

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday, 24 March 2025 at 6.00pm
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury,**

- Present:** Councillor Hinchliff (Chair).
Councillors Fitzgerald, J Giles, Khan, Kordala and Pall.
- Officers:** Sally Giles (Director of Children and Education Services); Mandip Chahal (Interim Assistant Director Commissioning, Partnerships and Improvement); Sara Baber (Early Years Lead Manager); Alison Fletcher (Early Years Teaching and Learning Advisor); Samantha Harman (Child Friendly Sandwell Lead Officer); and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).
- In attendance:** Councillor Uddin (Cabinet Member for Children and Families); Graham Archer (Chair SCT); Emma Taylor (Chief Executive SCT); and Steve Lilley (Head of Transformation).

11/25 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashraf, Choudhry, Haq, and Mayo.
Apologies for absence were further received from coopted members Barrie Scott (Church of England Representative) and Katherine Parks (Governor Representative).

12/25 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

13/25 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 6 January 2025 are approved as a correct record.

14/25 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

15/25 **Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update**

The Board considered the Sandwell Children's Trust's latest Performance Update from the Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT). The Trust was contractually obliged to report to the Board twice a year, the last update being in September 2024 (see Minute No.24/24).

The Chair of SCT and the Chief Executive of SCT attended the meeting to present the update and answer questions from the Board.

Graham Archer was the newly appointed Chair of SCT and was in attendance at the Scrutiny Board for the first time. The Chair of SCT addressed the Board with the following points:

- the SCT had been established following the inadequacy judgment by Ofsted owing to weak services and performance, since then, extraordinary progress had been made and now SCT was a good and improving organisation;
- leadership across SCT was strong, there had been a culture change and this had driven a change in practice across the organisation;
- a lot of practice across the organisation was good, however, this still needed to be consistent across the organisation;
- there was a clear understanding across SCT of what services were strong and performing well and those services that needed to be improved;
- SCT had worked with the Local Government Association and Newton Europe to build a detailed understanding of data across the organisation to identify both strengths and weaknesses;
- SCT continued to work in close partnership with the Council and had built strong working relationships with senior leaders;
- the Ofsted fostering inspection in October had been graded 'good' and demonstrated the strengths across the service, work continued to improve as the service sought to increase the number of foster carers in the borough;
- SCT had made a huge improvement when it came to the recruitment and retention of staff, agency staff had been reduced considerably and there was now a good learning and development offer.

The Chief Executive of SCT Provided an overview of SCT performance to the Board, where the following key headlines were noted:

- a lot of work had been undertaken to improve the 'child's journey' when accessing services – from the 'front door' to care experienced;
- there had been a significant drop in contracts through the 'front door', from a high of 2,405 contacts in March 2024 to 969 in January 2025;
- referral rates through the 'front door' were below West Midlands, statistical neighbour and National average;
- re-referral rates were somewhat inline with the national average;
- the change in referrals was a result of the change in practice, which emphasised a conversational approach to determine need and appropriate responses;
- the single assessment rate per 10,000 and the percentage of single assessments completed within 45 days was below both the national, statistical neighbour and West Midland average;
- the timeliness of assessments had and continued to improve, the quality assurance framework demonstrated assessments being undertaken were good;
- those undertaking assessments needed to be more confident;
- the number of children with a Children in Need Plan had increased month on month for the past year;
- the percentage of Children in Need on a Plan for 9+ months had decreased and subsequently slightly increased over the preceding 12 months;
- the numbers were stabilising, the important aspect was that the quality of the Plans;
- there had been a significant decrease over the preceding 12 months for those on Child Protection Plans;
- the decrease for those on Child Protection Plans followed the implementation of the STAR practice model;
- the number of Children We Care For was below statistical neighbours;
- as of January 2025 there were 833 children in care;
- more children were exiting the care system, however, there continued to be an increase of unaccompanied children been placed in borough.

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

- the number of contacts through the front door had reduced due to the new approaches taken at the first point of contact, more conversations were taking place to identify the best

pathway to provide support and manage the needs of individuals;

- the integrated front door approach meant that partners were working in partnership with SCT to better direct those in need to the most appropriate support;
- exit interviews were carried out with staff who were leaving the organisation to identify any recurring issues or concerns;
- retention of staff had improved considerably along with the reduction in agency staff;
- there was a legal obligation to maintain contact with care experience young people until they were 25 years old, contact was maintained through personal advisors.

The Head of Transformation at SCT provided an overview of the SCT Sufficiency Strategy to the Board, where the following key headlines were noted:

- there was both regional and national challenges to provide suitable residential places for children we care for;
- market difficulties meant, there was high demand or limited number of placements, the market was dominated by commercial businesses, less focus on the needs of young people, and difficulties with regional frameworks;
- there was a low percentage of young people from Sandwell who were actually placed in Sandwell with only 7 of 81 beds occupied by children/young people from Sandwell;
- there was no current internally provided Sandwell residential provision;
- the Step Aside Project aimed to deliver a child focused approach built on detail and finding the right match;
- the Commissioning Team had been reorganised to include the Home Finding team;
- service had become more efficient with the use of an improved electronic system;
- the Sufficiency Strategy was built on three elements:
 - what our young people are telling us;
 - data and intelligence; and
 - market availability.
- the themes of the Sufficiency Strategy were:
 - prevention, personal approach, keeping it local, and preparing for adulthood.
- Newton Europe had been commissioned jointly with SCT and the Council to provide independent assessment of finances, approach to care and to consider opportunities to build on progress and further increase effectiveness and efficiency;
- The work of Newton had enabled:

- Understanding of the complex national and regional context in and around care market and finances;
- A suite of actions that addressed demand, market supply and improved operational efficiency whilst maintaining a focus on young people, including Foster Sandwell Marketing, Recruitment and Retention Strategy;
- strong collaborative approach with the Council on a 'whole system' approach to safeguarding children-where prevention was key;
- a shared aspiration to consider what else can be done to drive improved effectiveness and efficiency whilst keeping children safe.

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

- placements were based on the need of the child or young person and SCT worked closely with providers to ensure the right provision was in place;
- it was recognised that there was not always the availability or right provision in Sandwell;
- the Sufficiency Strategy was a means of addressing the ongoing challenges with the market and positing the SCT to better engage with and influence outcomes;
- the challenges around sufficiency were not unique to Sandwell but regional and national;
- the system was broken, the market around placements and provision was driven by money rather than supporting vulnerable children;
- the Sufficiency Strategy looked to address challenges and provide a basis for a more child centred approach;
- in some cases local authorities from other parts of the country move their children into Sandwell as a cheaper option, which reduces the places available for children and young people in Sandwell;
- those who are asylum seekers / unaccompanied children were housed under different provision;
- the Cabinet had agreed on 5 February 2025 (minute No. 21/25) to procure two houses with the intention of converting them into Residential Care Provision;
- the move to open 'in-house' Residential Care Provision would allow SCT and the Council to enter the market and build the experience of operating care provision;
- it was expected the provision would be available sometime in 2026;

- operating Residential Care Provision came with a number of challenges including the cost and experience of staff;
- if the provision was successful, there remained the possibility that it would be expanded.

16/25

Early Years - Implementing the DfE National Wraparound Programme and the Extended Entitlement Offer

The national wraparound childcare programme was part of the childcare reforms announced in the 2023 Spring Budget. The Government's ambition was that by 2026, all parents and carers of primary school-aged children who needed it would be able to access term time childcare in their local area from 8am-6pm, so that parents could access employment.

Sandwell had received £947,859.67 funding from the DfE so far to encourage the expansion and creation of new wraparound places. As of March 2025 £771,545.37, had been allocated, creating 303 new places and 553 extended hours places that meet the full 8am – 6pm brief. This was a total of 856 new places in schools and within the PVI sector.

The extended entitlement childcare offer, also known as the "30 hours free childcare," provided eligible working parents in England with up to 30 hours of free childcare per week for children aged 9 months to school age. 30 hours funding for 3- and 4-year-olds had been in place since 2017.

The extended offer had applied to eligible 2 year olds was introduced in April 2024 and from September 2024 for eligible children 9 months +. Initially they were entitled to 15 hours funding, however, the funding would increase to 30 hours in September 2025 to be in line with 3 and 4 year olds.

The eligibility criteria for the Extended Entitlements were as follows:

- both parents were working, or the sole parent was working in a lone parent family;
- each parent earned at least £183 per week (equal to 16 hours at the National Minimum or Living Wage); and
- neither parent had an income of more than £100,000 per year.

Where a parent fell out of employment, but the child had already been accessing a childcare place, there was a grace period defined

by the DfE guidance to enable parent time to seek new employment.

To support the creation of new places Sandwell received £428,938.00 capital funding. This was split 80/20 between extended entitlement childcare offer and national wraparound childcare giving national wraparound childcare £85,787.60 and extended entitlement childcare offer £343,150.40. Extended entitlement childcare offer spending as of March 2025 £238,100 creating 135 FTE places in PVI settings.

The wraparound programme and extended entitlement offer would increase demand for childcare, requiring the Council to manage supply and demand, while early years providers would need to adapt to new funding models and potentially face workforce challenges while being asked to consider expanding their provision.

The Council already had a statutory duty to ensure sufficiency of childcare places and would need to ensure that there were sufficient childcare places available to meet the increased demand. This had required the Council to support the expansion of existing providers or encourage the creation of new places and providers. The biggest barrier to expansion of both the wraparound and the extended entitlements was the employment of suitably qualified and experienced staff.

Using the January 2024 Early Years Census and the estimated number of new places required to meet demand from September 2025, it was estimated that the Council required 190 new practitioners to allow all existing provision to operate at capacity and create the estimated new places.

The wraparound programme had been very well received by the PVI Out of School providers who had increased the number of schools they were providing care for. Sandwell already had good wraparound coverage in schools. There were 68 schools out of 91 schools delivering wrap around provision, but not all met the 8am – 6pm criteria.

The challenge for providers would be when 15 hours converts to 30 hours funding in September 2025. Estimates based on Council own supply and demand audits and the DfE estimated that the Council would require 447 new places by September 2025 to meet the needs of working parents.

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

- the quality of early years remained a priority and this was a focus in all the work undertaken;
- the vast majority of early years provision in Sandwell was rated 'good' with four rated 'outstanding';
- the service provided a very good CPD service with regular visits, provision was hands on and the provider had built good working relationships with early years providers;
- if any provision was graded as inadequate, the service provided the necessary support to address any concerns and support the setting into improving its provision, 95% of settings that are judge as inadequate reverse this within six-months;
- the team was made up of administrators and support staff and teachers that go out to early years providers;
- early years providers worked with Sandwell College and Birmingham City University on providing placements to students entering the career;
- places were only offered to children if they could be staffed;
- the extended entitlement did mean settings had to evaluate their provision and likely demand;
- the Extended Entitlement Offer had been taken up by parents;
- the National Wraparound Programme take up had seen lower interest.

The Board thanked Sara Baber and wished her well in her retirement after 29 years at Sandwell.

17/25

Child Friendly Sandwell - Progress Update

The Council was required to submit a report to UNICEF UK Child Friendly Cities and Communities at the end of our Discovery Stage of the Child Friendly Sandwell process detailing which priority badges it would focus on during the journey to child friendly recognition.

The report when submitted must evidence how the Council had reached its decision and how this had been directly influenced by children, young people, families, communities and partners, all the while illustrating a clear rationale to the decision-making process.

The guiding principles of a child friendly community were built on a Child Rights-Based Approach and the seven principles that

underpin this approach which include; participation, life, survival and development, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability, best interests, interdependence and indivisibility, and dignity.

Sandwell had been accepted as a Candidate Community by UNICEF UK Child Friendly Cities and Communities Programme in September 2024.

The Discovery stage of this programme lasted for six-months and coordinated activities had been taking place since September. A Member Working Group comprising members of the Cabinet, Scrutiny and the opposition, to oversee both the submission and each of the phases within the application process of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities programme had been established and met regularly to provide oversight and guidance as the programme moves forward.

A Child Friendly Sandwell Officer Steering Group and project team have been identified to manage both the initial Discovery Stage Phase and the development and delivery phases over the next three years.

A Partnership Discovery Day had occurred in October 2024 to which over 40 partner organisations were represented at West Smethwick Park.

UK Parliament Week that took place in November 2024 saw 103 children and young people participate in activities across the week held in the Council Chamber and 31 Strategic Leads, Cabinet Members and Officers worked with the children and young people during these sessions which included celebrating World Children's Day.

Child Friendly Sandwell presented at the Business Growth and Regeneration Summit in November to socialise our Child Friendly Aspirations to our business community across Sandwell.

Introductory Training to a Child's Rights Based Approach had been delivered by UNICEF UK reaching 40 partner organisations and the Child's Rights Impact Assessment Training had been received by 26 Council officers.

The UNICEF UK Schools Discovery Day in March reached 66 children and young people including participation by 3 specials schools, 1 free school and 1 alternative provision and a number of primary schools.

Baseline surveys to capture the Councils current understanding of children's rights and the UNCRC had been presented to Council officers and partner organisations and the children and young people's survey would be promoted.

Baseline analysis of existing data and new emerging data was currently underway collaboratively with Public Health, utilising the expertise of the HDRC and Research Intelligence Team colleagues and expected completion by mid-March 2025.

A Draft Badge Consensus report would be worked on during April 2025 with support from the Officer Steering Group and shared for comment late April to early May 2025.

The final report would be agreed across the Governance framework and shared with partners and children and young people who had contributed to the process prior to submission to UNICEF UK CFCC colleagues.

18/25 **Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

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

19/25 **Cabinet Forward Plan**

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

The Cabinet Member for Children and Families addressed the Board, thanking them for their ongoing support and work they undertake. It was noted that the Cabinet was excited to see the progress of the Child Friendly Sandwell update, along with the improved processes and risk management across services which are delivering for children and families across Sandwell. Growing Up in Sandwell was one of the Council priorities and the Cabinet worked to ensure every resident had the best start in life. The recent success regarding SEND Transport demonstrated how the Council could improve services while delivering value for money. It was hoped that Cabinet and Scrutiny could continue to work together to achieve success.

20/25

Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2024/25

The Board noted the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2024/25.

Meeting ended at 7.56pm

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