

Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

14 December, 2015

Summary of Matters Considered at the Board

Report of the Vice-Chair, Councillor Gill

The Scrutiny Board met on 14 December, 2015 and the following items were considered. I have selected the main points of the discussion which I feel members of the Council will be particularly interested to know more about. For more detail, a copy of the minutes is available on the Committee Management Information System (CMIS) via the Council's website at <http://cmis.sandwell.gov.uk/cmis5/>

1. Early Years Provision for 2, 3 and 4 Year Olds

It was reported that the local authority has a statutory duty to secure free early years provision for up to 40% of all disadvantaged two year olds. The Council has received capital and trajectory funding from the Government to prepare the childcare market for this new entitlement. The capacity within the childcare market and projected demand is analysed in the annual Childcare Sufficiency Report produced by the Council.

The names and addresses of eligible parents were provided to the Council by the Department for Work and Pensions. The Council then works to encourage those parents to take up the childcare they are entitled to. Some parents do not wish to take up the offer as they feel that their child is too young to attend such childcare placements.

The Government has also pledged to provide 30 hours of childcare for working parents of three and four year olds. This will become available nationally in September 2017, although work is planned for an initial audit of nursery provision in early 2016 to begin planning for the implementation date.

Members recommended that methods of encouraging existing child minders to upscale their businesses; for example through marketing suitable Council-owned buildings for their use, should be explored.

2. Children's Centres

Members received a report on the use of Children's Centres in Sandwell. There are 21 centres in total. One is designated as a Young Parents Children's Centre and is operated by the Council, the remainder are organised into seven clusters (one for each town, with two for West Bromwich).

Following a review and consultation the centres were re-designated as either a core centre (one per cluster), a Nursery Plus centre or a satellite centre. The core centres are the main bases for the centre teams and provide the full range of services. Nursery Plus centres provide some services alongside a full day care service and satellite centres operate with reduced opening hours but allow for local services to be available to reach certain areas and the communities that live there.

Children's Centre workers also carry out the lead professional role for Early Help cases in many instances, particularly where the children are younger than five years old. Involvement in this capacity generally lasts between 6-12 months, although where it is necessary and appropriate it continues beyond that time.

The Children's Centres offer a range of parenting programmes. These programmes are offered universally to avoid any stigma from attending such courses. Feedback from parents is positive and the Outcomes Star has been used to evaluate the outcome of one such parenting programme. This indicates that parents are reporting an improvement in self-confidence which helps improve not only their parenting skills, but also other aspects of life such as work and employability.

3. Debt Collection - Impact on Children and Young People

The Board received a report on the Council's debt collection methods prepared in response to reports by The Children's Society on the impact of debt and debt collection on children and young people. Members noted the steps taken by the Council to contact debtors, including additional contacts that are not required by law. The Council only instructs Enforcement Agents to collect outstanding council tax debt as a last resort; the setting up of a payment plan is always a preferred outcome.

Members were informed that the Council adopts a case by case approach, with signposting to additional advice and support such as the authority's Welfare Rights service or Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Members asked that Enforcement Agents be reminded to refer all cases where they believe children or young people to be involved to the Council.

The Board noted that Sandwell still offers a 100% Council Tax Support scheme. This is means-tested and applied to all eligible residents. Members noted that not all local authorities offer 100% support.

Members asked for further information on numbers of Sandwell's care leavers paying Council Tax, including those in receipt of Council Tax Support. This would help inform the ongoing pan-Scrutiny work on support for care leavers.

4. Update on New Belongings

Members noted an update on the New Belongings project which aimed to achieve a 'gold standard' for care leavers. To take this forward a survey of Sandwell care leavers had been undertaken and an action plan had been developed reflecting the findings of that survey. The Board requested an update on New Belongings early in the next municipal year.

5. Update from the Vice-Chair

The Board was informed about meetings of the Challenge to Schools and Academies Workstream that have been held since the last Board meeting. The Workstream is carrying out a piece of work to look at ways in which schools and local businesses can have closer relationships including through an 'adopt a school' approach. The Workstream has already held a workshop with representatives from some local academies and discussions are underway to take forward the work with the Black Country Chamber of Commerce and the Local Enterprise Partnership.

Councillor Gill
Vice-Chair of the Children's Services Scrutiny Board