

Report to Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

14 November 2022

Subject:	Sandwell Virtual School for Children with a Social Worker
Director:	Director of Children and Education Michael Jarrett
Contact Officer:	Executive Head Teacher of STEPS and LACE Virtual School, Balwant Bains balwant_bains@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations




- 1.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the impact of Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS) in supporting New to the UK children and families.
- 1.2 The Board considers the risks to the community and pressures on schools if the centre's financial support ends.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The work undertaken by Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS) has been a crucial service providing education to the most vulnerable in our community. The Scrutiny Board requested an overview of the service to better understand how it operates and impacts the outcomes for children and young people in Sandwell.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Best start in life for children and young people</p> <p>Sandwell is a community where our families have high aspirations and where we pride ourselves on equality of opportunity and on our adaptability and resilience.</p> <p>When reflecting on our priority: ‘best start in life for children and YP’ we think about Sandwell children 0 to 5; for migrant children STEPS provided their best start in life irrespective of their age, gender identity, nationality or creed. We give families a positive experience so that they are safe, settled and want to become residence with high aspirations, able to contribute to the local economy.</p>
	<p>Strong resilient communities</p> <p>Our communities are built on mutual respect and taking care of each other, supported by all the agencies that ensure we feel safe and protected in our homes and local neighbourhoods.</p> <p>For many of our International Families STEPS is their first interaction with council services. We give them direction and by linking services across the LA we can direct the appropriate support (homelessness and rental arrears, benefits support, Education Health and Care Plans applications, travel assistance)</p>
	<p>Strong resilient communities</p> <p>Our motto reflects the councils Corporate Commitments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DREAM (our families dream of a better future) • GROW (in their learning, confidence and practical application) • THRIVE (in Sandwell and make positive economic and social contributions)



4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS) is based at Cooper's Lane, Smethwick B67 7DW. It is a school-like setting for 75 children aged 5-16 and was launched in February 2017 as a local authority pilot. Since then, more than 2,000 children representing 64 nationalities have attended and there have been over 4000 service users.
- 4.2 The Centre supports Sandwell's school admissions process. STEPS is a frontline service that provides continuity in learning. Early intervention helps us safeguard vulnerable children and families quickly and prevents them being exploited, be this via rogue landlords, attendance at unregistered schools, modern day slavery or child sexual exploitation. The average length of stay is 16 days.
- 4.3 A Cost Benefit Analysis indicates that with an investment of £868,667 into STEPS; the saving to the public purse has been £8,131,372 in truancy aversion and improved families and children's wellbeing (RHCS independent evaluation January 2020); over a 32-month period.
- 4.4 Furthermore, STEPS is Sandwell's front-line service supporting the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP scheme, launched April 2021); relocation or assistance to former UK employed staff in Afghanistan.

The Home Office placed 85 individuals (including 11 families) in a 'Holding Hotel' in Sandwell on 17 September 2021, STEPS has been instrumental in supporting these families and have sourced schooling/education for:

- 5 reception aged children
- 14 primary aged children
- 10 secondary aged pupils
- 2 post 16 pupils

Recently STEPS has hosted 9 Ukrainian children who have fled the war in their country.



4.5 At present we are directing services to protect the most vulnerable of our families from the cost of living crises:

- We are a Sandwell Food Bank Voucher issuer online and on paper. 6 have been issued and staff have taken families to the foodbank.
- 2 emergency donations of £20 have been issued (sourced by donations to the centre); one for gas and electricity and one for emergency food (that led to a food bank solution).
- 6 referrals to Welfare Rights Advisers have been made (through community Navigators).
- 1 homeless housing application – current rental rates unaffordable to a family with a disabled child being evicted.
- 3 families signposted to Disability Living Allowance applications.
- Uniform bought for Ukrainian and Afghani refugees.
- 5 council applications for travel assistance completed with families.
- We provide support for all children who are entitled to Free School Meals in submitting the application for meals at mainstream schools.
- We make schools aware of children/families that have “No Recourse to Public Funds”, as these are the most vulnerable to the increasing cost of living.

4.6 All of this work was recognised at the National MJ Awards and this council service was awarded winners in the category Innovation in Children’s Service’s.



- 4.7 Based on our successful pilot, STEPS was recognised by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government in February 2018, with a 24-month funding grant of £868,667 through the Migration Fund.
- 4.8 The centre remained open for families throughout the pandemic and we have budgetary security until September 2023.

5 Implications

Resources:	<p>A Cost Benefit Analysis indicates that with an investment of £868,667 into STEPS; the saving to the public purse has been £8,131,372 in truancy aversion and improved families and children’s wellbeing (RHCS independent evaluation January 2020); over a 32-month period.</p> <p>We are based at the Hollies Centre (Smethwick), purposefully resourced as a school site. There is a staffing compliment of 7.3.</p>
Legal and Governance:	Legal implications including regulations/law under which proposals are required/permitted and constitutional provisions
Risk:	Staff are made redundant if no further funding is resource and the building is ‘returned’ (lease hold) to council use.
Equality:	The centre delivers a ‘British Values’ curriculum whilst respecting faith and cultural diversity.
Health and Wellbeing:	At the initial meeting with families we make sure they are registered with a GP and have access to local dentists, A&E etc resources.
Social Value	<p>We provide work experience for Sandwell school children, volunteering opportunities and work placement opportunities.</p> <p>Additionally, we have delivered ESOL classes, Sexual Health classes, anti-natal classes and delivered the ‘changes’ programme that prepares adults for a life int eh UK.</p> <p>We are respected by schools and have strong relationships with local charities.</p>
Climate Change:	Implications for climate change outcomes and any potential impact on the environment (e.g. impact on emissions, resource use, or the natural environment)

