

# Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 23 August 2021 at 5.00pm  
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

- Present:** Councillor Shackleton (Chair);  
Councillor Chambers (Vice Chair);  
Councillors E A Giles, W Gill, Hinchliff, McVittie, Smith and Webb;  
Co-opted Member K Heeley (Primary School Governor representative).
- Officers:** Lesley Hagger (Director – Children's Services);  
Emma Taylor (Sandwell Children's Trust, Chief Executive);  
Mandip Chahal (Senior Joint Commissioning Manager)  
Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services Officer)  
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer)

## 23/21 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hughes; as well as co-opted members K Kujawa-Sogbesan and C Ward-Lewis.

## 24/21 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.



25/21

## Minutes

Minutes of the meeting held on the 2 August were agreed as a correct record.

26/21

## Additional Item of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider however a statement was issued on the recent action taken by Birmingham City Council to terminate its contract with North Birmingham Travel following issues relating to DBS checks. The Executive Director of Children's Services informed the Board that both an internal and external review into Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transport contracts was underway and would be reporting to the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee. A joint Scrutiny Review was also being undertaken reviewing models and best practice going forward. The Cabinet had agreed 21 July to continue with current SEND Transport arrangements. The Board was informed that further details had been sought from drivers where required. The Service was progressing with arrangements for the start of the new term conscious that parents needed that reassurance.

The Board was informed that while there was a media interest in the decision by Birmingham City Council to terminate the contract with North Birmingham Travel in response to the issues around DBS arrangements. The process for checking DBSs within Sandwell was different; checks were conducted in-house and the Leader of the Council had instructed that all DBSs should be re-checked to provide additional assurances.

27/21

## Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review

The Chief Executive of Sandwell Children's Trust delivered a presentation to the Board emphasising the work of the Trust over the previous twelve months, the impact of the pandemic on the Trust and the work of the Trust going forward.



The full Ofsted inspection in 2017 on the Service had found it to be inadequate. There had since been multiple visits and inspections, most recently an assurance visit in early-March 2021 and a fostering regulatory inspection in July 2021. A full inspection was expected in late-2021/early-2022.

The key areas of focus over the previous twelve months had been the response to the pandemic. The issues and challenges dealt with by the Trust had mirrored those faced by Local Authorities nationally. A priority over this time was keeping children safe and there was a strong emphasis on seeing children face-to-face and ensuring their wellbeing. A very close partnership with the Local Authority was an important aspect of meeting the challenges as was building strong working relationships between senior colleagues.

It was reported that maintaining and recruiting staff continued to be a focus for the Trust. There had been a drive to communicate the '12 Reasons' to work in Sandwell. The pandemic had meant this had remained a challenge but there had been a small increase in permanent social workers and a decrease in agency staff. The Care Service had been impacted hardest with a range of measures taken to mitigate against this. Overall there had been stability of staff across the Trust throughout the year.

The key headlines stemming from current practice were that face-to-face visits had continued throughout the pandemic and were increasing incrementally, for a virtual visit to take place a valid reason was required. It was noted that improvements were required in the quality of assessments. Short and long-term placements for looked after children continued to improve, with key issues identified as permanency planning and implementing pathway plans. The March Ofsted assurance visit concluded that no child was at risk of harm and the Trust had had a good response to the pandemic. There remained areas for improvement notably in child protection planning and intervention.

The response of the Trust to the pandemic had included continuous evaluation along with oversight externally by the Department for Education. Sandwell had been disproportionately affected during the pandemic, and the leadership team had



managed to deal with emerging situations and enable business continuity across the Trust to continue.

Focusing on the future, Six Strategic Priorities had been developed as part of the Transformation Programme. The priorities were: People, Practice, Partnerships, Prevention, Meeting Need and Measuring Progress, and Striving for Excellence. These priorities would seek to strengthen staff recruitment and retention, strengthen services for vulnerable children and allow for permanency planning. They would also look to ensure interventions at the right point with an emphasis on Early Help and prevention, as well as allowing for the right plan for children to be developed ensuring quality of care and value for money. Overall the Trust felt that the priorities would allow for a culture of creativity, continuous learning and improvement.

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

- The emphasis on keeping children safe was vital.
- The accusations of bullying within the Trust had been dealt with. Many in the Trust did not recognise the allegations however where staff have expressed concerns the right course of action had been taken. No allegation had been ignored and there was confidence that any concern would be addressed in the fairest and most consistent way.
- It had been agreed that 25 Afghan families would be relocated within Sandwell (with the possibility of more) – Sandwell's Transition, Education and Partnership Service (commonly known as STEPS) would be supporting these families and any children would be supported in their education.
- Sandwell Young Carers continued to be supported. There was a risk that they could become isolated through caring for their families. Support had been allocated to them from the Voluntary and Community Sector. Work continued with schools to identify those who were young carers, but it was recognised that many young people did not want to be identified as such and it was important that they were not forced to.



- Some complaints had been received about staff, however this was to be expected due to the nature of the work and was not concerning.
- Wellbeing had been an increased focus with wellbeing days and staff surveys being distributed allowing for challenges and best practice identified.
- Ofsted may conduct a full inspection towards the end of this year or the start of next year. The Trust hoped to see an improvement on the 2017 inspection; it was hoped the good work that had taken place since that time would be recognised.
- The current issues around Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transport were not expected to have a detrimental effect on any Ofsted inspection or rating.
- If there were to be an SEND specific visit Ofsted were aware of the current issues surrounding SEND Transport.
- There was a close relationship with the Youth Offender Rehabilitation Services.
- There was expected to be an increase in referrals across the service with an increase in Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) and Early Help assessments.
- The partnership between the Trust and the Local Authority was something that improved outcomes and would be a focus going forward.

28/21

## **Regional Adoption Agency Monitoring Annual Report**

The Executive Director of Children's Services presented the Regional Adoption Agency Monitoring Annual Report.

The service had now been in place for two years. The service was created following a reorganisation of adoption agencies nationally which saw the merger of local authority managed agencies into regional ones. In the case of Sandwell, it merged with the other Black Country councils of Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton. The purpose of the merger was to allow for greater regional working that would be able to look across a wider geographical area.



The first year had been very busy with a now stable workforce and noticeable results. The current year had seen an increase of 24% in children being placed and adoption support had been reaching adopters based on targeted assessments of need.

The performance of Sandwell was emphasised in delivering results for children:-

- There had been 35 Sandwell children placed in the last 12 months (124 children in total across the agency).
- The numbers placed in previous years had been 41 – 2019 and 36 – 2020.
- Since its inception 100 Sandwell children had been placed.
- Inter-agency usage was at 56% (70% for Sandwell) meaning places were being found across the Black Country.
- Getting children into the right places as soon as possible ensured they are not moved around the system and resulted in better outcomes for the children.

When it came to adopters in Sandwell it was noted that:

- There had been 51 adopters approved in the first year of the agency with 69 in the second.
- There had been increased enquires and interest in adoption during the pandemic but low conversion rates.
- There was a priority to reduce the inter-agency usage in the third year.
- Registrations of interest had increased by almost a third in the second year.
- There had been a joined-up communication campaign between regional agencies, there had also been a national recruitment campaign 'You Can Adopt'.

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

- The new Adoption Agency was more effective than the previous in-house system. It had a greater ability to reach more people and find matches. It was also able to offer better after-support and at a reduced cost.
- The reason families did not pursue adoption or withdraw their interest varied. Some family configurations or single people did not understand that they could adopt. The process could also be tough and for some was very intrusive and could be overwhelming.



## Scrutiny Review - The Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families

The Executive Director of Children's Services delivered a presentation on the pandemic response and the impact on children and families. The presentation consolidated previous updates provided to Scrutiny on the pandemic response and acted as a baseline for a more in-depth look at the impact of the lockdown on children and families in future Board meetings:

- Services had continued to operate throughout the pandemic and continued to be very busy. Many members of staff had volunteered to assist other response functions, including the early morning schools support helpline. Staff absences had continued to be low and those members who had been self-isolating had in most cases continued to work.
- Engagement with the educational establishments across the Borough had been excellent. There had been initial weekly meetings with the Department for Education which had continued and now occurred bi-weekly. A Return to School Support Strategy had been developed which focused on the welfare of children and young people.
- Sandwell had enabled Sandwell Children's Trust to access various Covid-related grants which supported services against increased costs and fast tracked additional equipment for social workers.
- During the School year STEPS had supported 160 homes with learning packs for International New Arrival Children. There had been 950 wellbeing follow up calls to check progress and resolve any issues. A centre supporting these families opened fully in early-March.
- Those children and young people being Electively Home Educated (EHE) was recorded at 557 at the end of January Half-Term. An EHE Advisory Teacher had been recruited to support these children and half-termly newsletters had been distributed. Free School Meals had been provided to those EHE children who were eligible.
- Vulnerable children had been a priority during the pandemic, the service had:



- Conducted an average of 254 contracts per week including phone calls, emails and in person visits;
  - Delivered an average of 357 meals per week;
  - Delivered 1334 Learning Resource Packs ;
  - Supported 86 children living in hostels with Learning Resource packs and food parcels;
  - Supported Alternative Provision settings to monitor their pupils;
  - Supported the Return to Schools strategies.
- There had been some negative developments due to lockdown:
  - Free School Meals eligibility had increased by over 27%;
  - There had been an increase in domestic abuse and safeguarding incidents;
  - Children's mental health had been impacted;
  - Digital exclusion for a number of students;
  - An increase in demand for EHCP assessments;
  - Increased pressures and increases in SEND assessments.
- The next 12 months were going to focus on a number of key areas:
  - Catch-up and recovery in education and child development;
  - Social care recovery;
  - Planning ahead, expecting an increase in demand for the service;
  - Continuing to deliver emotional and wellbeing support;
  - Managing the increase in Education, Health and Care Plan assessments;
  - Supporting staff;
  - Moving back to Business as Usual.

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

- The impact of lockdown had many detrimental effects on families. Some pupils were not where they ought to be with home learning not sufficient in some cases.
- The Learning Resource Packs had been well received.
- The behaviour of children at school was good and the vast majority were enjoying being back at the school setting.
- The Pupil Referral Units were going to be taking part in a two-year pilot scheme bringing together young people and professionals, in a bid to enhance skills and pupil engagement.



- Although there had been an increase in the numbers of children and young people requiring an assessment it was not possible to shorten timeframes every assessment needed to follow a particular process.
- The Prevent Team had been working with schools in a bid to combat extremism. Training programmes had been running and safeguarding champions established.

30/21      **Work Programme**

The Board noted the Work Programme. The next scheduled meeting of the Board would receive an update on the Youth Facilities Scrutiny Review. The Board will be continuing its work as part of the Joint Scrutiny Review into Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Transport Models.

31/21      **Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

32/21      **Chair's Announcements**

The Board extended its congratulations to pupils and staff following the GCSE and A-Level results day. A special mention was given to Councillor W Gill following his results. It was hoped that all young people had achieved what they wanted and would be moving onto their desired destinations.

It was announced that the meeting would be the last attended by the Executive Director of Children's Services Lesley Hagger who was leaving Sandwell. The Board thanked Lesley for all her hard work and dedication to the Children of Sandwell and wished her all the best for the future.

Meeting ended at 6.21pm

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