

## Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday, 5 January 2026 at 6.00 pm at Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury, B69 3DB**

**Present:** Councillor Hinchliff (Chair)

<p>Councillors: S Gill Kordala</p> <p>Barrie Scott (Church of England Co-opted Member)</p>	<p>Councillors: Randhawa Williams</p> <p>Yvonne Ologbo (Parent Governor Co-opted Member)</p>
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**Officers:** Sally Giles (Director of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board); Julie Andrews (Assistant Director for Education Services); Judith Nash (Head of SEND Services); Carol Singleton (Representative Head of Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Practice and Principal Social Worker); Carol Bodenham (Safeguarding Partnership Manager); Kim Madil (Chief Superintendent - Local Policing Commander West Midlands Police); Imran Mirza (Chief Inspector – Sandwell Police); and Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

### 1/26 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashraf, Choudhry, Owen, Pall and Uppal.

An apology of absence was also received from Chinenye Okoro (Parent Governor Co-opted Member).

### 2/26 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

### 3/26 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2025 are approved as a correct record.

### 4/26 **Urgent Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

## Educational Attainment

Further to minute No. 7/25 (Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board, 6 January 2025) the Board considered the Educational Attainment Update.

In February 2022, the Government announced that it would be delivering a package of measures in 55 Education Investment Areas to further drive school improvement in England as part of the levelling up agenda. These were comprised of Local Authorities where educational outcomes at the end of both key stage 2 (KS2) and key stage 4 (KS4) were the weakest and others containing an Opportunity Area or areas previously identified for additional school improvement support.

The Council was identified as a Priority Education Investment Area and as such received more intensive support. To this end, Sandwell was allocated £2.9m in Local Needs Funding to deliver the agreed priorities and improvements over the life of the programme which ended in March 2025.

At the beginning of the programme, a Local Partnership Board was established to work with Sandwell. Membership included representatives from strong trusts, the Education Endowment Foundation, Department for Education (DfE), curriculum hubs, the Council, headteachers from Sandwell schools and local dioceses. The Board was chaired by the CEO of Shireland Collegiate Multi Academy Trust.

Sandwell's Local Needs Plan for the Priority Education Investment Area programme had been delivered via five strands which commenced in the spring term 2024. Following a procurement exercise and DfE sign-off, the Local Partnership Board selected delivery partners for each strand of the programme. In accordance with funding criteria, each strand was delivered by a multi-academy trust or a DfE approved provider rather than directly by the Council. These were as follows:

- phonics (delivered by the English Hub);
- KS2 and KS4 English (delivered by Shireland Collegiate Multi Academy Trust in collaboration with Whole Education and their 'Words for All' programme);
- KS2 and KS4 mathematics (delivered by the Maths Hub);
- metacognition and self-regulation (delivered by Windsor Multi Academy Trust in collaboration with the Teach Like a Champion team); and
- KS2 and KS4 SEND (delivered by Victoria Multi Academy Trust in partnership with Whole Education).

Now that the Priority Education Investment Area programme had ended, the Council was continuing to offer support to Sandwell Schools via its core and additional offer, including working with external partners. Schools across the borough could access this offer to help them to develop provision and practice and to sustain and improve on standards and progress achieved to date.

During the 2025/26 academic year, the Council was offering several additional funded support projects for schools to target key areas of focus. These would be overseen and monitored by the School Improvement Team. For most projects, participating schools were typically asked to submit a project plan for approval

detailing the project brief, success criteria and expected outcomes. This forms the basis for ongoing review and an evaluation on completion. It was anticipated that these would be available at the end of the 2025/2026 academic year. Targeted school-to-school support for individual schools typically linked to the overall support plan for that school, monitored by the link School Improvement Adviser.

The projects were based on a collaborative learning approach with schools working together to share and develop practice and include the following:

- **KS4 mathematics project**  
This was a pilot project which would review mathematics provision in the three maintained schools to explore potential reasons for poorer performance in mathematics a KS4 across the borough over time, and to develop a programme of support to help to address this. The project would also include a focus on the effectiveness of the curriculum and teaching and learning at KS3. Learning would be shared with other Sandwell schools, drawing on the findings of the initial pilot and expertise from colleagues involved.
- **Teaching and Learning Network**  
The purpose of the network was to support senior leaders in primary and secondary schools to implement and sustain improvements in teaching and learning over time. The networks were launched in summer term 2025 and included an introduction to the Education Endowment Foundation implementation guidance. Based on the feedback from schools about their areas of need and focus, four collaborative inquiry groups had been established. These were metacognition and self-regulation, adaptive teaching, feedback and challenge. The groups would meet half-termly from autumn term two and the end of the academic year. Sessions would be run by Staffordshire Research School using Education Endowment Foundation input and guidance, supporting senior leaders to implement and sustain improvement strategies within the context of their settings.
- **Peer-to-peer improvement programme**  
As part of this programme, headteachers would work in groups of three schools on an agreed improvement focus. This would be supported by School Improvement Advisers who would also provide a level of quality assurance for the groups.
- **Targeted school-to-school support**  
This would enable headteachers or senior leaders from one school to work with leaders in another school to develop and improve areas of provision and/or practice. Typically, school-based colleagues providing the support would work alongside a School Improvement Adviser and provide additional capacity related to agreed areas for development.
- **Learning Community projects**  
Sandwell schools were organised into seven learning communities across the towns within then borough. This project was a learning community collaborative improvement programme based on an agreed focus for development pertinent to their cluster of schools. It would include opportunities for schools to share practice with each other with a view to

learning from one another in order to improve provision and/or outcomes for their children and young people.

The following support offer, linked to the original Priority Education Investment Area strands, was available to Sandwell Schools now that the Priority Education Investment Area programme had ended:

- Phonics: St John Bosco English Hub continued to offer intensive school support and training programmes. The Hub also provided support for schools via self-referral for intensive phonics interventions and through ongoing programmes of professional learning. This was either match funded or fully funded depending on the programme;
- English: Shireland Collegiate Multi Academy Trust would continue offering networks and supportive provision for KS2 and KS3 English;
- Mathematics: The Central Maths Hub continued to offer a full complement of CPD programmes for Sandwell schools, teachers and senior leaders. Schools were encouraged to take part in professional learning and/or workgroups according to individual need. This support included specialist knowledge courses, mastery programmes, support for teaching assistants and phase specific input. In addition, the Local Authority would be launching a KS4 mathematics project as a pilot;
- Metacognition: The Teaching and Learning Network had been launched in June 2025 and included a metacognition collaborative enquiry group;
- SEND: Sandwell's Inclusive Learning Service would continue to offer a support for SEND Leadership through the SEND Leaders Network.

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

- both maintained and academy schools would be able to access the projects funded by the Council and would be delivered in the Spring term;
- partner organisations work with the Council to deliver improvement programmes across schools which was fully funded and allowed schools to enhance their physics offer;
- the Council worked to enable schools to access fully funded opportunities to increase attainment;
- development work in maths needed to be across primary and secondary schools, and the curriculum across primary and secondary needed to be more streamlined;
- the Council along with local partners were looking at the 'blockers' that impact attainment at early years and how this could be addressed through a child's education journey;
- the Council was working with headteachers on oracy, which had been demonstrated to improve outcomes when applied at an early stage;
- the Best Start in Life programme would pull a number of strands together that would allow services and partners across Sandwell to target individuals and improve outcomes;
- improving attainment started in early years and needed to be seen through to primary and secondary, it was not just about the education offer but also

attendance and addressing barriers that prevent children from achieving their potential;

- a multi-agency approach was required to drive up standards across the education sector and this was in development;
- the Priority Education Investment Area initiative was established by the DfE and held by the Local Partnership Board which was chaired by the chief executive officer of Shireland Collegiate Academy, any evaluation of attainment over the life of the initiative would come from them and would need to be correlated;
- a number of projects had been initiated that stem from the Priority Education Investment Area programme to maintain work to improve attainment;
- an education improvement strategy was in development that would be multi-agency and encompass all stages of a child's education journey, previously programmes under the Priority Education Investment Area were DfE funded and guided, the Council was now in a position to provide its own strategic approach; and
- a targeted approach of local schools would be a key component of any plan being developed and encompass a peer to peer approach between schools.

**5/26**

### **The Effectiveness of the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership**

The Board considered the effectiveness of the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership.

Local Safeguarding Partnerships had been an established framework for safeguarding partners since 2018. They had given an equal responsibilities to three statutory agencies (Local Authorities, Police and Integrated Care Boards) for agreeing the local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Sandwell had designated a fourth equal statutory partner, Sandwell Children's Trust, who delivered the children's social care functions on behalf of the Council. These four key agencies were known as the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership with an addition of a non-voting representative from schools which reflected the updated guidance.

The Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2024–2025 provided assurance on the effectiveness of local safeguarding arrangements. The report highlighted Strategic priorities for 2024–25 which were Help vs Harm, Neglect, and Harm outside the Home. Key themes from practice reviews, included neglect, voice of the child, and information sharing, alongside vulnerabilities such as babies with injuries and young people at risk of exploitation. Identified strengths included strengthened governance, underpinned by Working Together 2023; the launch of the Integrated Front Door; a new Neglect Strategy; and improved multi-agency engagement by fostering deeper collaboration with partners, strengthening communication channels, and embedding a shared commitment to safeguarding priorities through the Partnership's ST\*R practice model. This approach ensured that all agencies worked collectively to deliver consistent, child-focused interventions.

Actions taken in the last 12 months had resulted in a range of improvements such as, updated practice guidance in respect of information sharing guidance;

refreshed escalation procedures; enhanced performance monitoring; and feedback from children being more routinely gathered.

Each local area dealt with serious incidents, such as, a child being seriously injured or even a child death, where neglect and/or abuse was a contributory factor. When these tragic incidents occur, it was critical that safeguarding partners examined these in detail.

In March 2025 the national child safeguarding practice review panel's report 'It's Silent' highlighted the significant impact of race, racism and racial bias on child safeguarding practices. It revealed that race, ethnicity and culture were often not adequately addressed in these reviews, leading to a lack of meaningful reflection on practices. In response, Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership had launched a black and black diaspora Independent Advisory group sponsored by the commander for Sandwell Police and had begun to engage faith-based groups and voluntary sector to broaden safeguarding awareness. This Independent Advisory Group ensured that the learning from national panel was reflected throughout any Child Practice review.

In response to the Working Together 2023 campaign, Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership implemented a new governance structure from April 2024. Safeguarding responsibility now sits with Local Safeguarding Partners, supported by a streamlined framework that enhanced accountability, strengthened multi-agency collaboration, and ensured a sharper focus on improving outcomes for children and families.

The Independent Chair role had been removed and each statutory partner (Council, Children's Trust, Police and Health) shared chairing responsibilities leadership on a six-monthly basis, supported by an Independent Scrutineer.

A representative from schools was now embedded within the safeguarding arrangements at both strategic and operational level. This included active involvement from headteachers and colleagues across learning communities, ensuring that education settings had a strong voice in decision-making and that safeguarding practice was consistently communicated.

The learning from Rapid Reviews and Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews had been disseminated across all partner agencies. High-quality multi-agency training programmes had been offered to partners that incorporated learning from Safeguarding Reviews and National Panel recommendations.

Neglect remained a key priority in Sandwell. The tragic deaths of SE and SF (2022) had prompted two thematic Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, which had shaped a revised and strengthened strategic response. These findings informed a renewed commitment to improving practice, enhancing multi-agency coordination, and embedding a more robust framework for identifying and responding to neglect.

There had been increased investment in Neglect Graded Care Profile 2 training. Between April 2024 and January 2025, the partnership had undertaken a series of coordinated actions to strengthen its response to neglect. The task and finish group developed a revised screening tool, updated practice guidance, and a clear pathway for consistent intervention. An awareness video had been

produced to promote Sandwell's vision for children to thrive, and a concise one-page strategy overview had been launched to support clarity and accessibility. The refreshed strategy was formally endorsed by Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership and launched at the November 2024 summit, with full implementation beginning in January 2025.

A revised neglect eLearning module had been launched, with over 3,500 staff completing the training which had enhanced awareness and promoted consistent practice across agencies. Graded Care Profile 2 training continued with strong multi-agency engagement, supported by clarified guidance on the Lead Professional role and mandatory contributions from relevant partners. A podcast-style reflective learning series had also been introduced to deepen practitioner understanding, and targeted briefings had been delivered across agencies. Planning was now underway for a multi-agency Graded Care Profile 2 briefing featuring practitioner voices to encourage uptake and demonstrate real lived impact. Overall, take up of training had been positive, although more work was needed to ensure that what was learned in training was applied in practice across the partnership.

From 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 there had been three notifiable child safeguarding incidents across Sandwell which had been referred and scrutinised through the Rapid Review process.

The Key themes identified across these incidents had been:

- neglect, Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews focused on neglect, leading to a new multi-agency neglect strategy in Sandwell. Actions had included screening tools for early identification;
- consistent use of Graded Care Profile 2 and multi-agency audits and training;
- information Sharing, the timeliness of information sharing and professional escalation between agencies had been themes. Reviews called for clearer escalation processes and better transfer of responsibility between local authority areas;
- Voice of the Child, reviews highlighted some missed opportunities to capture and act on children's wishes and feelings, with emphasis on embedding child participation in assessments and planning; and
- Complex Family Dynamics, these often involved multiple vulnerabilities, such as parental substance misuse, domestic abuse, mental health, and poverty. This had highlighted the need ensure a consistent holistic, coordinated response across agencies.

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

- how training was embedded was measured in a multitude of ways, and it was important that the Council and partners were assured that processes were working as intended;
- practitioners when meeting with a child/children and their family, that was the time to be competing the required work, and it was important that involvement with a family demonstrated progress and a positive change from the initial point of contact;
- through recoding a families journey, you can demonstrate the positive changes in behaviours and outcomes;

- the ST\*R practice model was what partners do everyday and was part of the practice that was expected;
- the strengths based approach, was about sharing best practice across the partnership, and multi-agency audit allowed partnership to review cases and consider what provision was in place and how it measured across partners;
- when the partnership worked together, it was very positive the difference it could make, and it was important that this best practice was shared;
- it was very important for every professional and practitioner across the partnership to understand their responsibility as it related to safeguarding children and families;
- schools were an important partner in ensuring that safeguarding concerns were understood and raised, schools had a unique position being in contact with children and families regularly;
- there would always be areas for improvement and this was to be expected;
- working in partnership with schools had been improved and enhanced, such as having a headteacher representative on the executive forum group of the Partnership, along with an interface headteachers group that allows best practice to be shared;
- the Sandwell Children's Trust was working with schools to support them with the delivery of the Family Help offer;
- the decision to move away from an independent chair of the executive forum was a national decision made in 2023 and the chairship now rotated between the four senior partner leads, this change was aimed to focusing the responsibility on the executive leaders which was a national change;
- there was an independent scrutineer whose role was to provide that challenge and sense checking to the Board;
- the Partnership worked closely with charity and voluntary organisations, and were invited to operational and summit meetings to further engagement and coproduction;
- evaluations were taken on training sessions and the impact they have had on practice, this was further enhanced with multi-agency audits that assessed focused areas to determine if practice reflected best practice, which was further enhanced through quality assurance assessments;
- a performance data pack was reviewed by the executive board to enable them to understand how policy was being implemented and put into practice on an operational level;
- early intervention was now being implemented earlier that had allowed for better outcomes for children; and
- the executive board received large quantities of data which set out how practices had impacted the delivery of services, the presentation of this data to demonstrate how service delivery had improved would be corelated.

**6/26**

## **SEND Transformation**

The Board considered the SEND Transformation Update.

Sandwell continued to experience a sustained rise in requests for Education Health and Care (EHC) needs assessments, rising from 415 in 2019 to 993 in

2025. Although national demand had grown, Sandwell's increase had been notably higher than regional and national trends. This level of activity had placed sustained pressure on staffing, resulting in delays, variable quality and reduced support to children and families. The number of children and young people with an EHC Plan had risen to more than 4,600. The highest concentrations of EHC plans were in Oldbury, Smethwick and West Bromwich. A group of 221 children had been identified as additionally vulnerable which included those in care, missing education, educated at home or known to youth justice services. Data from the regional evaluation highlighted that Sandwell issued a significantly smaller proportion of new plans in the early years compared to many West Midlands neighbours. The impact of this was a delay in identifying needs of school aged children and late planning for children with complex needs at birth.

The SEND Transformation Programme had in 2025 focused on weaknesses in processes and partnership working. One of the most significant challenges was removing the statutory assessment backlog. In January 2025, 523 assessments were overdue, representing almost 59 % of all open cases. Through redesigned workflows, strengthened management oversight and increased workforce stability, the backlog was reduced to zero by September. The average time to complete an assessment had reduced from 54 weeks to 23 weeks. There were still issues with processing educational psychology advice on time and securing appropriate placements. 772 plans had been issued after January 2025 and outside the backlog. The average timeliness rate for issued plans since January was 54%. National average timeliness was at 46.4% and the national average time to complete the full assessment process was 33.1 weeks. In Sandwell, the average time taken to complete an EHC assessment was 27 weeks. The direction of travel was positive and supported by clearer processes and improved quality assurance. Capacity for the EHC team remained a significant issued and would be addressed through a service review in January 2026.

Historically in Sandwell, SEND needs had been identified in the early years through inclusion support and Early Years Inclusion Grants, but this had not routinely lead to statutory assessment at that stage. As a result, children's needs were recognised and supported informally, but EHC assessments had been delayed until later in primary school, commonly around Years 5 and 6. This meant that early intervention opportunities had been missed, primary schools had been managing complex needs without a statutory framework, and transitions had been less well planned, contributing to higher levels of statutory demand at KS1 and KS2. In 2024, only 0.08% of children under 5 had been considered for an EHC assessment, compared to a regional and national average of 0.54%. Partners had overhauled the early years pathways allowing for more children to be assessed. Currently this stood at 0.38%. However this had meant that the service, while managing the existing school age demand had also had additional demand from early years applications.

Annual reviews remained a significant focus of improvements. While 44.4% nationally of annual review decisions were confirmed within the statutory 4-week timescale. In Sandwell, this was and remained an area for focus. The transformation work would include improved annual review processes, better paperwork and open decision making and training for schools. These were still in early stages on implementation and impact would not be felt until August 2026.

Regional data had shown that Sandwell had been an outlier in terms of refusal to assess decision making and had been one of the lowest regionally. In 2024, the area only refused 8.3% of applications compared to a national average of 25%. This highlighted a weakness in decision making. By increasing timeliness and better decision making, the area had been more robust to refuse applications, and in 2025 the refusal rate had increase to 16.4%. This was an important part of reducing demand and supporting children effectively at SEND Support level.

The data showed a system that had been under sustained pressure for several years with slow and prolonged periods of decline. The service was now entering a recovery phase with better data and insight into pressures and demands. Backlogs had been cleared, statutory performance was improving, and partnership working, especially in early years, was strengthening. However, the evidence demonstrates that demand would remain high unless earlier intervention, whole school support and locality accountability were promoted. The transformation programme would continue to focus on workforce reform, early years improvements, locality delivery, the whole school model and strengthened governance to create a more sustainable and inclusive SEND system for Sandwell.

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

- there were three early years pathways to identifying children's needs that had been considered, the first was the 0-2 years, which was a joint approach with health services which had lead to a huge rise in needs identification, the next pathway was 2-4 years, which identified needs that were not identifiable at birth but had arisen, this pathway was lead by Council team with colleagues in the heath and social care, the third pathway was aimed at those children who moved into Sandwell or missed pre-school checks whereby the children could be assessed within a pre-school / school setting to assess need;
- the identified pathways would enable services to identify needs prior to formal education and enable services to be ready and able to address and support children with those additional needs;
- the refusal rate of EHC assessments was an outlier and work had been done to bring it in line with regional and statistical neighbours;
- the service was aimed at ensuring quality assessments were undertaken and every child that needed an EHC plan was in receipt of one with their needs assessed and met;
- the use of data had allowed the service to understand how EHP plans were being reviewed in schools, a consequence of this was that additional work had been implemented to support schools undertaking annual reviews and training and developing staff;
- the trajectories indicated that Sandwell could reach more than 7,000 plans by 2029, which was a do nothing option, the service was working to address this and ensure the necessary policies and procedures were in place to deal with a rise in demand;
- sufficiency data and demand had allowed the service to understand pressures in placement sufficiency across Sandwell;
- SEND commissioner had worked with the service to develop a plan to address short term need and long term goals for the service;

- the Council had worked with education settings across Sandwell on utilising space to bring more children in borough and reduce out of borough places;
- work was ongoing to address the challenges of placement sufficiency, it was recognised that until models were being introduced and impact assessed it was difficult to predict their outcomes;
- there was a move towards resource based provision within mainstream settings as an alternative to specialist settings that would allow the creation of places that could enable the creation of a locality model;
- a shared understanding of need was being developed to enable services and partners to understand thresholds of need and what the appropriate setting would be for children with a particular need;
- there was different interpretations on what constitutes appropriate settings for additional needs and what was required was a more uniform understanding of what provision would be suit children with additional needs across Sandwell; and
- there would be a permanent structure within the EHC assessment team from April 2026 with an expected 10 staff members which would replace the current six agency staff workers.

**8/26**

**Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2025/26**

The Board noted the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2025/26.

Meeting ended at 7.44 pm