

**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**  
**held at 11.00 am on Thursday, 11 July 2024**

Present:

Members: Councillor CE Thomas (Chair)  
Councillor J Birdi  
Councillor B Christopher  
Councillor J Gardiner  
Councillor R Lancaster  
Councillor S Nazir  
Councillor E M Reeves  
Councillor R Thay  
Councillor A Tucker

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

Other Members: Councillor G Duggins  
Councillor Dr K Sandhu (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills)

Employees (by Directorate):

Education and Skills J Gillum, A King, R Sugars

Law and Governance G Holmes, C Taylor

Apologies: Councillor P Seaman and Mr D Jackson

## **Public Business**

### **38. Declarations of Interests**

There were no Declarations of Interest.

### **39. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 18 April 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

There were no matters arising.

### **40. Early Years Strategy**

The Board considered a briefing note and comprehensive presentation of the Director for Education and Skills which provided an update on the progress and impact of the Coventry Integrated Early Strategy.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills introduced the item, advising of the challenges currently being seen, which were: an increasing pupil population, an increase in the early years sector, increasing need regarding sufficiency and more

special educational needs in early years. The Cabinet Member extended her thanks to officers for the roll out of the Start for Life Programme and its success.

Early Years education remained a citywide priority for Coventry as set out in the Early Years Strategy as well as the Start for Life Programme and The Marmot Principles. The strategy commenced in 2021 and aimed to improve achievement at the end of Reception year and school readiness, responding to increased demand on services post pandemic including with special educational needs and disability (SEND), and to make better use of knowledge and resources through improved information sharing and partnership working.

Services for families aged 0-5 were working as a coalition to improve practice; develop a shared understanding of 'school readiness'; tackle inequalities across the social gradient and achieve the Marmot objectives. This work is underpinned by service area plans to improve educational outcomes, health, and wellbeing for the youngest children in the city.

Coventry was one of 75 local areas selected to deliver the 'Family Hubs and Start for Life' programmes. These programmes align with the Early Years Strategy and had been a further support for delivery over the past 18 months.

The Start for Life programme aimed to join up and enhance services delivered through transformed family hubs in local authority areas, ensuring all parents and carers could access the support they needed. The educational aspect of the programme:

- Supported play and learning at home
- Improving early speech, communication and language development.

Appendix 1 highlighted the expectations for delivery and examples of activity undertaken.

By the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (5 years old), a child was defined as reaching a 'good level of development' (GLD), if they had attained the expected level in 5 key areas of learning. The Education Performance report shared with the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2), in February 2024, showed that there was an improvement in achievement in the 2023/24 academic year with 63.9% of the city's 5 year olds achieved a GLD at age 5 in 2023 rising from 61% in 2022.

Outcomes remained below national (67.2%), however, a greater increase in the percentage of children achieving GLD than statistical neighbours, had been achieved. Coventry ranked 4/11 statistical neighbours for GLD in 2023/24.

The use of the Apps 'Easypeasy' and '50 Things to Do before You're Five' had been effective in providing universal and targeted support. Both apps were promoted widely across all services working with families who had children aged from birth to five. One of the key impacts of the Early Years Strategy was the alignment of consistent advice for families to support school readiness and to provide access to information across a range of service areas.

As a result, the data for children's achievement in communication and language indicated a 1.4 ppt improvement from 2021/22 with 76% of ALL children achieving this Early Learning Goal.

An updated Early Years Strategy was in the final stages of development to respond to the current challenges facing the sector and to sustain the recent improvements. Appendix 2 provided an overview of activity and impact in different areas of work that related to Early Years Quality Improvement and Standards Work (Strategy), Early Years SEND) and Start for Life.

The Saplings Programme was an intervention for children in their Reception Year with additional Speech, Language and Communication Needs, delivered in partnership with Little Heath Primary School. Children were identified for Saplings by teachers from the Council's SEND Early Years Team in partnership with parents and school SENCOs. Children accessing Saplings, benefitted from specialist teaching and small group support as well as interventions to target speech, language, and communication skills.

Programme outcomes were shared with the Inclusion Head Teachers group who supported delivery of a further cohort and identification of a third Saplings cohort was now underway.

As part of the Spring 2023 budget announcements, the government had increased the financial support available to working parents by introducing free childcare for children from the age of 9 months. Starting from April 2024, existing childcare support would be expanded in phases. Changes were being gradually introduced to ensure childcare providers and Local Authorities could meet demand for the new entitlement plans. From April 2024, eligible 2 year olds would be able to access 15 hours childcare support; from September 2024, 15 hours of childcare support would be extended to eligible children from the age of 9 months and from September 2025, the offer would be extended to 30 hours per week.

To facilitate the expansion of the extended hours offer, the government had uplifted the hourly rate paid to childcare providers to deliver the existing funded entitlements. In the current financial year, the provider hourly funding rate for 3 and 4 year old provision was on average £5.26; for 2 year olds on average £7.91; and for below 2 year olds it was £10.19.

The government had also provided funding to local authorities to increase the supply of wraparound care for primary school children between the hours of 8am and 6pm term time only. The ambition was that by September 2026, all primary school pupils from Reception to Year 6, would have access to a full wraparound offer, provided by the school or in partnership with a Private, Voluntary & Independent provider including a childminder.

In England, Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) teaching begins in Reception year and must take part in SSP lessons for at least 2 years as specified in the national curriculum and the reading framework. The Early Years Services provided advice, support and training in relation to pre-reading skills advocating the use of evidence-based approaches. Training this year had included: Sharing Stories and Songs and Phase 1 phonics. Workshops. Work with the Library service had led to targeted distribution of Bookstart packs for 1-2 and 3-4 year olds

to under-resourced families and targeted distribution of the specialist Bookstart packs for children with additional needs and dual or multiple languages.

Coventry's strategy for supporting early reading started in the early years. Families supporting children's early development at home was a crucial factor in child development. This had a positive impact on school readiness which could continue to persist until GCSE's and A-Levels. It was also related to supporting social and emotional development with benefits noticed until age 16.

Oral language and communication skills underpinned children's development. This was enhanced by the amount of spoken language a child heard and joined in with.

Schools in Coventry supported a high proportion of children with EAL (English as an Additional Language) and/or who were disadvantaged. This was alongside 3 years disrupted education due to the pandemic.

In response, many schools were implementing a long-term strategy around oracy. A multi-agency Speech and Language Action group were ensuring the Universal pathway which supported early intervention was as effective as possible. The early years pathway which supported early intervention was as effective as possible. The early years workforce development programme was providing speech communication and language training. The target was 60% of the early years workforce trained to level 1 and 100% of schools and early years providers had a communication champion trained to level 3. Tier 1 training had been delivered over the summer term. To date 226 practitioners and professionals had attended the training across 177 early years providers and schools. To support childminder professional development, new childminder networks would be implemented in the Autumn, where this training would be delivered as the starting point.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to the Early Years Strategy including:

- Statutory guidance advised there was a responsibility on Early Years providers to talk about oral health with the children however, brushing teeth was not compulsory. A campaign was being rolled out in parts of the city where early years oral hygiene was the worst. Officers would continue to provide guidance and support on oral health to Early Years and would link with colleagues regarding teaching Early Years children how to brush their teeth.
- Makaton was used in both mainstream and special schools.
- Officers worked with health partners to provide free toilet training to all children at Early Years provider settings.
- All children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) were supported. A service of specialist teachers supported children with EAL within the school setting. Partnership working took place with the migrant team for any new languages arising in the city and the New Arrivals Fund targeted schools with new children with EAL in order to purchase support for them.
- The increase in school appeals was mainly due to a shortage of school places. EAL and SEN information transferred with children

moving schools EAL and SEN services also moved with the child if required.

- Bulge classes had been created in response to the shortage of school places. There were 11.5 bulge classes operating in primary school settings in Coventry.
- 2021/22 data was the most recent regarding improvements in targeted work through the Early Years Strategy and Start for Life. 2022/23 data would be published in November 2024. In comparison, Coventry was behind its 11 statistical neighbours however, the gap was closing faster than it had historically.
- Actions within the strategy were all evidence based responding to detailed analysis work however, outcomes took time to see results – sometimes years.
- Saplings was an intervention in Coventry in response to the need in Early Years children. There were 12 children currently accessing the Saplings Programme which provided an intensive level of support focused on communication and language skills. Initial results had shown 24 months of progress had been made over 9 months with the second cohort's progress showing even better results.
- The Saplings Programme supported those with a high level of need and was rolled out ensuring innovative progress was used.
- The Best Start for Life Programme included using Apps such as EasyPeasy, 50 Things To Do. Funding was present within the Family Hubs for a teacher to provide a family learning session in each hub.
- The uptake of 11% for the Easypeasy App was very good. The communications plan around it was robust. Demographic data was used to show which postcode areas were using the App more or less and then areas could be targeted accordingly. Workshops were available for families to learn how to use the App.
- Practitioners in the Family Hubs worked beyond one building and took the Family Hubs out to the community. The Family Hub Digital Offer was available via [www.coventryfamilies.co.uk](http://www.coventryfamilies.co.uk) and enabled a targeted search for support.
- Each Family Hub had a timetable of activities tailored to community requirements and needs.

**RESOLVED that the Board:**

- 1) Considers and comments on the progress of the Early Years Strategy and is aware of the initiatives implemented through the Start for Life Programme to address school readiness.**
- 2) Consider and comment on the information provided in relation to the Saplings Programme and its continuation for a third year.**
- 3) Consider and comment on the information provided in relation to the teaching of early reading.**
- 4) Note the information provided in relation to the expansion of the roll out of the early years and childcare entitlements which is in line with Government policy.**

#### 41. **Work Programme**

The Board considered a briefing note of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, which provided an update on the schedule of items for meetings over the coming municipal year.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills introduced the item advising the Board of her five priorities for the coming year which were: The Early Years Strategy, Delivering New Entitlement, Sufficiency of school places, Behaviour and SEND.

The Board questioned the Cabinet Member and received responses on a number of matters relating to the Work Programme for 2024/25, including:

- The biggest single issue regarding education in Coventry was sufficiency of school places.
- Officers from Education and Planning linked up regarding housing, and in particular Section 106 contributions.
- Family hubs and supporting at families in an holistic way could help with child and parent behaviour. A partnership approach regarding behaviour, working with organisations who had an interface with families was important.
- Measures were in place for children to tell the teachers if they were experiencing problems at home or mental health problems and work was ongoing regarding children feeling that they belonged.

The Board requested:

- Briefing notes regarding government implementations and changes relating to Education and Children's Services.
- The link for the Secretary of State for Education's vision for education, children's services and skills (16.7.24 @ 4pm)
- The One Coventry Strategic Plan relating to School Sufficiency item discussed at the Scrutiny Board (2) for Education and Children's Services on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

The Board noted the Work Programme with the agreement that the following item be added to the items for noting in the Work Programme for 2024/25:

- Early Years Strategy – update in 6 months-time
- Delivering new entitlement for Early Years and Childcare
- School sufficiency
- Managing behaviour
- SEND

#### 42. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of business.

(Meeting closed at 12.30 pm)