

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 14 February 2022 at 5.00pm
in the Council Chamber, The Council House, Fleet Street, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Shackleton (Chair),
Councillors W Gill (Vice-Chair), Chidley, E A Giles, Hinchliff, Millar
and Webb.

Officers: Michael Jarrett (Director of Children's Services)
Sue Moore (Group Head Education Support Services);
Jacqui Smith (Chair – Sandwell Children's Trust)
Emma Taylor (Chief Executive – Sandwell Children's Trust)
Tariq Karim (Youth Service Manager)
Dawn Maleki (Youth Service Manager)
Matt Powis (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer)

01/22 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Smith, McVittie and co-opted members K Heeley (Primary School Governor Representative) and K Kujawa-Sogbesan (Secondary School Governor representative)

02/22 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.



03/22 **Minutes**

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 November were agreed as a correct record.

04/22 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

05/22 **Update on Youth Facilities Review**

Members questioned the timeframe of the implementation of the reviews recommendations. It was agreed that the recommendations would be added to the Boards Action tracker.

The Board received the update on the Youth Facilities Review and the Chair highlighted the following points:

- Members noted how the review had positively demonstrated the youth provision across Sandwell.
- Provision was understood not to be uniform across the six towns and in some instances only available once a week.
- The low number of youth workers was highlighted as a reason for the lack of availability of youth services across the Borough.
- The Review was praised by Members for its wide reach and inclusivity in its approach.
- The work of Youth Services had to adapt to the Covid-19 Pandemic ensuring those who accessed the services were provided with food parcels, laptops and education packages.
- There continued to be a lack of resources for youth work and it continued to suffer cutbacks and be reliant upon charity groups.

The Review was identified as an influential piece of work which would enable future planning for youth provision. Coneygre Youth Arts Centre was a good example of youth work and access to facilities should be encouraged.

The Youth Services managers thanked the Members who participated in the review and witnessed the breadth of provision within the service. While the six towns received equitable funding,



it did not necessarily translate into an equitable services and additional resources would always be well received.

Councillor Millar informed the Board that she was a Cabinet Advisor for young people and skills. She had worked with Youth Service managers to reach out to young people in the Borough to ascertain their aspirations and experiences during the national lockdown. It was noted majority of responses highlighted that social isolation from friends as one of the main concern for young people.

The Chair acknowledged the work that had gone into youth facilities over the pandemic, the work of Shafaq Hussain (Senior Youth Officer, Smethwick & Oldbury) was raised and the work that went into the Young People's Survey 2020.

The Director of Children's Services welcomed the progressed that had been made in Youth Services. It was noted that in future, there would be a particular focus on employment and skills of young people in order for them to prepare for the future.

Resolved:-

That, the Boards Action tracker be updated to include the recommendations from the Youth Facilities Review.

06/22

Update on the Performance of Sandwell Children's Trust

The Board received an update on the performance of the Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) from the Chair of SCT, Jacqui Smith and the Chief Executive, Emma Taylor.

The Chair of SCT gave a brief introduction to the performance of the Trust since the last update at the Board.

The Trust's main objective remained to progress improvements across children's social care in order to improve its inadequate Ofsted rating which was received in 2017. It was hoped that an inspection would have taken place in 2020, however, due to the pandemic Ofsted inspections had been paused. It was anticipated that an Ofsted inspection would take place in the near future. The



Trust is continuing to progress its improvement plan in order to demonstrate that further progress has been made since the previous inspection.

In regard to monitoring visits, the Trust had an inspection of its Fostering Service in August 2021 which is now rated as good. In addition, a monitoring visit in November 2021 noted progress within the children in care service. Whilst the progress was encouraging it highlighted where there was a lot more work to do.

The Trust had worked with families to keep in touch with children during the pandemic. Corporately there had been a drive to continue improvements made such as chief officer appointments to the senior leadership team.

It was noted that national and regional issues continued to impact the Trust. The recruitment and retention of social worker shortages were a continuous challenge. The Trust had implemented a '12 reasons to work at Sandwell Children's Trust' campaign as a means promoting and improving the attractiveness the Trust.

The Chair of the Trust concluded that the organisation had prioritised its equality, diversity and inclusion programme. As part of this drive, staff development was identified as an important aspect of the Trust's improvement plan. She highlighted that staff development remained a priority in the Trust and would benefit the Trust's aim in ensuring the best provision for the children of Sandwell.

The Board then considered a presentation from the Chief Executive of SCT:

- There was a downward trajectory with referrals to the SCT over the last 12 months, referrals decreased from 70 to 582 per 10,000. As a result, the Trust had lower referrals compared to statistical neighbours.
- Re-referrals had reduced from 22.6% in 2021 to 19.5% in 2022. This rate was 3.5% lower than other similar organisations in West Midlands.
- The percentage of single assessments completed within 45 working days had fluctuated over the last 12 months and there was recognition that further work was required.



- There was a reported drop in Section 47 enquires based on a 12 month period for 2022 were 183 per 10,000 compared to 312 per 10,000 in 2018-19.
- Initial Child Protection Conferences in December 2021 were 78.5% completed within 15 working days which was slightly below statistical neighbours. The previous 12 months was 86.6% above statistical neighbours.
- Over the last 12 months there had been a reduction in children on Child Protection Plans (CPP) from 576 to 404. Between December 2020 to 2021 there were 465 new CCPs. However, over the same period, 664 CPPs were removed.
- There were 5 children on CCPs longer than two years which equated to 1.2% of the cohort. However, there were 41 children on CCPs that had not reached the two-year threshold.
- For the 2021 period, 160 children had been admitted into care. However, on 31 December 2021, 850 children were admitted into care. This represented a reduction from 888 in 2020.
- In terms of placement stability, 59 children had 3+ moves in the last 12 months which equated to 6.9%, which was lower than the statistical neighbours which on average was 8.3% and the West Midlands average of 8.1% and better than England average of 9%.
- In respect of care leavers, it was noted that out of 18-21 year olds 47% were Engaged in Employment, Education or Training (EET) and 53% were Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). As a result, this resulted in the Borough being below statistical neighbours.
- The Ofsted inspection of the Fostering Agency highlighted several areas where progress had been made:
 - o Children felt safe and had positive relationships with their carers.
 - o There had been good partnership working with Council Education & Health Teams.
 - o Children know who to speak to someone if they wish to make a complaint.
 - o There is good management and quality assurance oversight.
 - o Communication and engagement with carers was positive.
 - o Robust safeguarding processes were in place.
- The service recommendations following the Ofsted inspection were noted as:



- Continued training for foster carers.
 - Continued support for disabled children.
 - Annual joint panel training
 - The development of a recruitment strategy for foster carers.
- An Ofsted monitoring visit on Children in Care resulted in a number of points:
- While tangible progress had been demonstrated, there remained a lot more to do to secure permanence for many children in care
 - Progress was evident in specific areas with respect to exploitation & missing children.
 - Increased drive and focus from leadership.
 - A noticeable clear commitment to improve.
 - Workforce feeling positive and valued.
 - Progress was continuing for the quality of Social Work practice.
 - There had been good use of interpreters and religious leaders.
 - There had been a continued focus on permanency with increased focus and prioritisation of plans and tracking.
 - Participation was highlighted as supporting children, allowing them a voice and feel listened to and valued.
 - The consistency of practice required improvement along with the wait for permanence plans and the need to stabilise the workforce.
- The Trust was working to stabilise the workforce, engage in critical reflection to improve outcomes and the consistency of performance.

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

- Children's Services across the country would request additional resources if available. The Trust had continued to have a positive and instructive relationship with the Council.
- The development of the medium term financial plan specified areas which required additional funding to meet costing pressures. The Council and the Trust negotiated each year on the Contract Sum. However, both the Trust and the Council had a good working relationship.



- Due to the Trust's unique position as being operationally independent from the Council, it had the ability to access specific funding from the Department for Education (DfE) and the Government which had allowed the Trust to innovate in some areas.
- The recruitment and retainment of social workers remained one of the biggest challenges for the Trust. There had been some encouraging progress with more people wanting to move and work for SCT, however, there continued to be staff loses to other Councils who offered greater benefits. The idea of competing and increasing benefits to match competitors was not viewed as favourable to children. An increased focus on learning and development, career progression new roles and resources was deemed an appropriate means to attract and retain workers.
- There was no evidence to suggest that front line social workers had been attracted to their role because of the Trust's unique arrangement with Council.
- It was hoped that benefits such as learning and development and career progression would encourage social workers to choose Sandwell to work and build their career.
- The percentage of children being moved from placement to placement, comparatively was low considering the numbers in care.
- Placements were provided through a regional framework, any provider was subject to inspections by Ofsted. There was a saturated market and there remains a lack of choice unfortunately, it is usual now to accept the placement that is available. Due diligence and background checks was taken with any placement.
- There are 203 established social worker posts within the Trust, with not all posts filled. The number of children they manage would range across localities and specific roles.
- Case load reduction had been a focus with fluctuations over the past year, there was however a lower caseload rate now compared to when SCT was founded.
- There was an aim to be ambitious and move into the future with confidence to achieve and maintain continued improvement.
- An action plan had been implemented to ensure the recommendations of the Ofsted inspection of the Fostering Agency are implemented.



- There was a Strategic Partnership Board that worked with the SCT on continues improvement. There was also an Improvement Board chaired by independent appointed DfE consultant and an Operational Partnership Board (all attended by SMBC) to map progress and the Council was encouraged by the 'green shoots' of improvements. The Ofsted inspection when it takes place would cover the entirety of Children's Services not just SCT.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and the Chair of the Trust for their attendance.

07/22

Cabinet Response to SEND Recommendations

The Board received the Cabinet response to SEND Transport Recommendations.

The Group Head Education Support Services informed the Board that Cabinet had acknowledged the recommendations by the Board and have subsequently tasked Children's Services with their implementation. The report set out the latest update with regards to the actions. Some of the actions had been implemented, there were other actions such as driver medical accreditation would be in place with the start of the new SEND transport contracts. The recommendations from the Board were regarded as timely and have been implemented alongside those from the internal and external review.

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

- The increase in the number of those on the ASD spectrum was recognised as a growing issue nationally. The Council had a responsibility to provide the right provision at the right time at the right place. The cost was very significant to meet the growing demand on the service which often required a bespoke response. Dialogue and work continued with school leaders to ensure provision was located to meet the demands. The increase in demand was impacting the existing SEND transport service and it was required to deal with difficult logistics. There was a preference for shorter routes for children however, the service aimed to match the provisions of children with need.



- The reason for the increase in children on the ASD spectrum was not fully understood. However, there was an increase in the appropriate diagnosis of those on the ASD spectrum leading to a more focused and bespoke provision.
- The provision for places for children with SEND was part of an ongoing strategic plan that the service was moving forward with. The service was having to balance the cost of provision with the number of children who required the service. The service was working with schools to expand current places. Discussions had commenced on the on future provision and a new school was due to be opened in 2023.
- Children with ASD tend to be in the primary school setting when diagnosed. Once diagnosed, a specified provision would be identified to meet the child's need.
- Dyslexia and ASD were very similar on the spectrum and because of this may be hard to diagnose owing to it not been prevalent or visibly noticeable, owing to this it was therefore difficult to identify specific learning needs in many cases. The service was working with Early Years to bring forward diagnosis to identify those children who have dyslexia.
- There was provision for SEND children in Early Years to access provision.
- It was best practice to ensure children enter the right setting as soon as possible to meet their specific needs.
- There was a SENCO within all settings to identify those pupils who present as SEND and provide appropriate support.

Resolved:-

That, the Boards Action tracker would continue to be updated to include any update from the recommendations from the SEND Transport Review.

08/22

Forward Plan

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

The Board agreed to consider the temporary accommodation Elm Tree Primary School at the next scheduled meeting.



09/22 **Work Programme**

The Board noted the Work Programme.

Meeting ended at 6.38pm

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