

# Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 10 October 2022 at 5.30pm  
at the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Hinchliff (Chair)  
Councillors Dhariwal, Dunn, W Gill, McVittie, Preece and Uddin

**Officers:** Michael Jarrett (Director of Children and Education)  
Sue Moore (Assistant Director Education and Support Services)  
Jacqui Smith (Chair of Sandwell Children' Trust)  
Emma Taylor (Chief Executive of Chair of Sandwell Children'  
Trust)  
Sally Giles (Strategic Partnerships and Commissioning Manager)  
Mandip Chahal (Senior Joint Commissioning Manager)  
Lynn Noble (Interim Head of Service Adoption@Heart)  
Mark Davies (Chief Executive SCVO)  
Stephnie Hancock (Senior Democratic Services Officer)  
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer)

## 20/22 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Akhtar and Shackleton, and Co-opted member Kelly Heeley.

## 21/22 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.



## 22/22 **Minutes**

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21 March 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

## 23/22 **Urgent Additional Item of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

## 24/22 **Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2021/2022**

The Board received the Regional Adoption Agency's Annual Report for 2021/22.

The following headline data for Sandwell was noted:-

- 34 Children had been granted adoption orders as of 31 March 2022. This was a slight reduction compared to previous years, but was a national trend as more children were being placed with relatives.
- 38 Placement Orders had been granted - eight children were subject to a change of care plan, three were on hold waiting further assessment and four children had been linked to families but not formally matched. The agency was proactively family finding for the remaining 23.
- 29 children had been placed with adoptive families, of which 17 were in-house. This compared to 35 the previous year.
- 'Foster to adopt' placements had increased significantly since the establishment of the agency.
- There was an increase in permanence across the Adoption@Heart agency. This was also reflected in national data.
- The use of in-house adopters had increased within the agency, which had resulted in a reduction in the inter-agency budget from 55% to 35%.
- The number of days for children entering care and moving in with the adoptive family was below the national threshold of 426 days, but this was in line with regional performance.



- The number of days from receiving a Placement Order and the agency agreeing a match with an adoptive family was above the government threshold of 121 days, however, this also reflected national performance.
- Children who waited longer to be placed for adoption were typically those in sibling groups, with complex needs and those from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- There had been 57 adopters approved over 2021/22. This was a reduction but was also replicated nationally.
- 43 assessments for adoption support had been approved. Adoption support funding was a key factor in the success of any placement.
- Adoption@Heart was part of a national pilot, ending in March 2023, trialling digital methods of post-adoption contact (keeping in touch).
- There had been three formal complaints regarding adoption support and allowances.
- Governance arrangements had been streamlined with the creation of one Strategic Partnership Board (SPB) replacing both the Management Board and the Strategic Commissioning Board, with effect in January 2023.

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

- Waiting times for children to be placed for adoption averaged out over the three year period.
- There had been significant increase in those from the LGBT community and single people coming forward to adopt. The agency was working hard to reach the whole community and dispel the myth that adoption was just for middle class people.
- Adoption@Heart was reliant on partners to refer birth parents for support. 29 had been referred in 2021/22. There was a continued effort to engage with birth parents, but disengagement was an ongoing concern. Partners had been asked to refer birth parents as soon as possible for creation of the child's life story book and to provide support.
- The digital contact pilot was for those where face to face contact was not appropriate and it provided an opportunity for information to be shared more frequently than twice a year.
- The decision to streamline governance arrangements was as a result of the good progress made by the agency.



- ‘You Can Adopt’ was a national campaign to increase adoption focused on finding families for those children who waited longer.
- There was an ongoing conversation about the financial support offered to adopters to encourage people to take up adoption and overcome financial barriers.
- Both informal and formal complaints were taken seriously and practice and policy reviewed where necessary.

The Board received the Annual Report and the Chair would provide a summary feedback to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board.

25/22

## Sandwell Children’s Trust Performance Update

Further to Minute No. 06/22 (Monday 14 February 2022, when the last update was presented to the Scrutiny Board) the Board received a performance update from Sandwell Children’s Trust for the period July 2021 up to July 2022.

Ofsted had carried out an inspection in May 2022, which had been delayed from 2020 as a result of the pandemic. The Trust’s Ofsted rating had improved from *Inadequate* to *Requires Improvement to be Good* in all areas. The Trust had refreshed its Improvement Plan, utilising the feedback provided by Ofsted.

The Board noted the following headlines:-

- Referrals had reduced to 523 per 10,000, this was down from 650 per 10,000 the previous year. The figures put Sandwell lower than statistical neighbours and more in line with the West Midlands’ average.
- The rate of re-referrals had reduced from 22.6% last year to 20%. The rate was 0.8% lower than statistical neighbours and 2.7% lower than the England average.
- The percentage of Single Assessments completed within 45 working days had fluctuated, from 90% in July 2021 to 56.5% in February 2022 to 62.3% in July 2022. On average it had been around 70%, below the statistical neighbour and West Midland average.



- The rate of Single Assessments per 10,000 over the last 12 months had reduced from 718 to 520, which was now below statistical neighbours.
- Section 47 enquiries had reduced from 312 in 2018/19 to 178 per 10,000.
- Initial Child Protection Conferences had reduced from 96.9 per 10,000 to 56 per 10,000.
- The number of Child Protection Plans had reduced from 52.2 per 10,000 in 2021 to 48.8 per 10,000.
- There were currently 13 children (which represented seven families) who had been the subject of a Child Protection Plan for longer than two years.
- As of July 2022, 837 children were in care (100.8 per 10,000) which was a reduction from 853 previous year (102.8 per 10,000). At the time of reporting this had decreased to 818. This was a significant achievement.
- Over the last 12 months 187 Children had re-entered care with 192 Children leaving care.
- Over 90 care leavers were in suitable accommodation and there was a focus on increasing the number in education or training.
- OFSTED had been impressed with the children's voice being at the centre of the Trust' work.
- Workforce challenges continued and reflected the national picture.

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

- The response to children suffering neglect was a partnership responsibility and the Trust relied on partners to identify needs as soon as possible and focus on Early Help. Ofsted had found that some children's plans had not been progressed as quickly as they should have, however, there was evidence that the Trust was getting better at getting children out of the care system sooner and identifying pregnant moms earlier.
- There were currently 203 social workers across the Trust. There were 27 vacancies as of October 2022. Workforce was the single largest problem that the Trust faced and was raised with the Department for Education at every opportunity. There was an effort to retain and recruit social workers with attractive conditions and benefits along with learning and development opportunities.



- The SCT had established within the Trust the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment Academy to act as an internal support, development and learning for newly qualified social workers in their first year of work. There were 31 social workers on the programme.
- Exit interview information indicated that social workers were leaving the Trust in favour of agency work, along with issues around work life balance and personal reasons.
- The government had recognised the impact that agencies, and their rapacious methods of targeting staff, had on the workforce.
- It had been anticipated that the Trust would have received a *Good* rating from Ofsted had the inspection gone ahead in 2020. The objective of the Trust's leadership remained to get to *Outstanding*.
- The Director of Children and Education undertook to ensure that this Board was provided with financial performance information in future, as well as the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Board.
- Ofsted in their report noted the good practices across the SCT but this good practice was not necessarily replicated across the whole Trust. Getting to *Good* required that consistency.
- It was recognised that Independent Reviewing Officers needed to get better at challenging decisions.
- There was a concern that the 'cost of living crisis' could lead to an increase in families accessing services and more children coming into the system. The Trust was working with the Council.
- Every safeguarding referral was taken seriously, the reduction in the referral rate was positive, and there been no reduction in contact rate. Working with partners there had been a lot more scrutiny of referrals. Previously a lot of referrals did not have consent, now the Trust was working on the 'front door' approach and working closely with partners. The service was focused on bringing the right children into the statutory system and working to provide the necessary support at the 'front door'.

The Board also noted a spotlight report on children in care. It was noted that there had been a steady decline in the number of children in care since the establishment of the Trust. The numbers had peaked in July 2019 with just over 930 children and young people in care, the figures had now reduced to just over 830. The



demographic breakdown of those 830 children and young people demonstrated that 52% were male and 48% were female, 54% were white while 26% were mixed, 9% were black/black British and 8% were Asian/Asian British.

The number of children becoming looked after had reduced significantly since 2018/19. With the exception of 2018/19 the numbers of children entering care was below statistical neighbours. The number of children leaving care had also remained fairly consistent over the last three years and on par with statistical neighbours.

Foster placements for those children in internal and external foster care was 462 as of July 2022. This number accounted for 55% of those children who were in care. 165 children were in foster placements with family and friends ('connected care'), which represented just under 20% of the overall number. 57 children were in residential homes. The remaining children were placed with parents (97), living independently (33), placed for adoption (19) within other placements (3), and within the NHS system (1).

There had been, and continued to be, a focus on prevention with an increase in family group conferencing. The Family Solutions Team had had a 100% success rate in preventing children entering care. The Multi-Systemic Therapy Team had supported 39 children and 89% of these remained with their families. The Trust's focus was on permanency from the outset, which did not just mean adoption. To support this a joined-up approach between Early Help, Care Planning and Edge of Care Interventions was crucial.

26/22

## Covid Funding Update

The Board received a report detailing how Covid Emergency Funding had been used to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

It was widely acknowledged that the pandemic had had a detrimental impact on children and young people. The Cabinet had approved proposals on how to tackle this by Cabinet in 2021/2022 (Minute No. 161/21 of the Cabinet meeting held on Wednesday 29



September 2021). Some initiatives had started later than anticipated and some were not delivered in the 2021/22 financial year, however there had been agreement for these to be carried forward and used in 2022/23 and 2024/25.

To support the rising demand for services, the Cabinet had also approved further initiatives, including for those children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities at its meeting on Wednesday 22 June 2022 (Minute No. 124/22). These were agreed for 2022/23 and with longer-term demand to be reviewed at Budget Board post September 2022.

The Strategic Partnerships and Commissioning Manager reported that a consultation with children and young people had revealed the pandemic had impacted them negatively reporting that:-

- they had missed out on education and were not prepared for exams;
- their mental health had been negatively affected, they felt anxious and were concerned with returning to school;
- social media was having a negative impact on their self-image;
- they missed their friends and peers and felt isolated.

A significant proportion of the Covid Recovery funding (£1.1m) had been allocated to supporting the increased emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of young people before they escalated and required more intensive services. The purpose of the funding was to increase capacity within the voluntary sector to meet this increased demand as quickly as possible. Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations was managing the funding on behalf of the Council via a grant aid agreement. A multi-agency panel with representatives from CAMHS, the Council, Public Health, Sandwell Children's Trust, Education Psychology and the Charter Mark team had been set up to establish criteria for the programme, agree the projects and monitor programme implementation.

To date there had been a range of activity and impact. 13 providers had received grant funding and delivered a range of activities across the six towns. Over 2,000 individuals had accessed the support sessions.





The support provided to children and young people was ongoing as the impact of the pandemic became more understood work had continued with partners to best identify areas that needed additional support. Work was being undertaken to identify those schools who needed additional support and Public Health had been undertaking needs assessments to support ongoing commissioning. Feedback had been received from young people and work was now underway to identify how to meet their needs going forward.

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

- Schools could apply for funding independently and were not obligated to inform Council.
- Schools were unaware of the support available. A network of schools and mental health professionals was being created to showcase good practice.
- SCVO had spent a proportion of the funding to appoint a project officer dedicated to the children's support agenda. Regular reports were submitted to the Council on expenditure and activities to ensure that economies of scale were achieved, and funding impact was maximised.
- Most organisations were working across the six towns.
- The service was working to better understand the impact of the pandemic. The recommendations arising from the Board's review on the impact of lockdown on children and families would be coming to the Board's next meeting for final approval before submission to the Cabinet.
- The terms of reference of the multi-agency panel ensured that due diligence was undertaken.

27/22

### **Response from the Cabinet in respect of the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review of Elective Home Education**

Further to Minute No. 40/21 of Scrutiny Board meeting on 29 November 2021, the Board received the response from the Cabinet in respect of the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Review of Elective Home Education (EHE).



The Cabinet had accepted all of the recommendations, which had now been actioned/implemented. The Board also noted that, in addition, a new EHE Team Structure was now in place from September 2022 to increase capacity and two higher level teacher assistants (HLTA's) had been appointed to support the EHE Advisory Teacher. The team would also get additional support from the Attendance Support Service with an allocated "children not in school" officer.

## 28/22 **Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Board noted an update on progress on previous actions and recommendations.

A further update on progress relating to the SEND Transport model recommendations (Minutes No. 35/21, Monday 27 September 2021 and Minute No. 07/22 of Monday 14 February 2022) would be provided at the next Board meeting.

## 29/22 **Forward Plan - Children's Services Items**

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

## 30/22 **Children's Services and Education Work Programme**

The Board noted its work programme for 2022/23.

Meeting ended at 7.26pm

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