

**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**  
**held at 11.00 am on Thursday, 28 January 2021**

Present:

Members: Councillor K Sandhu (Chair)  
Councillor P Akhtar  
Councillor J Blundell  
Councillor J Lepoidevin  
Councillor G Lloyd  
Councillor R Thay  
Councillor C Thomas

Co-opted Members: Mrs S Hanson and Mrs K Jones

Cabinet Member: Councillor K Maton Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

Employees:

A Coles, Education and Skills  
J Gregg, Director of Childrens Services  
G Holmes, Law and Governance  
K Nelson, Director of Education and Skills  
M Rose, Law and Governance  
R Sugars, Education and Skills

By Invitation: P Green Head Teacher

Apologies: Councillor B Gittins, B Kaur and P Seaman

## **Public Business**

### **13. Declarations of Interests**

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

### **14. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2020 were agreed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

### **15. The Impact of Covid-19 on Schools**

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) received a presentation of the Director of Education and Skills that informed Members of the Impact of Covid-19 on Schools.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills and the Director of Education and Skills began by thanking all staff, and parents and carers working with young

people during this difficult time. A reassurance was given that parents were not expected to be school teachers but working together with schools to keep young people motivated was beneficial for all.

The presentation detailed the following:

- The current position
- The COVID-19 Journey
- Partnership principals
- The positives including, the joined-up approach and Local Authority support
- The Challenges

Also present was Head Teacher Paul Green, who had been invited to the meeting by the Chair, Councillor Sandhu to support the discussions. Mr Green emphasised that he had experienced the strength of the Coventry Partnership collaboration and supportive schools' network which had been valuable through this new experience. Mr Green was keen to ensure that some positives were maintained in schools in the future, such as increased confidence with using technology, other 'Covid keeps' were being investigated.

It was also recognised that Coventry had been commended by the DfE for providing a collective voice. The business case for vaccinations of staff in special schools to support high risk situations had also been valuable.

Challenges discussed included:

- Frequent changes to guidance at short notice
- Gaps in learning
- The safety of vulnerable pupils
- Balancing risks to public health and loss of education
- Staff were managing onsite learning, remote learning, track and trace, lateral flow tests and new examination processes
- Ofsted assessments
- Financial impacts
- Electronic devices and internet access

The Board also thanked staff on behalf of the citizens of Coventry, for their enthusiasm, commitment and hard work and were pleased that despite the web of complexities there had been benefits identified in this very difficult time which could support young people in their futures.

The Board questioned officers, received responses, and discussed the following issues:

- Contact with vulnerable children and families
- Home learning on laptops and internet access
- Covid funding and catch-up support for gaps in learning
- Tests
- Signs of safety
- Parental anxiety about home schooling
- Mental health support in schools

Officers noted that it was a choice offered to families of vulnerable children to attend school, contact had been made with identified families as directed by

national guidance. Technology and internet access had been a significant challenge and creative thinking had been encouraged including, sharing information with parents about access through devices they may have other than laptops such as games consoles. Also blended learning i.e. some 'live' lessons and some independent directed work set to support families with multiple siblings and one device. Opportunities for supporting catching up needed to be explored once gaps had been identified. Signs of safety were not as evident to staff as when schools were open fully and there had been evidence of hidden harm following schools opening back up during the Covid journey and opening back up following a full lockdown. Parents were urged to contact schools if they felt anxious at all about home schooling and officers again thanked parents for working in partnership with schools and encouraging young people to engage in learning during this difficult time.

Officers agreed to look into whether recorded lessons could be transferred to DVD to increase access for those without internet connection. Officers also agreed to circulate further information to the Scrutiny Board about how many vulnerable children were in schools.

**RESOLVED that, The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) noted the detailed presentation which updated members on the Impact of Covid-19 on Schools and requested that a letter be sent on behalf of the Board to thank all staff for their hard work and commitment particularly during this challenging time.**

#### 16. **Children's Services Continuous Improvement Progress and Covid Update**

Further to minute 34/19 the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) received a Briefing note of the Director of Children's Services that presented the progress with Children's Services improvement, which had been reported to the Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 9 December 2020. The briefing note also provided an interim update to the Board on the impact of Covid on vulnerable children and families. The next Continuous Improvement Executive Group would be held on 10 February 2021.

The briefing note indicated that the Ofsted Annual Conversation with regional representatives was undertaken each year, the meeting last year took place in March 2020. The meeting was part of a broader meeting covering education and early years. In March 2020, Ofsted paused ILACS inspections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Children's Services was anticipating a standard Inspection by September 2020. Ofsted published their interim plans for a phased return to routine inspections which commenced from September 2020. The Interim visits were paused again during the November 2020 lockdown.

A report proposing arrangements to transfer Children's Services Continuous Improvement to Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership was approved by the Children's Services Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 28th October 2020. The new arrangements would be effective from 1st April 2021, the governance in place would ensure that Children's Services continuous improvement remained a political priority. Education and Children's Scrutiny

Board members would continue to receive reports on Children's Services continuous improvement and progress on a quarterly basis.

On 5 January 2021 a further national lockdown was announced. Ofsted had confirmed that interim focused visits would be undertaken during the national lockdown period commencing from February 2021, changes would be made to make the process more manageable and proportionate.

The Continuous Improvement Plan was reviewed by Executive Group Board members on 9 December 2020. The plan had been updated to reflect current progress and had received critical challenge from the Independent Chair on the impact of actions. The completion of actions in the plan would be signed off by the Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 10th February 2021, before arrangements transferred to the Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership on 1st April 2021.

Children's Services continued to maintain core service delivery, delivering ongoing protection, support and intervention to vulnerable families across Coventry during the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. All buildings had remained open, services had continued to operate during the November 2020 national lockdown period, risk assessments were regularly updated to reflect the changes in government guidance and were disseminated to staff. Virtual visits had continued throughout the service where it was safe to do so. Children's Homes had continued to operate within the operating risk assessment. Broad Park House had remained open offering short breaks both targeted and community breaks. Staff who could work effectively from home had continued to be based at home. The service continued to be under pressure with the increased numbers of child in need work, increased numbers of Child Protection work and LAC numbers increasing. Caseloads were higher than average and recruiting to experienced social worker vacancies remained a significant challenge.

The recruitment and retention of experienced frontline Children and Families Social Workers was a challenge facing all local authorities across the country. The most recent DFE Social Workforce Data indicated (2019) that there was an acute shortage of Experienced Children and Families Social Workers particularly those who were three years post qualified. The operating environment for the recruitment of experienced social workers had become increasingly challenging since the pandemic.

The Children's Services Workforce Development Strategy supported and improved the recruitment and retention of social workers, and children's services practitioners by developing the training and development offer, focusing on improving the capability of staff to engage children, young people and families by enabling them to assess, make judgements, decisions and 'hold risk' whilst creating solutions with families and multi-agency partners. The strategy had delivered a number of key initiatives:

- A number of Recruitment Campaigns to promote Coventry City Council Children's Services as a first-choice destination for Social Workers to practice.
- A successful Coventry Social Work Academy has seen 58 Newly Qualified Social Workers commencing the Academy since July 2018.

- A revised Children's Services Social Work Progression and Career Pathway Framework
- A Children's Services 'Grow our own Social Work Scheme' and National Fast Track Pre-Qualifying Social Work Programmes; Step Up and Frontline programme.
- The service has supported the 'Social Work Together' government campaign supporting the current COVID-19 pandemic enabling social workers who have retired in the last two years to be fast tracked to apply to return to practice.
- A return to practice scheme to enable Children and Families Social Workers to return to the profession.
- A comprehensive learning and development offer that is fit for purpose and supports practitioners to continuously improve the services provided to children and young people and their families, that improves the quality and consistency of practice.
- The launch of a 'refer a friend' scheme in March 2020 has resulted in a further 3 experienced social workers joining the service.
- Regular engagement with agency staff to consider applying for vacancies within the service has resulted in a number of agency social workers being appointed to permanent experienced social worker roles.
- Children's Services launched their own local Induction in October 2020 to support the corporate Induction.

The service had been under significant pressure, the current market and demand for social workers continued to increase due to the pandemic which had increased the competition for recruiting within the region. The number of social work vacancies remained high, and despite a range of recruitment initiatives and other approaches, the service continued to interview small numbers of candidates on a weekly basis and those successful were offered experienced social worker roles.

The COVID-19 pandemic was having significant impact on recruitment and was making it difficult to recruit experienced social workers during this period. This had led to an increased use of agency staff and increased financial impact. The service had also experienced difficulty in recruiting agency social workers due to insufficient experienced social workers in the region. A shortage of social workers had led to higher caseloads and higher demand of work across all services and teams in Children's Services.

A further 12 Newly Qualified Social Workers (Cohort 7) would commence on 25 January 2021, this was an additional cohort to address further the number of social work vacancies within the service. A further Social Work Academy Team to manage the double cohorts of Newly Qualified Social Workers would also be established and recruited to.

Children's Services continued to work with the recruitment team and human resource colleagues to review further targeted campaigns and innovative ways to recruit and retain experienced social workers.

The Performance Board continued to meet monthly to review performance. A summary of current performance showed there continued to be an increase in performance activity, the increase in demand was putting significant pressure on services.

- Increase in Referrals in the last seven months (613 compared with 279 in April 2020)
- Contacts in the last seven months (2,392 compared with 1582 April 2020)
- Number of children subject to a child protection plan have increased to 462 compared with 408 in April 2020
- S47's has increased considerably 307 in October 2020 compared with 110 in April 2020.
- The number of children identified as "Children in Need" continue to rise 2010 compared with 1225 in April 2020
- Looked after children continue to increase 756 compared with 693 in April.
- Assessments completed within 45 days have decreased to 78.3% compared with 85.9% in April 2020.

Children's Services introduced Quality Assurance visits to teams in October 2019. The aim was to ensure understanding of practice and the signs of safety framework to ensure a clearer line of sight of the senior leadership team to frontline practitioners. The visits included direct observations, discussions with staff, and case mapping.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, visits had not been undertaken during March-September 2020. In October 2020 the third visit was held in the MASH, this was face to face whilst complying with COVID-19 guidance with some of the visit completed remotely. The findings from the visit highlighted positive outcomes with evidence demonstrating improvement and focus on maintaining continuous improvement.

It remained a very challenging operating environment. In the lead up to the Ofsted Interim Focused visit the Children's senior leadership team and extended Leadership Team continued to work together to drive forward practice improvements and service changes. This phase of significant demand and improvement relied heavily on corporate support and the support from partners to ensure that improvement continued. There was explicit intention to ensure that Children's Services reached a position where it was continuously achieving good outcomes for the Children of Coventry.

The Board questioned officers, received responses, and discussed the following issues:

- Administrative support for Social Workers
- The workload of Social Workers
- Risk Assessments
- Extra pressure and procedures due to Covid
- Impact on performance
- Children with a Children In Need assessment and parental engagement

Officers noted that Covid had altered the workflow of the Service, young people were brought to their attention later and needed escalating quicker once hidden harm had been identified. Roles had been risk assessed and redefined. Agency availability was reduced, and workloads were exceeding what was considered manageable, additional funding was required.

Officers agreed to provide the Board with information on the number of parents not engaged with the service following Children in Need assessments.

**RESOLVED** that, the Board noted the update on the Continuous Improvement Progress and Covid-19 Update and requested that a letter be sent on behalf of the Board to thank all staff for their hard work and commitment particularly during this challenging time.

17. **Work Programme**

The Board considered their work programme for the current municipal year. It was noted that Items had been paused due to the pandemic to allow Directors to manage requirements of their statutory duties having regard for new regulations and not create additional pressures during this challenging time. There would be a meeting of the Health Scrutiny Board that this Board would be invited to attend on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2021.

18. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 12.50 pm)