

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 23 November 2023

Present:

Members: Councillor CE Thomas (Chair)
Councillor N Akhtar (substitute for Cllr R Lancaster)
Councillor M Ali (substitute for Cllr S Nazir)
Councillor J Blundell
Councillor S Keough
Councillor A Masih
Councillor M Mutton (substitute for Cllr T Khan)
Councillor E M Reeves
Councillor A Tucker

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson, Mr D Jackson and Mr G Vohra

Other Members: Councillor R Brown (Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources)
Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)
Councillor A Jobbar (Deputy Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)
Councillor E Ruane (Chair of the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1))

Employees (by Directorate):

Children's Services N Macdonald (Interim Director), S Kinsell, S Watson, A Whitrick

Law and Governance G Holmes, T Robinson, C Sinclair

Apologies: Councillors T Khan, R Lancaster, and S Nazir

Public Business

13. Declarations of Interests

The Board noted that Cllr A Tucker and Co-Opted Member D Jackson were members of the Fostering Panel. As this was not a disclosable pecuniary interest, they remained in the meeting.

14. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 October 2023 were agreed and signed as a true record.

There were no matters arising.

15. **Exclusion of Press and Public**

RESOLVED that the Board agrees to exclude the press and public under Sections 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 relating to the private report in Minute 20 below headed 'Homes for Looked After Children and Cost of Placements' on the grounds that the report involves the likely disclosure of information as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The grounds for privacy are that it refers to information relating to an individual and the financial or business affairs of an organisation and the amount of expenditure proposed to be incurred by the Council under a particular contract for the supply of goods or services. The public interest in maintaining the exemption under Schedule 12A outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

16. **Social Worker Recruitment and Retention - Workforce Proposals**

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Interim Director for Children's Services on social worker recruitment and retention – workforce, proposals, implementation and progress to date.

The Briefing Note indicated that recruitment and retention of social workers is a national problem and accepted in the government's response to the Independent Review of Social Care. The workforce profile over the past few years has led to Children's Services supporting a "grow our own" approach, with a key focus on enabling social workers into the profession and developing into experienced social workers with high quality practice standards.

Therefore, the local picture in Coventry in many ways mirrors the regional and national picture. Coventry has continued to face challenges to recruitment and retention of social workers, which has impacted the stability of the workforce and the number of agency staff required to cover vacancies. Coventry is based within the West Midlands, in an area where there are a number of local authorities all competing for the same pool of social workers, which makes it a competitive market for social workers.

In response it was highlighted that Coventry Children's Services vision for the Social Work workforce is to secure a stable, permanent, highly skilled and capable workforce; a workforce who are able to uphold the One Cov values of Coventry City Council, working in the 'The Coventry Way' – the children's services practice approach informed by signs of safety, relational and restorative practices. A stable and permanent workforce can more effectively work with children, young people and families in a way which supports to improve outcomes.

The Briefing Note outlined a range of positive recruitment and retention initiatives the service is progressing to help recruit and retain Social Workers further and reduce the number of Social Worker vacancies. These included but were not limited to:

- A Review of Team Managers, Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) and Child Protection chairs pay in order to bring in line with regional rates of pay.
- Retention Payments to experienced Social Workers until end of March 2024, replaced with a Progression pathway for experienced social workers the opportunity to progress to Advanced Social Workers through a progression panel process to be implemented from 1 April 2024.
- Continuation in the expansion of the Social Work Academy supporting more Newly Qualified Social Workers to grow experience in the service and fill vacancies on a more permanent basis.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to social worker recruitment and retention including:

- Recruitment campaigns and potential schemes with secondary schools for children who want to be social workers.
- The 'Grow Your Own' initiative.
- Fast-track programs and the qualifications received.
- Cooperation with neighbouring authorities to pool resources and compete in a competitive recruitment and retention market.
- Social Work courses from Coventry University.
- Staff wellbeing programs and mandatory involvement.
- Work placements for those studying health and social care.
- Staff mentoring schemes for a younger workforce.
- Retention rates in comparison to the national average and feedback from exit interviews.
- Retention payments and any conditions attached.

Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People) thanked officers for the Briefing Note and encouraged the Board to attend the Social Worker open days that have been a very successful recruitment tool for the service. The Board, requested that the Cabinet Member and officers share details of any future events as wide as possible, including with the Board to ensure wider participation from diverse communities.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Notes the current progress.**
- 2. Requests that details of Social Worker open events are shared to ensure wider participation with diverse communities.**

16. Homes for Looked After Children and Cost of Placements

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Interim Director of Children's Services which provided an outline to the challenges in finding appropriate residential care for children, including those who have a high level of diverse and complex needs, and consequent impact of the cost of these children's placements. A corresponding private Briefing Note detailing confidential matters was also submitted for consideration (Minute 20 below refers) .

Officers highlighted that, wherever possible, children and their families will be supported to remain living together when it is safe to do so. The Service's Strengths based; outcomes focused Family valued approach seeks to enable families to find the solutions to challenges they face.

Families are supported through Family Network Meetings and Family Group Conferences (FGC) to identify family led solutions. If a child cannot remain in the care of their parent/s, the wider family network is explored, supporting connected adults to become Kinship (Connected) foster carers, or a Special Guardian.

If this is not viable, a foster placement will be sought, enabling children to receive care and support in a family environment, through either the Coventry Fostering service or via an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). For some children, due to their complexity of need, placing them in a children's home will be deemed the most appropriate care plan and only when Coventry Council internal children's homes or block providers cannot care for them, would the Service explore the wider residential market of commissioned placements.

There are currently 67 children living in a residential children's home, placed by Coventry Children's Services, a reduction from quarter one of 9 children. Trend analysis of data shows there is often an increase in June each year as foster carers are unable/ unwilling to care for new children due to planned holidays and carers offering respite support to each other.

A bi-monthly review is undertaken of all children living in residential care, to consider their plans to move on, in line with their care plan. In September 2023, a deep dive review was undertaken of the 74 children who were living in residential care by Children's Services Leadership Team (CSLT) and a review of the highest cost placements with the Chief Executive and Chief Partnership Officer. The review identified that there were clear plans for each child living in a children's home and highlighted the complexity and challenges of finding homes for some of our looked after children. Although the numbers of children living in a children's home have reduced, costs have increased for newly commissioned residential placements significantly over the last 12 months.

Officers emphasised that this is a national challenge as evidenced in the Competition and Market's Authority report of March 2022, the Independent Review of Children's Social care of May 2022, and the Government's consultation response to this review – Stable Homes: Built on Love (February 2023) that there is recognition that the children's placement market is broken. These problems break down into two main areas. A lack of placements of the right kind, thereby increasing risk of unregulated placements and secondly that larger providers are making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than we would expect if this market were functioning effectively. There is also a concern around the high level of debt some providers have and the impact if they could no longer operate and therefore the impact on individual children and the LA's ability to meet these children's needs.

Recent reports from Warwickshire & Cambridgeshire highlight the challenges they are facing in relation to the residential market. Warwickshire identified that they are paying 57k per week for one child and Cambridgeshire 85k per week for one child.

An outcome from the Care Review is to increase, strengthen & upskill those who work in residential children's homes. The Strategic lead for Looked after Children (Corporate Parenting) is working with the Department for Education and Ofsted on this, representing the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). Alongside the Operational Lead for Residential Children's Homes, meeting and visits to some of the Service's children's homes from 4 DfE representatives, including the Policy Lead - Children's Homes Workforce - took place on the 7th of November.

Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People) echoed the sentiments of the Briefing Note and the difficulties of trying to deliver a service to vulnerable children, young people and families when private providers are having free reign to profit. The Cabinet Member supported officers in reassuring the Board that the best options and outcomes were being sought in the difficult landscape of looked after children and highlighted that some of the current burdens on the service would be eased by the opening of 5 new residential children's homes alongside the various recruitment schemes in place.

Councillor R Brown (Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources) similarly chastised the unregulated and uncontrollable financial profiteering of vulnerable children, young people, and their families. Whilst recognising the valuable and important hard work of officers and staff involved, the Cabinet Member stressed the need for an urgent expedited review of the looked after children sector and governmental legislation to control what has become a financially unsustainable market.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to homes for looked after children and cost of placements including:

- Family network meetings and conferences as prevention for children coming into care and their timeframes.
- Other agency contributions to costs of placements.
- Misconceptions from residents about children's homes in residential areas and strategies to effectively manage these.
- The DBVSP (Delivering Better Value in SEND Programme) and its ability to improve the delivery of SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) services for children and young people whilst optimising financial sustainability for Local Authorities.
- The process for placing children when there are no places within Coventry.
- Health inequalities impacts, children with autism, and training for carers to help children with autism.
- New residential children's homes and their provision for specialist care.
- A children's trust as a potential solution to recruitment issues and competitor to private providers.
- The use of capital to bring down revenue costs and the potential for regional solutions to the issue.
- The possibility of financial support from the Combined Authority.
- Distance of placements from the city for those children with the most complex needs.
- ICB (Integrated Care Board) cooperation.
- Deprivation of Liberty Orders (DoLs) – costs and decision-making process.

- Occupancy figures for new residential care settings.
- Residential children's homes for disabled children and young people.
- The evolving nature of complex care issues and evolving costs.
- The minimal requirement for residential placements for Unaccompanied Refugee and Asylum Seeker Children.

Councillor Brown, following responses from officers to the Board's questions, sympathised with the overwhelming complexity of the market and enquired about any potential regulation caps on provision costs from private providers. In response, the Interim Director for Children's Services recognised that while regulation caps were not currently in place, he agreed that both financial transparency and minimum timescales for residential placements were needed. He also highlighted the valuable role previously played by the voluntary sector that is no longer available. Similarly, the Strategic Lead for Looked After Children informed the Cabinet Member and the Board of previously implemented frameworks with financial caps for private providers. Deregulation in the sector, however, catalysed the transition to un-capped and more costly 'spot' placements.

Councillor Seaman thanked officers for the Briefing Note and offered her appreciation to the Board for helping to understand the complexities and bigger picture of the looked after children market. In response to a question regarding regional cooperation to tackle financial issues and the lack of residential children's homes, the Cabinet Member reassured the Board of her regular meetings with regional counterparts at the Local Government Association (LGA) and the West Midlands Regional Innovations Board to work collaboratively to tackle those issues in depth.

Similarly, Councillor Ruane (Chair of the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1)) sought assurances from officers that the issues highlighted regarding looked after children and the cost of placements be treated as a transformation project and engaged with at the top level of the organisation. In response, the Interim Director of Children's Services highlighted the increasingly prominent role of staff from finance in children's services, the regular discussions being undertaken by the senior leadership team regarding looked after children and the cost of placements, the vital political and executive support within the council, and how the matter is being addressed as a financial stability issue and a corporate priority.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Notes the continued support for the Residential Children's Homes Review & Strategy 2023-2026 (Appendix 1) and the work being undertaken in relation to sufficiency, including value for money, addressing high-cost placements and improving outcomes for our looked after children.**
- 2. Undertake a visit to a newly built home for looked after children to better understand the need for provision.**
- 3. Requests that a review of this issue be considered by the Board at the first meeting in the 2024/25 Municipal Year and that the Cabinet**

Member for Strategic Finance and Resources be invited to attend that meeting.

18. Work Programme

The Board noted the Work Programme and agreed to bring the following item forward to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Board.

- School Place Sufficiency

19. Any Other Items of Public Business

There were no other items of business.

20. Homes for Looked After Children and Cost of Placements

Further to Minute 15 above, the Board received and noted a private Briefing Note of the Interim Director for Children's Services which set out the personal and commercially confidential matters relating to the Homes for Looked After Children and Cost of Placements.

21. Any other items of Private Business

There were no other items of private business.

(Meeting closed at 12.55 pm)