

Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

10 October and 12, December, 2016

Summary of Matters Considered at the Board

Report of the Chair, Councillor J Underhill

The Scrutiny Board met on 10 October, 2016 and 12 December, 2016, the following items were considered:-

I have selected the main points of the discussion that I feel members of the Council will be particularly interested to know more about. For more detail, copies of the minutes are available on the Committee Management Information System (CMIS) via the Council's website at <http://cmis.sandwell.gov.uk/cmis5/>

Implications of the Education White Paper "Education Excellence Everywhere"

The Board welcomed that Sandwell MBC had a successful academy school programme with proportionately more teaching schools than other local authorities in the area to develop high quality teachers, however the Board found that there are not enough teachers to meet demand and recruitment of teachers in the Borough is proving difficult.

The Board considered implications of the White Paper including provision to set up grammar schools and changes to the Education Services Grant (£3.7m) which is to be replaced by a central block funding to deliver local authority retained duties from September 2017. This will result in a potential reduction of up to £3m at current pupil rates (£77 per pupil reduced to £15 per pupil).

The Board heard that the local authority has specific roles as a Convenor, a Commissioner and a Champion to provide school places, to support vulnerable children and those with learning needs and to act as a champion for children and families.

In relation to excluded pupil alternative provision and baseline assessment, the Board found that alternative provision is defined and reviewed annually, that schools are responsible for pupils temporarily excluded from their school and that the local authority will place permanently excluded young people at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) or suitable alternative provision. The Special Education Needs (SEN) Unit does recognise tests for dyslexia and there is

support for young people with learning behaviour associated with dyslexia both from the educational psychology team and with support in the classroom. There were less than 20 permanent exclusions in primary schools last year; however, secondary education was higher with 45-50 exclusions annually. A review of PRU places had highlighted the increases in referrals and the need for schools to be inclusive and keep pupils in schools.

The Board heard that a shortage for specialist teachers had been addressed in Sandwell with an initiative for a 'golden hello'. The initiative had attracted 52 specialist teachers for maths and science in Sandwell. Teachers will remain in placement for three years or repay the incentive. The Board found that teaching staff levels in Sandwell schools are not always culturally representative of the locality, however, in terms of minority groups there is a good representation in Sandwell.

The Board recognised that local authority schools are not allowed to be in debt without a licenced deficit agreement, but that several Academy schools are having difficulty managing finances. The change from local authority control to an academy is a one way door, once changed there is currently no way to change back to local authority control but the local authority is working alongside academies in its specific roles.

The Board will monitor the progress of the strategy for improved careers advice in schools and consider a further report outlining the review of SEN and PRU places and monitoring the actions on the implementation plan.

Fostering Service Update

The Board received an update relating to Fostering Services highlighting the challenges of recruitment and retention of foster carers and the activities put forward in the 'Fostering Service Improvement Plan' to address the recent OFSTED report recommendations. Sandwell currently has 318 foster carers (198 internal and 120 independent) who provide a temporary placement for a young person when absolutely needed.

The Scrutiny Board recognised that expectations on foster carers have changed in recent years, with foster carers expected to take an active part in the development of the young person, such as taking them to school and attending parents' evenings. As expectations increased, the number of people coming forward to express an interest in fostering has decreased. The Board identified there were gaps in representation from ethnic minority groups in fostering cover across the six towns. A new marketing plan is being developed to take account of decreasing enquiries from members of the public to become foster carers; the focus on recruitment in the 'Become a foster carer' campaign and dedicated approach across the six towns is welcomed.

The Fostering Improvement Plan (FIP) has been updated and the foster carer offer has been amended to make allowances more competitive for carer and family provision. Due to the higher costs to the Council of using agency foster carers, there are benefits for the Council recruiting more foster carers direct, in addition to help strengthen the support package for looked after children (LAC).

The Board found that recruitment to fostering is not a quick process, the stages of the process have to be followed meticulously; checks, references checked by independent manager, fostering panel. It is not always possible for the same Social Worker to see the process through from beginning to end, highlighting the importance of Social Worker retention. The Board were advised of an agreed West Midlands pay rate for Social Workers and that any Social Worker leaving to join an agency could not return to the Council for six months; also that new Social Workers would be assessed following a year in practice and after two years of satisfactory practice would receive a two increment salary rise.

The Board highlighted the implications of the authority's Children's Services moving into a Children's Trust in relation to staff morale and Social Worker retention and have been reassured that the Council will work closely with staff and consult throughout the process. Whilst the Trust was being imposed and the Commissioner having clear views about what was required, there is scope about how the Trust will be developed through improvement groups.

School Place Planning

The Board received a summary of current school place planning provision in primary and secondary schools in Sandwell which highlighted the increase in primary school expansion since 2010 and the measures taken to respond to the massive increase in birth-rate and 'new to UK' applications.

The falling birth-rate in reception class for the 2017-18 academic year enables school place planning to take a short respite to cope with the numbers of new to UK applications and the gap in projected reception numbers and capacity, which would result in more parental choice for reception places. The surge in primary school places will be hitting secondary schools in a few years and officers are talking to schools about what additional provision they intend to build in to respond to the surge.

The Council cannot build its own new schools; all new builds have to be Academies and agreed with the Department for Education (DfE). The Academy Transformation Trust (ATT) has agreed two proposals for 900 secondary school places and 126 secondary special places for 2018-2019 and a further 900 places had been submitted to the Education Funding Agency (EfA) for 2019; both are subject to land being identified and secured.

Suitable land for school building space was in shortage in Sandwell and any land identified would need to be a reasonable distance from borders with neighbouring authorities to ensure that the additional places generated help to close the gap in school places for children in Sandwell. The Director - Education advised that in addition to planning and building work to address the location issues, work with developers to build additional primary schools in large scale building projects was also being pursued.

The Scrutiny Board welcomed that risks were being recognised and addressed by building additional school spaces. The two new secondary schools will need to be in place by 2020, at least one by 2019.

Commissioning and monitoring of Serious Case Reviews

The Board received an update relating to commissioning and monitoring of Serious Case Reviews detailing the first quarter Serious Case Reviews (SCR), Independent Management Reviews (IMR), Table Top Reviews (TTR) and Significant notification to Safeguarding Board (SINFs).

The Board was assured that recommendations and actions arising from SCR are being audited and carried out. The reviews are overseen by the Safeguarding Board and the action plan was reviewed by SCR Safeguarding Sub Group. Tracking is conducted by the Independent Review Officer (IRO) with focus on the service for the child and the IRO pursues actions and acts as an adjudicator if they were not being followed up on. The tracking mechanism is a manual process which can be improved to an electronic version and outcomes more easily monitored.

Work Streams

The Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Scrutiny Board are leading on three in depth work streams relating to:

- Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers;
- Schools and Academies Relationships and Accountability;
- Childhood Obesity.

Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers

The work stream group met on 8 December 2016 to consider evidence gathered and will next meet on 12 January 2017 following which a survey to Children's Services Social Workers will be released. The report of the group will be considered by the Scrutiny Board in February 2017.

Schools and Academies Relationships and Accountability

The focus of the work stream is challenging educational attainment and developing and maintaining relationships between Academies, free schools and the Council. The work stream group will meet in February 2017.

Childhood Obesity

The focus of the work stream is physical activity in schools and nutritional value of school meals. A meeting with officers was held on 8 December 2016 to highlight evidence streams and potential witnesses to plan for a special meeting in February 2017. The increase in child obesity is of concern and as a result of initial discussions with Sandwell Inspired Partnership (SIPs) the Director of Public Health reported that an agreement had been made with SIPs to reduce the amount of sugar in school meals by 5%.

Councillor J Underhill

Chair of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board