

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 14 November at 5.30pm
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Akhtar, Chambers, Dunn, W Gill, McVittie, Preece,
Uddin.
Kelly Heeley (Co-opted Member)

In Attendance: Councillor Hackett (Cabinet Member for Children and
Education) and Councillor Millar.

Officers: Michael Jarrett (Director of Children and Education)
Sue Moore (Assistant Director Education and Support)
Balwant Bains (Head of Sandwell Virtual School)
Stephnie Hancock (Deputy Democratic Services Manager)
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer)

31/22 **Apologies for Absence**

An apology was received from Councillor Shackleton (Chair).

32/22 **Declarations of Interest**

Co-opted member Kelly Heeley declared a non-pecuniary interest in the matter referred to at Minute No. 37/22 – Scrutiny Action Tracker as she was a user of the SEND Transport service.



33/22 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2022 are approved as a correct record.

34/22 Additional Item of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

35/22 Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service

The Board received a presentation outlining the impact of the Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS) in supporting those children and families who were new to the United Kingdom.

Launched in February 2017 as a local authority pilot scheme to tackle the challenges of getting international arrivals into school, STEPS provided a school-like setting that catered for up to 75 children aged 5-16. STEPS acted as frontline service that provided continuity in learning. Early intervention helped safeguard vulnerable children and families and prevented exploitation. Since its introduction more than 2,000 children, representing 64 nationalities, had attended the Centre and there had been over 4000 service users.

The following work of the Centre in supporting the most vulnerable families was highlighted:-

- Issuing of food bank vouchers to families in need.
- Emergency donations of £20 had been issued for utilities and emergency food.
- Referrals to Welfare Rights Advisers.
- Support with homeless housing applications.
- Signposted families towards Disability Living Allowance applications.
- Uniform bought for Ukrainian and Afghani refugees.



- Supported applications for travel assistance for families.
- Supported Free School Meal applications for children and young people moving into mainstream setting.
- Ensuring schools were aware of those children affected by having No Recourse to Public Funds to provide free school meals, as these were the most vulnerable to the cost of living crisis.

The Centre had remained open for families throughout the pandemic.

A cost benefit analysis had indicated that with an investment of £868,667 into STEPS over a 32-month period, the saving to the public purse had been over £8 million in truancy aversion and improved families' and children's wellbeing.

STEPS was also 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 service had been instrumental in supporting 85 individuals placed by the Home Office in a "holding hotel", having sourced schooling/education for:-

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

STEPS had also hosted 9 Ukrainian children who had fled the 2022 war.

The initial pilot (February to December 2017) had been funded by the Department for Education. Based on the success of the pilot, STEPS had been recognised by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in February 2018, with a 32-month funding grant of £868,667 through the Migration Fund.

The work of STEPS had been recognised at the National Municipal Journal Awards where it was awarded winner in the category Innovation in Children's Service's. The result of a nomination for a further award was also awaited.



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

- The STEPS Centre was somewhat unique to Sandwell, with Bolton Council the only other local authority to operate a similar scheme.
- The benefits had been visible in the local community, the provision had had positive effects both in terms of education and socially for those children and families receiving the service.
- The service STEPS had delivered was important and ensuring the funding for the service was an ongoing discussion.
- The service was non-statutory, funding had been secured up to September 2023. Long term funding solutions were being considered.
- Around 450 children a year attended the STEPS Centre. Those children unable to attend due to the centre being at capacity received daily wellbeing calls.
- The service was a stop gap for children awaiting a school place. If a mainstream school place was available, the children could go straight to school.
- 12 children who had attended STEPS had been referred for an EHCP.
- The majority of children attended STEPS for around four weeks, however in some cases children had attended for two months. The safety of the children was the first consideration.
- The service as a concept had the potential to be a service model that could be made commercial and mirrored across other local authorities.
- The Centre was known to Ofsted and the Council was proactive in engaging with Ofsted.
- The funding for the service came through the dedicated schools grant underspend. There was also a specific grant that the Council received in respect of the Virtual School, as a statutory service, which was funded separately from the DfE and from the dedicated schools grant.



36/22

Scrutiny Review - Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families – Final Report and Recommendations

The Director of Children and Education recommended that consideration of this item be deferred to enable further discussion on the proposed recommendations with relevant partners and the Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Children and Education.

Members thanked the officers and members involved in the review for their hard work in gathering evidence.

Resolved that consideration of the final report and recommendations following the Board's review on The Impact of Lockdown on Children and Families is deferred.

37/22

Scrutiny Action Tracker

The Board noted the progress on the delivery of recommendations it had made to the Executive.

In relation to the Board's review into the provision of transport for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) it was reported that a new procurement exercise had been in place with effect from 1 September 2022. Work had also already commenced on procurement for September 2024.

The new framework, which utilised a range of operators, provided additional resilience in the service. The service continued to evolve, to improve and respond to increasing demand, and service users continued to be engaged to identify areas for improvement.

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

- The start time for the contracts was being reviewed, noting the pressure on the service beginning in September and the impact on service users.
- Basic first aid training had been requested. There was no first aid training specific for the SEND transport industry and



consideration was being given to developing something bespoke.

- Drivers were required to obtain a Travel Assistance Service (TAS) badge and no driver could obtain a badge without proof of a satisfactory DBS check, sign up to the DBS update service and proof of completion of first aid training and safeguarding and demonstration of basic English skills. This was an annual requirement.
- Different councils had their own criteria and Sandwell's requirements were notably higher. All companies on the framework met Sandwell's criteria.
- There was an ongoing arrangement with the Taxi Licensing department which allowed records to be shared and any issues communicated.
- Access to the National Licensing Database had been requested for the SEND team via the Licensing team.
- Random compliance checks were undertaken on a quarterly basis with operators.
- Consideration was being given to the development of an in-house SEND Transport service.
- A number of parents had experienced a lack of communication at the start of the new contracts and this was acknowledged and had been a consequence of tight timescales.
- Sandwell Parents of Disabled Children had been engaged and issues had been fed back to the SEND Service and operators to ensure lessons were learned. There would be closer engagement with parents in the future.
- Operators and drivers were required to undertake Passenger Assistant Training (PAT) training on a three-yearly basis, however the course was now dated so an in-house course was being considered.
- The Council was committed to continually improving the service to ensure that it was stable and met the needs of all children, particularly those with more complex needs. Operators were also aware of the importance and impact of the service to service users and were also committed to ongoing improvements.

[Councillor Preece left the meeting.]



38/22

Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan and its Work Programme for 2022/23.

Officers undertook to review the previous work undertaken by the Board in relation to childhood obesity and youth services to ensure that any future work was appropriately timed and focused.

The Board was assured that a corporate approach was being taken to the monitoring and management of the impact of the cost of living crisis on the borough, with the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board leading on scrutiny's involvement.

Resolved that the Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust is invited to the Board's next meeting to provide an overview of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, including changes to services since the Trust took on the lead provider role, data on demand and how it is being addressed.

39/22

Councillor Shackleton

Members made reference to the ongoing ill health of Councillor Shackleton and agreed to send her a card and flowers to wish her well.

Meeting ended at 7.21pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk

