

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday, 13 November 2023 at 6.00 pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Chair);
Councillors Chambers (Vice-Chair), Allcock, Choudhry, Pall
and Weston;
Yvonne Ologbo - Parent Governor representative.

Officers: Michael Jarrett (Director of Children and Education);
Sally Giles (Assistant Director – Children’s Commissioning,
Partnerships and Improvement);
Balwant Bains (Head of Virtual School);
Kelly Harris (Skills & Employability Service Manager);
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

In Attendance: Councillor Hackett (Cabinet Member for Children, Young
People and Education)

36/23 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashraf, W Gill,
and Mayo and Barrie Scott Co-opted Member - Church of England
dioceses of Birmingham and Lichfield Representative.

37/23 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

38/23 Minutes



Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2023 are approved as a correct record.

39/23 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

40/23 Post 16 Pathways

The Board received an update on the post 16 pathways available to young people in Sandwell. The period of transition from full time education to post 18 destinations was important to help guide young people to achieve their aspirations. Education, Employment and Training figures had been generally good in Sandwell for those young people aged 16-18, however, post 19 figures had raised challenges.

The Board noted the following key headlines:-

- the Council had a statutory duty to provide targeted careers support for vulnerable young people;
- Sandwell Connexions was the team responsible for delivering the service in Sandwell which supported vulnerable groups including those young people involved in the youth justice system, those with attendance issues, Children in Care, those with SEND and those with family issues;
- since the raising of the participation age in education, the monitoring of post 16 outcomes had become an important aspect of Sandwell Connexions focus;
- the September guarantee meant there was a statutory duty for Connexions to return data on the placements of those young people aged 16-18;
- for 2022/23 1.7% of young people were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) , this was an improvement over the 2021/22 figure of 2.6%;
- Sandwell ranked in Quintile 1 in the Country for its 16-18 NEET figures, which equated to 7th in the Country;
- the figures for September 2023 demonstrated Sandwell was ahead of the national and regional average;
- in August 2022 87.3% of Sandwell's young people in care aged 16 in Employment, Education or Training (EET), this had improved and in August 2023 it was 90.6%;

- the percentage of care leavers aged 17 and 18 in EET had been 60% in August 2022 and 71% in August 2023;
- the percentage of care leavers aged 19-21 in EET had been 44.5% in August 2022 and 48.6% in August 2023, this was below the England (62%) and West Midlands (60%) average;
- the percentage of those young people with SEND who were NEET was less than the West Midlands (9.4%) and England (9.7) average at 8.3%;
- the specialist EET support for children in care and care leavers included:
 - bespoke Sandwell Connexions Career advice and guidance programme from year 8 to year 11;
 - access to the aspire to higher education programme;
 - a NEET panel allowed social workers to refer young people towards career advice and support;
 - ringfenced apprenticeship opportunities across the Council and Sandwell Children's Trust;
 - the employment and skills team building a bond with care leavers to support them in accessing opportunities.
- the specialist EET support for young people with SEND included:
 - Connexions advice and guidance;
 - those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) would be supported up to the age of 25;
 - supported internships where those with SEND were given a work placement;
 - supported apprenticeships which was aimed to follow any internship;
 - the support of a specialist employment team to support those with SEND.
- since 2021/22 there had been 2070 apprenticeships started;
- the take up of apprenticeships since 2016/17 had reduced by 46.6%;
- apprenticeships were not just for young people; the take up for those under 19 was 430, those aged between 19-24 was 650 and those aged 25 plus was 990;
- there was less opportunities for level 2 apprenticeships which had made it more difficult for young people to access apprenticeships;
- of the apprenticeships offered, 44% had been advanced apprenticeships (level 3), 29% higher apprenticeships (level 4) and 27% intermediate apprenticeships (level 2);
- the Council's apprenticeship programme was award winning;

- under the apprenticeship levy 954 apprenticeships had been started across the Council and schools;
- the age range accessing the Council's apprenticeship programme was between 16 and 62; 599 had been new entrants which had included a number of young people and those who were care leavers;
- those young people aged 19-24 who had been in receipt of out of work benefits was 2600 in August 2023 which accounted for 9.1%, this was above the West Midlands (6.7%) and National (4.9) averages;
- the causes of youth unemployment had been attributed to:
 - end of or reduced funding streams and support available;
 - lack of skills and experience for vacancies available;
 - mental health and anxiety;
 - lack of work experience;
 - financial barriers – benefit reliance/apprenticeship wage;
 - generational worklessness;
 - lack of willingness to travel outside of the borough for opportunities.
- measures introduced to reduce youth unemployment included:
 - introduction of the Accelerate programme which aimed to support young people in getting the experience necessary to move into employment;
 - the Sandwell Youth Hub at the YMCA in West Bromwich which was a partnership between the Council and the DWP;
 - the UK Shared Prosperity Fund which had replaced the European Social Fund;
 - introduction of jobs and skills support using the Commonwealth Games legacy funding;
 - the children in care and care leavers NEET strategy;
 - Local Supportive Employment strategy with the DWP for those with SEND;
 - growing the supportive internship model in the Council;
 - the Council's Skills and Employment Strategy had been refreshed.

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

- young people between 16 and 18 were required to be in employment, education or training, post 19 however, young people had more of a choice and could choose to drop out;
- for those young people who had left care, the Council was in a position to work with them to encourage them to take the necessary steps to enter and remain in employment, education or training;
- it was not entirely clear why the youth unemployment figures in Sandwell were so high, it may be down to young people leaving education and not been able to find, for a number of reasons, employment or training;
- the strategies and programmes were anticipated to support young people enter employment;
- sometimes employers put up barriers to young people accessing work through their requirements;
- the Council was focused on reducing the NEET figures amongst care leavers and increasing their access to opportunities;
- the Council was working to reduce youth unemployment and bring it in line with the national average;
- understanding the reasons behind the 16-18 EET figures and post-19 NEET figures was a strategic priority for the Council;
- work was required to understand the transition from childhood to adulthood for care leavers and the support they require;
- a number of children in care and care leavers would have had very negative and difficult upbringing and as a result struggle in the transition to adulthood. It was important that the Council supported them in entering EET;
- the Council utilised social media to publicise the Accelerate programme and other support available;
- figures related to unemployed young people who were SEND and had an EHCP were not available;
- through the Commonwealth Games legacy, funding had been dedicated to particular pathways to support young people's wellbeing;
- the Council had invested £1 million of Covid emergency funding into a health and wellbeing programme which supported programmes that addressed children's and young people's mental health;
- the demographic breakdown of those unemployed was available;
- it was important that career guidance and support was led by the young person; it was not the role of officers and support

workers to direct young people but rather explore opportunities and guide them towards those areas;

- the Council had fed back with regional partners the issues around the lack of level 2 apprenticeships and the knock-on effect it had when recruiting;
- the DWP had approached the Council with regards to the establishment of a Youth Hub in Sandwell. The Council had been working with the YMCA in West Bromwich to establish the Hub which had been open from October 2023. The aim was to support young people who were on Universal Credit and who were economically inactive.

Resolved that:-

- (1) a further report is brought to the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board highlighting the barriers that exist for young people accessing Education, Employment or Training post-19, and the measures in place to reduce youth unemployment;
- (2) the Director of Children's Services provides feedback to the Board on the Council's provision of supported internships for young people and those with SEND;
- (3) the Children's Services and Education Board is provided with an update on the work and impact of the Youth Hub that had recently opened.

41/23 Sandwell Virtual School

Sandwell Virtual School aimed to promote achievement, raise attainment and ensure equality of opportunity and to enhance the life chances of all Children in Care.

The Virtual School Head was the lead responsible officer for ensuring that schools had the arrangements in place to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the authority's Looked After Children, including those placed out-of-borough.

The Board noted the following key headlines:-

- Sandwell Virtual School for Children in Care had an intentionally high expectation for children so that they were given every opportunity to access the very best education possible and achieve their potential;
- a dedicated team comprising of a headteacher, operations manager, advisory teachers and support workers provided support to those children and young people in care;
- Ofsted had made repeated positive statements on the Sandwell Virtual School including:
 - “the virtual school has high expectations for children in care”
 - “[the children in care] are well supported and make progress in their education and learning”
 - “Children have access to a range of social and educational opportunities”
- Nationally there were around 82,000 children in care which continued to increase and was expected to reach 100,000 by 2035;
- the most common reason for children to move into care was - at risk of abuse or neglect – which accounted for 54,270 children (66% of all cases);
- males accounted for 56% of the cohort, compared to 51% in the overall child population in Sandwell;
- Children in Care were predominantly older aged 10-15 years old and accounted for 39% of children, those aged 5-9 years were 18%, those 1-4 years 14% and those less than 1 year old 5%;
- The Virtual School was responsible for 503 children;
- approximately 48% of Sandwell children in care attended school outside of Sandwell, with 93% attending schools in and within 20 miles of Sandwell;
- of the schools attended by children in care:
 - 16 percent of the overall Children in Care cohort attended an education setting rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted;
 - 88% percent attended an education setting that was Ofsted-rated ‘good or outstanding’;
 - only 1 percent of the cohort attended a setting judged to be ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted;
 - children attending inadequate schools were provided with additional support;
- Pupil Premium came directly to the Virtual School. Based on the Personal Education Plan of each child, the funding was then moved to the child’s educational setting;

- Virtual School retained a proportion of that funding where it provided a creative curriculum which included:
 - arts and crafts day;
 - film making workshop;
 - Easter arts festival and theatre performance;
 - an introduction to acting at the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre;
 - a prosthetics workshop.
- a joint Aspire to University programme was run across the wider Black Country:
 - Sandwell had the highest proportion of students in the programme;
 - those children on the scheme were identified in year 6 and they were worked with to encourage them;
 - there were 129 young people across years 8-13 on the programme;
 - in 2023 there were 10 graduates of the programme all heading in positive directions.
- the attendance at school from children in care continued to be higher than the national average at 93.9% compared to 92.5%;
- of the 503 children in care there had been 106 cases of suspensions from school (21% of suspensions) involving 45 individuals from the cohort;
- the Virtual School engaged 554 service partners and carers in training over the 2022/23 academic year;
- the Virtual School ran a Music Provision Programme which allowed those children from year 4 to 7 to engage with free music lessons;
- the Personal Education Plan completion for the 2022-23 academic year indicated that 94% had been completed;
- quality assurance showed that 69% of those completed were judged as good or outstanding with 10% being inadequate;
- the Virtual School took a strategic leadership role in promoting the educational outcomes of Children with a Social Worker;
- the Virtual School worked in partnership with the Albion Foundation working directly with children and young people in care;
- the NEET figures for those leaving care continued to fall; work with Connexions meant that every child in care from year 8 received a careers interview;
- Key Stage One outcome data demonstrated:

- there was a rise in attainment in all areas: Reading +19%, Writing +7% and Maths +17%, closing the gap between children in care and all Sandwell children.
- 31% of the Key Stage Two cohort had SEND/EHCP or SEND support, and there remained a gap in the cohort attainment;
- of the 29 children with no SEND, the outcomes surpassed those of all Sandwell Children in Reading Writing and Maths.

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

- parents had fed back to Councillors that the Albion Foundation had undertaken good and important work for the local community;
- teacher assessments in 2021/22 meant that figures could not be compared to a regular school examination year, it was also the case that at small numbers individuals could significantly impact the statistics;
- there was a programme that distributed support packs to those pupils who had been identified as struggling in education;
- there was a programme of support that worked with carers and children in care to identify those who would benefit from additional academic support;
- the aim was to bring down the numbers of children in care educated outside of the Borough but that was dependent on the number of carers available and the location of the child in the Borough;
- there was a national issue with regards to the availability of foster carers;
- the number of suspensions was high, and intervention work was undertaken to work with the children involved to address concerns and challenges.

42/23 ASEND Inspection Outcome and Next Steps

The Board received an update on the ASEND Inspection conducted by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) between 19 June and 7 July 2023. The inspection evaluated against the new Ofsted and CQC inspection framework which was launched in January 2023.

The revised framework evaluated the effectiveness and impact of local area partners and the extent to which children and young people with SEND, including those who attended Alternative Provision, were receiving consistently good experiences leading to consistently good outcomes.

While the inspection had been positive, the inspection had found that children and young people with SEND, and those who attended Alternative Provision, received inconsistent experiences leading to them achieving inconsistent outcomes in Sandwell. This was referred to as a 'category 2' outcome for the local area partnership.

A category 2 outcome meant that the local area partnership would submit to routine monitoring by Ofsted and CQC and supported by the Department for Education (DfE) in making the necessary improvements and within agreed timeframes. Following the inspection, all local areas were required to publish a local area inclusion plan by 2024. Sandwell would be publishing theirs ahead of the deadline set by the DfE.

The three areas for improvement noted by Ofsted and CQC were:

- area leaders should strengthen multi-agency working across the partnership between education, health and social care, so that children and young people's needs were identified and assessed in a more efficient and timely manner;
- area leaders should develop co-production with children and young people with SEND at a strategic level so that children and young people played a key role in developing improvement strategies and plans;
- area leaders should increase the number and range of short break opportunities to support the needs of all children and young people with SEND, including those with complex needs and post-16 young people.

The recommendations would be taken on board and actioned, which included incorporating them within the local area inclusion plan.

The inspectors were highly complementary about the renewed energy and vision shared across the partnership for children and young people with SEND, and the new SEND eco-system

transformation programme launched by the local area partnership in June 2023. This had given the inspectors a very clear understanding that the local area partners, through the self-evaluation, were accurate in their judgements and the actions they were taking to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND.

The senior leaders of the Sandwell local area partnership for SEND were pleased that the inspection was both developmental and helpful and confirmed the accurate self-evaluation of the partnership.

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

- the placement of children and young people with SEND out of Borough was to do with the needs of those individuals; local authorities nationally were not in a position to meet the needs of every child within their boundary and therefore were required to place and educate some children out of Borough to ensure their specific needs were met;
- the provision offered was very often based on need, it was often that needs changed and services were required to adapt, working with partners across services was required to identify and meet the needs of children with SEND;
- the Council had been working with local college providers in Sandwell and neighbouring authorities to identify their ability to meet the needs of young people with an EHCP and SEND;
- there were a number of children on a reduced timetable; the figures were at the lowest point that they had ever been, however, it was acknowledged that in some circumstances this approach was best for the children involved;
- local authorities would be required after 2024 to provide a comprehensive vision for those children with SEND, Sandwell had already developed a vision, however it was in need of a refresh.

43/23 Scrutiny Action Tracker

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

44/23 Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan as it related to Children, Young People and Education.

Meeting ended at 7.40pm

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