

**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**  
**held at 10.30 am on Thursday, 16 September 2021**

Present:

Members: Councillor J Innes (Chair)  
Councillor F Abbott  
Councillor P Akhtar  
Councillor J Blundell  
Councillor S Keough  
Councillor R Simpson

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson  
Mrs K Jones

Other Members: Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

Employees (by Directorate):

S Bhambra, Children's Services  
J Gregg, Director of Children's Services  
G Holmes, Law and Governance  
M Rose, Law and Governance  
R Sugars, Education and Skills

Apologies: Councillor B Gittins, R Thay, C Thomas and A Tucker

## **Public Business**

### **6. Declarations of Interests**

There were no disclosable interests.

### **7. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 24th June 2021 were agreed as a true record.

Further to Minute 4/21, the most effective way to scrutinise apprenticeships where three scrutiny boards were involved was to be investigated.

**RESOLVED that further detail regarding the scrutiny of Apprenticeships be communicated to the Board.**

### **8. Children's Services Ofsted Visit Outcome and Action Plan Progress**

The Scrutiny Board considered a report of the Director of Children's Services which detailed the outcome of the Children's Services Ofsted focused assurance visit, held on 12th and 13th May 2021 and progress against the Action plan.

Ofsted re-inspected Children's Services in March 2017, the outcome of the inspection was published on 13th June 2017, Children's Services were judged as "requires improvement to be good". The Ofsted framework (ILACS) included focused visits to local authorities who were judged to be 'requires improvement'. Children's Services had received two visits. The first visit was held on 30th and 31st January 2018. The visit focused on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 22nd February 2018. A further focused visit was held on 26th and 27th February 2019. The visit focused on permanency planning and achieving permanency. The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 21st March 2019.

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 to reflect the COVID-19 context for a phased return to routine inspections which commenced from September 2020. The Interim visits were paused again during the November 2020 lockdown. On 5 January 2021 a further national lockdown was announced. Ofsted confirmed that interim assurance focused visits would be undertaken during the national lockdown period commencing from February 2021.

The interim focused visit, (COVID-19 assurance) was undertaken on 12th and 13th May 2021. Interim focused visits differ from the usual focused visits in that they had a broader scope with a particular focus on the quality of decision making for children. The methodology for the visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) and was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The visit was carried out largely on site, although remotely for the School HMI.

The scope of the visit included:

#### Help and protection scope

- The effectiveness of the front door, with specific reference to any rise in and response to referrals, section 47 enquires and strategy discussions
- The progress of children subject to child protection and child in need plans (those who have experienced abuse, neglect or exploitation)
- The progress of those recently stepped up or stepped down to early help and the exercise of thresholds
- Edge of care/pre-proceedings, particularly those subject to letter before proceedings

#### Children in care and care leavers scope

- The focus on physical/mental health of children in care and care leavers, including how the local authority has maintained contact with the child/care leaver and how they're facilitated contact with families
- Placement decisions, including the quality of matching, particularly when sufficiency is a challenge

#### Impact of Leaders scope

- The quality assurance of practice and 'line of sight' to the quality and impact of practice with children and families
- Management and workforce capacity, including responses to staff well-being

- The effectiveness of leaders in leading and contributing to multi-agency working that leads to effective social work practice

The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 25th June 2021. The link to the report was provided to the Board. The findings stated that there was strong, timely and effective political and corporate support for children's services which had enabled leaders to respond promptly to mitigate the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders had ensured the most vulnerable children had been seen in person, and staff were provided with personal protective equipment. Children in care, both living in Coventry and those living outside of the city were provided with the technology and access to tuition and education where possible. Inspectors stated that partnership working had strengthened during the pandemic with positive changes identified. Partners had maintained oversight of child safety and well-being. Decision making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub was timely and Strategy discussion held promptly. Face to face visits had continued during the pandemic, subject to risk assessment. Staff were positive about working in Coventry. They stated that their workload was manageable and that they valued the support and communication provided by leaders and managers at all levels during the pandemic.

Three areas were identified as areas for improvement:

- The timeliness of decision making for children to enter the Public Law Outline (PLO), and their circumstances being purposefully progressed once within it.
- The quality of supervision, management oversight and case notes so that the rationale for decisions, made was clearly recorded.
- Decision making and the recording of rationale with respect of children's placements

An Action Plan which was appended to the briefing note was developed in response to the visit, the plan detailed the areas for improvement and the actions that were being progressed.

Officers noted that since the 'Inadequate' rating in 2014 Coventry had showed many signs of improvement and pre-pandemic this had been significant enough to see elements of practice that could be considered at a 'good' level. However, the pandemic had had a significant impact on progress. The Assurance Visit was in response to the pandemic and the service was reviewed in 2 days. There was positive feedback to be proud of and some areas highlighted to focus on for improvement. Inspections were viewed as providing support for achieving the best outcomes for children.

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

- The four different Ofsted ratings and what they meant
- Areas of improvement
- Issues around timeliness of court work and capacity for judges in family courts
- Quality of case notes
- The difference between Management oversight and supervision
- The increasingly complex problems faced by families
- One Coventry approach and partnership working
- Which aspects of Leadership are included in the inspection process.

- Action plan progress
- How timeliness is measured
- 'Voice of the Child' work not included in the Ofsted report

Officers noted that the increase in the volume of work and the national shortage of staff had affected Coventry's improvement work. Social workers had been out protecting children during lockdown in Coventry and were facing an increase from 2000 contacts on average per month pre-pandemic, to 2600 calls raising concerns per month during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic on average 400 contacts per month would become referrals however, this had increased now to 600 on average. The Director of Children's Services evidenced the issues in Coventry with the approximate figures of 80,000 children in the city, of which 5,000 were open to Children's Services, with a budget of approximately £80million and 1,000 members of staff. Staff shortages contributed to delays and despite the Social Worker Academy being regarded highly, time was needed for new staff to gain experience. The complexity of problems faced by families was significant and there were recognised links with poverty. Partnership working was crucial, and the One Coventry approach aligned support.

Officers explained that significant improvements had been made with the quality of case notes in Coventry, for example summaries were now evident on case files. Improvements to the quality of case notes would continue to be important. Overview supervision was a time allocated for reflective supervision and developing practice wisdom and management oversight was required when a more immediate decision was presented. Measuring timeliness combined qualitative and quantitative assessment. Purposeful assessment was important for the best outcomes for children and therefore a balance must be considered as this may take longer to establish key information. Quantitative measures included the number of assessments completed within the target number of days and Coventry were currently at 91.2%, ahead of statistical neighbours and the national average. Qualitative measures included audits of cases. The 'Voice of the Child' work in Coventry was recognised as a good story and Coventry would work to improve promoting positive work. The Action Plan was a required response to the areas for improvement highlighted by the inspection and actions had been progressed which could be shared with the Board.

The Board requested that:

- Progress on the action plan be circulated to Members
- Consideration be given to numeric metrics being included to measure progress against actions where possible
- Consideration be given to arranging briefings for the Board on the voice of the child, as well as quality assurance audits

**RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board note the Action Plan and thank officers for a comprehensive response to questions.**

## 9. **Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Board considered and noted their Work Programme for the 2020/21

## 10. **Any Other Business**

## **Support to families self-isolating due to Covid**

Officers responded to Members concerns about the communication of support available to families who were required to self-isolate due to Covid. Officers discussed the link to the Council website that was sent to parents requested to isolate and the information regarding support available on the webpage was displayed for Members and discussed. If the family were in receipt of Free School Meals they would receive a voucher or food parcel from the school. It was recognised that schools were aware of potentially vulnerable families and often offered support for those in need even if they did not meet guidelines required for funding.

The Board asked questions regarding:

- The value of vouchers
- The impact of the revised government regulations regarding isolation
- The speed of support
- Support for children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)
- Contact by the Council following Test and Test requests to isolate

Councillor Abbott highlighted the Council offered support to families via the network of food hubs in the city.

Officers to provide the following information:

- Whether parents have still applied for support they are now not eligible for following the changes to the government isolation requirements
- What are the timescales for test and trace payments?
- Whether children with an EHCP are still eligible for test and trace support if they are required to isolate due to shielding
- How and when Public Health contact people as part of the Track and Trace process.

On behalf of the Board Councillor Innes thanked Councillor Abbott and all those involved with supporting families in need at food hubs in the City.

(Meeting closed at 11.50 am)