better take up of the places and was advised that there was a drive to promote take-up of places, raise awareness and encourage

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engagement through social media, the council website and at local events;

- Members of the Board were concerned that young people were not spending enough time at home, that children were not getting a homelife, that parents were working longer hours and that young people were away from home for long periods, in pre-schools and after-school clubs;
- it was noted that parents of larger families in low paid jobs may need to work longer hours;
- the DfE had set funding at a maximum of 10 hours per day and the Board was advised that there were benefits of a child going into school early, including socialising and being fed, which helped their concentration and development;
- the requests for out of hours cover was mainly due to parents' irregular working hours. Some parents who worked in shops, factory workers, nurses, police, and so on had to work long days and shifts, including weekends and school holidays;
- the supply of childcare places was assessed against the potential demand for places and the findings were formulated into the 9 recommendations.

The Board considered that if a child was safe, loved and well cared for, generally the families had a more stable and happier time. It was highlighted that child care was not just being a baby minder, it was about the child learning, being inquisitive and learning language skills. Some parents had indicated that they did not need a child minder, they did not appreciate that the child may benefit from the interaction. The Director advised that it was not a statutory provision, but that the service gave parents the opportunity to take up the place.

The Board was concerned that some care providers had been rated as inadequate, they were advised that the Council would work with them, but that Ofsted was strict on ratio's and that one break would mean that the care provider would be rated as inadequate. The Director gave assurance that they would get the support they needed.

The Board noted that some schools did not provide out of school care. Officers advised that since the report was written there had

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been further work carried out and that both Tipton toddlers (St Martin) and Jubilee Park (Multi-academy Jubilee Park) were now covered.

The Board noted that there were places available and that work was ongoing to provide and sustain child care services. To promote the services in Sandwell, a list of providers was made available in towns and other public places such as doctors surgeries. In addition, a number of events had been arranged in Sandwell, including safer 6 campaign, a SHADE event, the big picnic in Dartmouth Park and some specific local Ward events.

The Chair and all Members of the Board welcomed the report, they wanted to record that the report was of high standard, an excellent reflection of the current position and work being done in Sandwell which presented a good picture.

Resolved

- (1) that the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board endorse the nine recommendations arising from the Sandwell Childcare Sufficiency Report 2019-20;
- (2) that the comments from the Children's Services and Education Board be referred to the Cabinet Member for Best Start in Life to take into account when the report is considered for approval by Cabinet.

(Meeting ended at 6.50 pm)

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