

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday, 20 March 2023 at 6.00 pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Chair);
Councillors Chidley, Dunn, Preece, and Uddin.

Officers: Michael Jarrett (Director of Children and Education);
Julie Andrews (Head of Learning and Advisory Support);
Jacqui Smith (Chair of Sandwell Children's Trust);
Steven Gauntley (Head of Operations Sandwell Children's Trust);
Mandip Chahal (Senior Joint Commissioning Manager);
Oliver Flowers (Headteacher, Westminster School).

14/21 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors W Gill and Mayo and co-opted member K Heeley.

15/21 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

16/21 Minutes



Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 9 January and 22 February 2023 are approved as a correct record.

17/21 Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

18/21 Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update

Further to Minute No. 25/22 (10 October 2022), the Board received a performance update from Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) for the period July 2022 to February 2023.

Ofsted had carried out an inspection into the Voluntary Adoption Agency in December 2022. The Voluntary Adoption Agency Ofsted rating had been rated Good. The judgement noted; overall experiences and progress of service users taken into account; how well children, young people and adults were helped and protected had been rated Good, while the effectiveness of leaders and managers had been rated as Required Improvement.

SCT worked to progress permanence for children when adoption was identified as a part of a child's care plan and continued to work closely with the Regional Adoption Agency to increase the number of children placed in fostering to adopt placements.

The highlights of the inspection noted the positive relationships children built with adopters; children were introduced to adopters in a planned and sensitive way; collaboration between partners had ensured children had uninterrupted support; a governance structure enabled good oversight and service delivery; a culture of high expectations and aspirations for children.

The inspection had resulted in a number of recommendations; more feedback should be encouraged from children; child stories should be individualised; child and prospective adopters should be introduced in a timely manner; the adoption process should be non-judgmental and feedback and lessons learned should be sought from adopters.

The Board noted the following key performance headlines:-

- referrals had decreased to 474 per 10,000 over the last 12 months - a reduction from 580 per 10,000. The referral rate was lower than the statistical neighbour and West Midland average;
- re-referrals had increased from 20% to 23% over the last six-months which was 2.6% higher than statistical neighbours and 1.5% above the England average;
- there had been a reduction in referral rate (400 in the last 12 months) was a factor in the re-referral increase;
- the focus was ensuring the quality of the assessments and making use of the support services available;
- single assessments completed over the past 12-months had ranged from 56.5% to 95.2%. During February 2023 the number completed had been 88.3% and had been above 85% since October 2022 which was above statistical neighbour, West Midland and England average;
- the rates of assessment per 10,000 over the last 12-months had reduced from 718 per 10,000 to 530 per 10,000;
- there was continued improvement in relation to Section 47 Enquiries stemming from a better understanding and management of risk;
- the trajectory anticipated a rate of 183 per 10,000 over the last 12-months, significantly lower than 2018/19 with a rate of 312 per 10,000;
- initial Child Protection Conferences held within 15 working days was in February 2023 was 94.7%.
- of the Initial Child Protection Conferences, 82% resulted in a Child Protection Plan;
- there had been a reduction in the number of Child Protection Plans over the previous 12-months from 409 to 365. The figures were below the statistical neighbour and in line with the England average;
- of those children on Child Protection Plans, 16 children had been on a plan longer than two years;
- as of February 2023, 811 children were in care, a reduction from 848 in February 2022;
- over the last 12-months 167 children had entered care with 211 ceasing care;
- of those children in care 67 children had moved three times or more within the last 12-months;
- care leavers aged 19-21 who were NEET was 55.5%, which was 13% below the statistical neighbour and 15% below the West Midlands average;

The continued Social Worker recruitment challenges had been addressed. The national and regional shortage in social workers had been recognised in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and SCT was proactive in addressing the workforce recruitment and retention. A Workforce Strategy focused on growing our own, developing a marketing campaign and promoting a Sandwell Deal.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were provided and issues highlighted:-

- the number of children leaving care would require additional staff to support care leavers where necessary;
- among those who leave care a number moved to be with family members;
- intervention and preventative services worked to prevent re-referrals, however, a number of service users declined continued involvement with the service following the initial intervention;
- for those families who received intervention work, more had been done to ensure they understood the benefits of access to available services;
- the higher re-referral rates were linked to domestic abuse, and partnership working continued to alleviate this;
- a contract had been negotiated with the Richmond Fellowship which was hosted within SCT, for the delivery of the perpetrator programme, which aimed to break the cycle of domestic abuse;
- a cost of living summit held by the Council in March had been well attended with a range of voluntary and community partners, the work with partners was focused on supporting those in need and promoting ongoing partnership working;
- SCT and the Council continued to work in partnership to provide the necessary support and plans for those young people leaving care who were not in education, employment or training;
- the Regional Adoption Agency and SCT had been collecting information relating to feedback and lessons learned but had not adequately shared this between partners. Work was now undertaken to ensure partnership working between the Regional Adoption Agency and SCT;

- an ongoing challenge was adopters did not feel comfortable offering difficult or negative feedback fearing it having a detrimental impact on their application. SCT was encouraging potential adopters to engage with them and highlight any concerns;
- the Care Review had made specific reference to the ongoing workforce challenges and its implications. It was hoped that agency and project teams would be attracted back into local authorities.

19/21 The 16+ provision at the Westminster School

The Head of Westminster School outlined the work undertaken to improve educational and life-skill outcomes for children and young people at Westminster School and set out how the newly established Specialist College post-16 provision had provided new opportunities and skills for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The Westminster School had been at its present location since 2011, developing its offer and had been able to provide the children and young people with skills and opportunities to enable them to be productive and active members of the local community.

Westminster School had gone from being rated Good in 2014 to Outstanding in 2017, the first internship was in 2015, in 2016 the first students entered an apprenticeship and in 2017 the first student moved into paid employment. In 2019 the school had expanded into its own post-16 centre and 2020 saw a visit from a Government Minister. In 2021 the new 19-25 provision was approved.

The Westminster School provided a holistic approach to the curriculum with the child at the centre, the curriculum was specified across six areas;

- My Creativity;
- My Community;
- My Care and Independence;
- My Thinking Skills;
- My Communication;
- My Wellbeing.

The focus across the learning areas was enabling children and young people to become independent not dependent. The structure of education was to not have learning support continuously attached but rather building the skills and confidence of children and young people, to enable them to move from physical, modelled, verbal and general help to independence and independence across different situations.

The post-16 pathways was an effort to develop a genuine and realistic trajectory into employment for young people with SEND. A pathway for young people with SEND had often taken them from school to college, but then rather into employment, they had been consigned to staying at home and living separate to society.

For adults with a learning disability the percentage in England for those in employment was only 4.8% and in the West Midlands it was only 3.3%. The rate had also decreased over the last decade. Considering the money and effort that went into the education of children and young people with a learning disability, the outcome for the majority was very poor.

The Westminster School Specialist College was an attempt to reverse the trend and enable young people to progress into employment and become a valued member of the community. The Specialist College focused on developing employability pathways. Initially young people would be exposed to taster sessions allowing them to see what was on offer for them, following this the young people would be offered work experience to enable them to get a good understanding of what the job would entail. An internship would then develop the young person's ability to undertake the role with an idea that the young person would then move onto direct employment, an apprenticeship or traineeship.

A work readiness rubric enabled young people to be assessed and enable them and the school to understand their strengths but also areas for improvement, the skills-builder enabled a young person's development to be tracked overtime and demonstrate their growth and readiness for employment.

Since 2017/18 there had been a year-on-year success with 15-30% of young people moving into apprenticeships, internships and paid employment. Whilst the take up and growth of the post-16 provision had not been as great as was expected, the trend had

continued to grow and was expected to increase following the introduction of the Specialist College.

The Westminster School Specialist College had allowed for the expansion and renewed focus on developing the skills and abilities of young people post-16, with a focus on those young people aged 19-25. The internship and apprenticeship programme had allowed young people to enter the workforce, gain the necessary skills to undertake a role and ultimately enter paid employment.

The Westminster College had developed good working relationships across businesses in Sandwell and this had allowed many students to undertake apprenticeships and ultimately paid employment from a wide variety of businesses. It was hoped that the Council would consider building an apprenticeship programme that could incorporate some of the Westminster School Specialist College young people.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- the Employment and Skills Team recorded destination data for young people leaving education. Looking at destination data across Sandwell would demonstrate a broad range of outcomes;
- regeneration and employment and skills was a strategic priority for the Council and more work was required in terms of the cost of living crisis, work was required to look holistically at challenges in order to improve outcomes as a whole;
- levelling out opportunities for young people with SEND was a priority, recognising that current outcomes were not in line with neighbouring authorities;
- the Council was one of the biggest employers in Sandwell and it was therefore important that SEND apprenticeship opportunities were offered by the authority and its partners;
- the corporate apprenticeship levy was a means of funding apprenticeships for young people with SEND and allow the Council to get a return on its investment;
- the Council received £406 million under the dedicated schools grant, of this funding £66 million was identified with the High Needs Block and maximising the return was priority;
- as a Sandwell school, residents of the borough were a priority in admissions, however, if the model allowed, places

at Westminster School could be offered to those who live out of borough;

- the Council's Specialist Place Planning Strategy worked to prioritise the placement of children and young people within Sandwell, however, in some instances necessary provision must be sought out of borough;
- Westminster School worked closely with the Supported Employment Team to identify those young people with SEND who wanted to move into employment and guide them towards the Specialist College post-16 provision;
- supporting a sustainable growth strategy and getting young people into employment was the focus, which was not just about employment, but rather, about encouraging young people to be part of wider society, and a positive member of that society.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member for Children and Education be requested to provide a response to the Children's Scrutiny Board on his plans to increase the number of inclusive apprenticeships offered by Sandwell Council and its contractors.

(Councillor Dunn left the meeting)

20/21 Education Investment Area and Priority Investment Area developments

The Interim Assistant Director of Education Services provided an update to the Board on the Education Investment Area and Priority Education Investment Area developments.

The Priority Areas Programme was established to challenge and support schools to raise standards in all key stages to close educational gaps and to increase the proportion of schools and academies rated good or better by Ofsted.

The programme aimed to bring about rapid improvement in outcomes for pupils across Sandwell at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4). The additional support would enable students to be better prepared for the next stage in their education or employment and enhance their life chances and choices.

The Government had announced in February 2022 that it would be delivering a package of measures in 55 Education Investment

Areas, to further drive school improvement in England, as part of the levelling up agenda. The identified areas were comprised of local authorities where educational outcomes at the end of both KS2 and KS4 were the weakest and containing an Opportunity Area or areas previously identified by the Government for additional school improvement support.

Of the 55 Education Investment Areas, 24 of these had been identified as Priority Education Investment Areas and were set to receive more intensive investment. Sandwell was one of these Priority Education Investment Areas and had been allocated £2.9million in Local Needs Funding to support the initiative and deliver the agreed priorities and improvements within the life of the programme.

A Local Partnership Board had been established to work with Sandwell. The role of the Local Partnership Board included helping to identify the main challenges to improving outcomes for children and young people, identifying a range of interventions to address these challenges, and helping to drive support and activity within the Priority Education Investment Areas. The Board had also contributed to the development of Sandwell's Local Needs Delivery Plan and would support the monitoring of progress towards the agreed criteria within it.

Sandwell's Local Needs Delivery Plan was focused on three themes:-

- maths would focus on improving the quality of provision across targeted schools;
- English would focus on improving the teaching of literacy to ensure it was of good quality in all schools to enable learners to access the rest of the English curriculum and other subjects across both primary and secondary phases;
- speech and language would focus on ongoing development due to the impact of the pandemic, resulting in challenges in learning phonics at early years and KS1, which would have a long-term impact on KS2 attainment.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were provided and issues highlighted:-

- the data presented in the report was from May 2022 based on the academic year and the results from that year;
- the DfE were positive in taking on board the data from this academic year when considering further measures;

- the Council would be moving forward with a campaign on attendance and tackling persistent absence, it was important that measures aimed at improving attainment should be impacting those who required it;
- Early Years and SEND were a priority in addition to the areas identified;
- the Council had looked to be innovative and was focused on output, working on evidence to deliver results;
- the Council would work to enhance the digital offer and its use in education and curriculum delivery;
- work was underway to support young people and families with career aspirations, and a campaign was planned to be launched in the summer of 2023;
- those children who had taken up an early education place statistically achieve better educational outcomes than those who did not, work was underway to encourage more parents to access that offer.

21/21 Scrutiny Action Tracker

The Board noted progress on actions and recommendations from previous meetings.

Meeting ended at 7.58pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk