

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 11 September 2023 at 6.00pm
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Hinchliff (Chair);
Councillors Ashraf, Pall and Uddin.
Barrie Scott Co-opted Member - Church of England dioceses
of Birmingham and Lichfield Representative.
Yvonne Ologbo - Parent Governor representative.

Officers: Michael Jarrett (Director of Children and Education); Emma
Taylor (Chief Executive, Sandwell Children's Trust); Jacqui
Smith (Chair of Sandwell Children' Trust); Mandip Chahal
(Senior Joint Commissioning Manager); Lisa Preston
(Adoption@Heart); Julie Andrews (Assistant Director -
Education Services) and Stephnie Hancock (Deputy
Democratic Services Manager).

26/23 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Choudhry, W
Gill, Mayo and Weston.

27/23 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.



28/23 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 3 July 2023 are approved as a correct record.

29/23 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

30/23 Adoption@Heart Annual Report

The Board received the Regional Adoption Agency's (RAA) Annual Report for 2022/23. The provision of an adoption service was a statutory requirement and the Council was required to monitor the provision of adoption services. The agency had been operating for four years, following a government direction for all local authorities to deliver their adoption services through a regional agency, funded by the Department for Education.

Adoption@Heart continued to be an active member of the Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC), which had a shared aim to enhance placement choice at the earliest possible opportunity for children and to ensure effective arrangements and protocols were in place for providing longer term adoption support. Placement figures for the MTC region were:-

- 145 interagency placements had been made for 206 children;
- 12 placements secured with RAAs for 13 children;
- 41 placements made with VAA partners for 60 children.

The focus this year had been the launch of the MTC Early Permanence Good Practice Guide. This followed the launch of the National Early Permanence Standards and was in recognition of the need to that early permanence was considered for all children with a likely plan of adoption. Since the launch of the Good Practice Guide in February and March 2023, referrals for Fostering to Adopt



(FFA) placements had increased. The challenge for Adoption@Heart and other RAA's was recruiting enough adopters to meet the increase in demand.

The Board noted the following headline data for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023:-

- 541 adopter enquiries had been received, compared to 609 the previous year; advertising was now being done on a wider scale to increase numbers;
- there had been an increase in the number of complex assessments, which had adversely impacted on the completion of adoption assessments within six months;
- a survey carried out by Adoption UK indicated that the cost of living crisis was having an impact, with adopters seeking to adopt fewer and older children;
- 40 adopters had been approved, of which 15 were approved within the six-month statutory timescale, this also represented a reduction in 17 adopters compared to the previous year;
- as of 31 March 2023 there were 21 families approved and awaiting a match;
- the new adopters approved did not reflect the cultural and religious heritage of the children awaiting adoption, so adopters were being asked to consider widening their criteria to reduce waiting times;
- delays and waiting times were being closely monitored;
- there had been four formal complaints, learning from complaints continued to be a key feature of the service;
- staffing was stable and vacancy rates continued to be low;
- there had been one referral to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) and the IRM had upheld the Agency's original decision;
- there had been one placement disruption and one placement that had not progressed beyond introductions, learning from both events had been fed back into the services and changes implemented where necessary;
- from Autumn 2023 governance arrangements would be streamlined, with a new Strategic Partnership Board,



replacing the Management Board and Strategic Commissioning Board;

- the management team had re-written key policies and procedures and developed an overarching business plan which identified the following key service development priorities:-
 - embedding early permanence from both a child and adopter perspective;
 - focusing recruitment activity on recruiting adopters for children who wait the longest;
 - improving timeliness of adoption assessments and matching;
 - improve the adopter and the child's voice;
 - Reinstating some activities that were suspended during Covid such as coffee mornings, adopter picnics and social gatherings for adoptive families to extend the adoption support offer;
 - embedding a quality assurance framework within the service, to include the need for regular themed audit activity across all aspects of the service and the collation of service user experience across all parts of the adoption journey;
- 31 Placement Orders had been granted;
- most children waited less than a year following a Placement Order, but 13 children had waited for over a year;
- 24 children had been made subject to Placement Orders;
- 25 children had been placed for adoption, of which 12 were boys and 13 were girls;
- National Indicator A2 (time from placement order to matching decision) stood at 195 days and was in line with national benchmarking data, and current in-year data was showing significant improvement on Sandwell's 3-year rolling average of 231 days.
- National Indicator A10 (time from entry to care to placement for adoption) stood at 465 days and was in line with national benchmarking data, and current in-year data was showing a



significant improvement on Sandwell's rolling average of 519 days.

- Six children had been placed in early permanence placements via Foster for Adopt, which placed Sandwell as the second highest in the region, and six of those children had been placed with in-house families;
- of the 2 children placed for adoption 18 had been placed with in-house adopters and 7 interagency.

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

- birth children were often a key factor in placement breakdowns and training was being targeted at those adopters;
- disruptions were always reviewed independently and learning points embedded across the board;
- some prospective adopters needed more time to think and so in these cases, the process was paused as it was important to ensure that adopters were as resilient as possible to meet the needs of vulnerable children;
- children who suffered placement breakdowns were returned to foster care and a review of the child's situation was carried out before considering further placements;
- whilst there were checks and balances in place to prevent placement disruptions, indicators were not always obvious.

31/23

Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update

The Board received the Sandwell Children's Trust's Annual Review and Performance Update for 2022/23.

The Trust was contractually required to report to the Board twice a year. Progress against the performance indicators for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 was set out in the Annual Review 2022/23, together with information about financial, workforce, and other performance areas. The Review informed the Trust's business plan on an annual basis.



Since April 2018 the Trust had been the subject of seven monitoring visits from Ofsted as well as a focussed visit, three inspection visits of the fostering service, a full inspection under the Ofsted framework and guidance for inspecting local authority services for children (ILACS) in May 2022, and most recently an inspection of adoption services in December 2022. The judgement following the inspection undertaken in May 2022 was one of *'Requires Improvement to be Good'*. With the judgement of *'Good'* received by the fostering service in August 2021 and a judgement of *'Good'* for the adoption service in December 2022 there was a clear trajectory of service improvement.

The Trust had undertaken a refresh of its Improvement Plan, utilising the feedback provided by Ofsted following the ILACS inspection, with an aim of becoming a *'Good'* or better organisation.

The Board noted the following key headlines:-

- 11 key performance indicators (KPIs) had been met, and three were within the contract tolerance;
- a provisional surplus of £39k had been generated;
- the key financial pressures related to the reliance on agency staff and placement pressures;
- between June and September 2022 there had been significant staffing issues, which was reflective of the national and regional picture in respect of recruitment and retention of social workers;
- to reduce the child of children not being allocated a social worker, the Council had supported the bringing in of five agency project teams during this period;
- caseloads were lower at the end of the year than the beginning, however, Sandwell was still higher than statistical neighbours;
- there had been an increase in the number of children working with the Strengthening Families Service;
- the number of re-referrals had increased, and a deep dive had revealed a need to get better at preparing partners to provide support to enable the Trust to step down;



- the rate of Section 47 enquiries continued to be lower than statistical neighbours and in line with England and West Midlands averages;
- the rate of initial child protection conferences was now below statistical neighbours', England and West Midlands averages;
- the number of children with a Child Protection Plan had increased, but remained below statistical neighbours and England and West Midlands averages.

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

- the positive judgments from Ofsted had changed people's view of Sandwell and the Trust had worked on its branding and values so social worker recruitment was in a better place than in previous years;
- office accommodation and IT had also been re-modelled based on staff feedback and leadership support had improved so there was more of a focus on wellbeing;
- 32 student social workers had joined the Trust from the ASYE (assessed and supported year in employment) Academy, reducing the number of vacancies from 27.36 to 13.36, out of an establishment of 187;
- currently 20.7% of the establishment was made up of agency social workers;
- average case loads had reduced from 20+ to 18.73 since March 2023;
- there continued to be a national crisis, impacted by agency rates of pay;
- evidence of good practice had been seen as part of quality assurance exercises in relation to the new Early Help offer, however it was important to increase capacity across the wider partnership (e.g. health visitors, designated safeguarding leads in schools) to take on the lead professional role and ensure that referrals were appropriate;
- Ofsted had identified strength in leadership, visibility, grip, and strategic direction, however examples of good practice in frontline social work were in-consistent but improving;



- the Horizons Team had won an award for its work in tackling child exploitation;
- a wellbeing strategy had been introduced for all staff and improvements had been made to supervision in terms of quality and focus, with a more reflective approach as opposed to task driven, and there was now more focus on wellbeing;
- the inspection had identified many aspects of “Good” practice, but inconsistencies remained, however the trajectory was good;
- domestic abuse was often a factor and the majority of referrals related to abuse or neglect, substance abuse was also a common issue;
- performance management meeting sought confidence that the child had been seen and there was sufficient detail to support referrals;
- other agencies needed to be ready to step in in case where the Trust stepped down.

The Board also noted an update on performance in relation to children in care and noted the following headlines:-

- 10-15 years was the biggest age group, an intervention hub had recently been launched to target this age group;
- the majority of children in case were with foster families, leaving 12% with parents;
- dedicated social workers were working on exit plans to reduce delay;
- foster carer recruitment and branding had been reviewed and there was a focus on increasing skills and resilience;
- bespoke advertising was taking place for foster carers for children with special needs and importance was placed on support for those carers;
- increasing the number of fosters carers would reduce the reliance on out of borough placements.

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



- when placing children with fosters carers, the need for and importance of a family setting often took priority over an exact cultural match;
- there were many myths around fostering and reassurance could be given to those interested, whilst still recognising however that standards need to be met;
- a range of support was provided by the Intervention Hub to help keep children at home, or return children safely to home, using evidence based interventions;
- everyone could play a role in promoting fostering across the borough to support Sandwell's aim to be a Fostering Friendly Borough and this was something that was being looked at by the Corporate Parenting Board, and the Scrutiny Board would have feedback on progress and impact in due course.

Resolved that a report detailing progress and impact in relation to Sandwell's journey to becoming a Fostering Friendly Borough is submitted to a future meeting of the Board.

32/23

Education Investment Area and Priority Education Investment Area Developments

Further to Minute No. 17/23 (20th March 2023) the Board received an update on developments in relation to Sandwell being selected as an Education Investment Area and Priority Education Investment Area.

The Local Partnership Board had held a launch event in June 2023 for all Sandwell schools and academies. This had detailed the universal offer available to all Sandwell schools and the that for priority schools. The event had been well attended, with positive engagement from stakeholders.

Priority schools for each of the workstreams had now been contacted and invited to take up the support offer. Other schools could be added in the autumn term, subject to the outcomes of 2023 Key Stage 2 tests and Key Stage 4 examinations.



Procurement of delivery partners was currently taking place. Delivery of Key Stage 2 and 3 maths workstreams would likely commence in September 2023 and was being delivered by The Maths Hub. Bids were currently being assessed in relation to the SEND workstream, however, no bids had been received for any of the other workstreams, which mirrored neighbouring LA's positions, and tenders had therefore been re-issued.

33/23

Scrutiny Review – Cost of Living Crisis and its Impact on Attainment and Attendance

That the Board considered the draft scope in relation to its review into the cost of living and its impact on educational attainment and attendance in Sandwell.

The scope document set out the proposed areas of inquiry for the review and the methods to gather evidence. The scope was not set in stone and could be revised according to the evidence gathered as the review progressed.

Resolved

- (1) that the scope for the review into the cost of living and its impact on educational attainment and attendance in Sandwell is endorsed;
- (2) that a working group is established to progress the review, comprising councillors Ashraf, Hinchliff and Pall; and co-opted members Barrie Scott and Yvonne Ologbo.

34/23

Scrutiny Action Tracker

The Board noted progress on actions and recommendations from previous meetings.



Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan as it related to Children, Young People and Education.

The Director of Children and Education reported that the draft report had now been received, following the SEND area inspection and the final report was due to be published shortly. The full report would be brought to a future meeting.

Members requested a report to a future meeting on the operation and success of Operation Encompass in Sandwell.

Resolved that the following items be added to the Board's work programme for 2023/24:-

- Outcome of SEND Area Inspection.
- Operation and Success of Operation Encompass in Sandwell.

Meeting ended at 7.57pm

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