

**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**  
**held at 10.30 am on Thursday, 9 December 2021**

Present:

Members: Councillor J Innes (Chair)  
Councillor P Akhtar  
Councillor J Blundell  
Councillor S Keough  
Councillor C Thomas

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson  
Mrs K Jones

Other Members: Councillor K Sandhu (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills)  
Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

Employees (by Directorate):

Children's Services S Bates, C Donovan, J Gregg,  
Education and Skills R Sugars, J Essex  
Law and Governance G Holmes, M Rose,

Apologies: Councillors F Abbott, R Simpson and Councillor Gittins  
(Deputy Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

## **Public Business**

### **18. Declarations of Interests**

There were no disclosable interests.

The Board noted that Councillor Abbott had submitted her apologies in light of her interest in matters to be considered at meeting.

### **19. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021 were agreed and signed as a true record.

### **20. Voice of the Child**

The Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Director of Children's Services which detailed different methods used to identify the voice of the child, especially through the use of technology when engaging with specific groups of children and young people.

Coventry Children's Services use various methods to support children and young people in sharing their wishes, feelings and aspirations. Methods included, during direct work, group activities, surveys, focus groups and technology. The focus at this meeting was on technology and details of other methods were appended to the briefing note.

The Board received a presentation on the 'Mind of My Own' app designed and co-produced with children and young people, to support them in sharing their views, concerns and thoughts about their lives. The app had been successfully used in Coventry since 2019. Some of the benefits of using Mind of My Own had been:

- a) Children and young people on the autistic spectrum had shared more via the app than previously with their worker.
- b) During Covid-19 lockdowns, it was an effective tool for young people to keep in touch with their worker.
- c) Young people had used the app to tell their worker something that was difficult to say in person.
- d) Staff had benefitted from being able to upload to case files young people's views in their own words.
- e) Children, young people and staff had all benefitted from sharing good news rather than focusing on issues all the time.

Coventry had been partnering with Social Finance for the past three years as a pilot authority in the development of 'Leaving Well'. Leaving Well was a pioneering, new digital approach to leaving care services, which was centred around the Leaving Well Digital Tool. The new style pathway plan had been successful in ensuring all pathway plans were completed and reviewed via Leaving Well. This had several advantages detailed in the report.

Various methods were employed to ensure children and young people living with special educational needs and disabilities voices could be heard including Widgets and Makaton, (the use of symbols, signs, and speech to replace written words). Screen sharing Apps for sharing a white board screen in the classroom with a young person on a laptop or tablet. Screen reading technology including touch typing programmes. Students use phones and tablets to take images and zoom in. There were also specific apps, such as, 'Seeing AI' which was a talking camera for the blind to identify images or read writing. Hardware used included, electronic Braille. The use of MS Teams had also had a positive impact on the number of young people attending annual reviews and expressing their opinions. It was thought that online was a less intimidating environment than being in a room with a range of professionals.

Another method using technology was 'Kooth' a safe, free and confidential way for young people to access emotional wellbeing and early intervention mental health support, it was actively promoted by Coventry Children's Services. The service was available to all young people across Coventry aged 11-25 years from April 2021 and was jointly funded by the City Council and Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Other methods of participation used within Coventry's Children's Services included:

- The Participation Team was a focal point for engagement across Children's Services. The database monitored participation across looked after children aged 5-18 years and identified where there were any gaps.
- 'Young Inspectors' was a youth led programme which provided children and young people with a platform for their views and opinions of the services they access. Recommendations made, would support services in the development of their offer and help to ensure services were meeting the needs of the children and young people they work with.
- Young people led groups which included 'Little Voices' and 'Voices of Care' the local Children in Care Council. A separate Care leavers group contributed to the Corporate Parenting Board and Coventry Youth Council provided a more generic voice.
- Moderation of case note files with a focus on the voice of the child and ways to improve
- Service User feedback forms and ways to improve
- Coventry was part of wave 2, of 'Coram Voice New Belongings Project'. Care leavers were surveyed to identify where they were flourishing and where things could be improved. An evidence base was produced and informed service improvements via an action plan. Key areas for development included housing and accommodation, emotional well-being and finance.
- In 2018, the Social Work Academy supported by young people from Voices of Care developed a good practice guide for life story work which had been widely disseminated and used by staff.
- Children and young people inform practice via direct liaison with coordinators and formal service user feedback. During Covid-19 restrictions, the Lifelong Links and Family Group Conferencing service offered three options which were influenced and guided by young people
- The 8 Family Hubs across Coventry were at the forefront of using the Mind of My Own app, they had provided youth sessions during holiday periods and delivered child friendly interventions. Young people's feedback informed how sessions could be further developed, they measure customer experience, twice a year, via the Let's Talk Coventry platform and feedback forms were offered to all families following periods of intervention. Currently all the hubs were taking part in the Young Inspector's programme. This activity would inform hubs about how they were viewed from a young person's perspective.

All activity was monitored quarterly as part of the Participation Strategy. Monitoring enabled Coventry Children's Services to articulate the status of participation activity across our services, celebrate successes and identify areas for development. Participation was recognised as 'everyone's' business with services developing mechanisms for children, young people, parents, and carers to have a voice about the services they access and inform practice. The expectation was that participation work would be further enhanced through the Voice and Influence strand of the 'Coventry Family Valued' project.

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

- the benefits of using technology
- accessibility of technology and digital poverty
- diagnosis of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and support available following identification

- concerns about the returning of feedback forms and use of cut and paste
- reasons young people would prefer to do their schoolwork at home e.g., anxiety
- assurances around safeguarding and use of technology
- communication and follow up with young people regarding issues they have raised via technology
- the amount of young people using the technology of those who were eligible

The Board were reassured that the messages received from young people via technology were to be an aid to conversations and training was delivered to staff using the app. The briefing note used 'signs of safety' framework headings and the concerns noted under the heading "What we are worried about" were not significant concerns but were used to assist developing the service.

The Board were very supportive of the work to listen to children and young people and particularly the option to use technology to communicate their views.

**RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board note the content of the briefing and thanked staff for supporting the importance of including the voice of the child in planning and evaluating work.**

## 21. **Free School Meals Holiday Activities Fund Update**

Further to Minute 10/21 the Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Director of Education & Skills which updated Members on the previous report regarding free school meals (FSM) and the Holiday and Activities Fund (HAF).

FSM numbers in the city have increased from 11,683 (21.6% of pupil population) at the start of the pandemic to 12,683 (23.4% of pupil population) in January 2021 and 13,272 (24.3% of pupil population) currently. This compared with 20.8% of pupils nationally. By the end of April 2020 100% of eligible children were recorded as accessing free school meals (FSMs), and with the help of schools during the first lockdown, food vouchers/parcels for benefits eligible FSM children were delivered (including holiday periods).

The briefing note detailed the changes to the funding during the pandemic including various guidance, schemes and amounts over the last 2 years. Recently Coventry had been indicatively allocated £3.2M by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) via a new grant, the Household Support Fund (HSF) which operated from the 6th October to 31st March 2022 (6 months). This was the same level of funding as was provided to cover the 10 month period of the Covid winter grant Scheme (WGS) and Covid local grant schemes (LGS) in place between December 20 and September 2021. It was likely that the increase in funding was due to consideration of the recent reduction to Universal Credit and the significant price inflation currently affecting the energy market. No further funding had been announced for beyond 31st March 2022. By this point eligible pupils would have received food parcels / vouchers in holiday periods for almost 2 years.

Alongside FSM, the Holiday Activities and Food Pilot Programme was extended nationwide for children 5-16 during Easter, Summer and Christmas of 2021. Combining enriching activities with a hot or cold meal, nutrition awareness and

signposting. The Programme would reach approximately a quarter of eligible children and as the other grant schemes remained in place eligible pupils would have had access to this as well as parcels / vouchers. The briefing note detailed the numbers attending and examples of support they received. In the spending review further funding was announced for the holiday activities and food programme over the next 3 years at £200M per annum. The national level was at roughly the same amount as the current year.

The Coventry Food Network had been working to develop a city-wide Sustainable Food Strategy which focused on the links between the long-term sustainable prevention of food poverty, the promotion of public health and the reduction of growing health inequalities. They were applying for charitable status.

Following a successful 2-years funding bid to Feeding Britain, Coventry Independent Advice Service were supporting each social supermarket, to offer residents a range of advice and support. The aim was to help residents address and resolve underlying issues that made them vulnerable to hunger or food insecurity; to increase household income or reduce expenditure, thereby contributing to greater financial resilience; reduce their reliance on community food provision; receive support to improve their wellbeing and independence.

Coventry Food Network were supporting the procurement of food and delivery of the HAF 'Festive Fun 2021' Programme. A number of social supermarkets were providers for the HAF programme and delivered activity programmes and meals to children and young people eligible for FSM. An additional number were supporting the co-ordination and distribution of the 'Cook at Home Packs'. Coventry Food Network also supported issuing food parcels to residents who had made requests for food via the Community Support Team.

Feeding Coventry secured £10,000 to bulk order and distribute food to the social supermarkets during October 2021. This ensured that the social supermarkets were able to stock-up on essential food items for their members.

A Christmas campaign had been launched by the Community Resilience Team to raise money and secure food donations for the social supermarkets and vulnerable families in the city to address the shortage of lorry drivers and increased demand for help from the social supermarkets during the holiday period and into January 2022.

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

- conditions of the grant schemes
- concern about the extent of Food Poverty nationally and in the city
- the end of the current funding schemes in March 2022.
- support for young people over 16 years

Officers agreed to provide further information about the conditions of the £3.2m grant schemes funding of which £2.5m, was used for FSM.

The Board were encouraged to circulate the publicity about the support available to their constituents.

**RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board:**

- 1) **Note the content of the briefing note and concern about the extent of Food Poverty nationally and in the city**
- 2) **Write to the Cabinet Member (Education and Skills) and the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) requesting they consider future support for the Holiday Activities Fund taking measures necessary following the end of the current funding schemes in March 2022.**
- 3) **Write to the LGA, Coventry's MPs and the Department for Education to raise their concerns about the extent of Food Poverty and the end of the current funding schemes in March 2022.**

## 22. **School Readiness - Impact of Covid-19**

The Board considered a briefing note of the Director of Education & Skills regarding the impact that Covid has had on school readiness and what services were doing to support and improve school readiness.

The report noted that in England a child's progress was reviewed between the age of 2 and 3 by an early year's practitioner, or health visitor and again by their class teacher at the end of the school year in which they turn 5 (reception). The teacher used their judgement to assess a child's attainment against the national checklist of 'Good Level of Development (GLD)' Framework for the early years foundation stage. This was the key national indicator of whether a child was 'ready for school', this was a measure of attainment, not progress.

It wasn't possible to claim a full understanding of the impact that Covid has had on school readiness. The government temporarily disapplied and modified certain elements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework so no profile data was available for July 2020 or 2021. Children born immediately before or during the pandemic had not yet started school, so any impact on their expected level of development was not yet known.

It was recognised that high quality early years education combined with a supportive home learning environment were known precursors to later educational success. Children would have had varying pre-school experience. For those attending early years settings, access may have been disrupted and it was probable that the level of uptake of early years provision had been detrimentally impacted by Covid concerns and parental demand because more parents had been at home.

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, school readiness was an area of focus in Coventry. The data taken from 2019 indicated that overall, 69% of Coventry children were 'school ready' compared to a national average of 71%. However, the breakdown for children identified as disadvantaged fell to 55% compared to a national average of 56.6%.

The report detailed studies investigating the impact of Covid-19 on family life and early childhood development and work with teachers in schools where children started reception in September 2020. Feedback from Coventry Schools and Early Years Providers in Coventry supported these findings including, concerns that the

children entering the EYFS exhibited poorer social skills and other indicators of GLD were lower such as:

- They were often more comfortable in learning on their own or with a very small number of other children.
- Unable to share
- Some children were overwhelmed by a busy classroom, preferring quieter, more solitary activities
- More children seeking adult attention and some evidence of building unhealthy attachments with adults
- Language delay and confidence in communication
- Children enjoying sharing books with adults
- Gross and fine motor skills were less well developed, and balance and co-ordination were below levels expected
- Overall tiredness within the day and across the week – whilst this had always been a factor it was now more pronounced
- Unable to sustain concentration
- Significantly higher number of children presenting with special educational needs (SEND)
- (Nursery) – more children not yet toileting independently and reliant on ‘pull-ups’ than ordinarily expected

On a more positive note, some schools had also reported that children had settled well into daily routines and were starting to make gains in their learning through good progress.

In Autumn 2020 Coventry’s uptake of 2-year-old funded places was 61% compared to 76% in Autumn 2019. Uptake of 3- and 4-year-old funded places was 90% in Autumn 2020 compared to 92% in Autumn 2019. Throughout the pandemic there had been a sufficient number of high-quality childcare places for keyworker and vulnerable children, including using reserves to support holiday periods and provide better funding certainty for providers.

The quality profile of Coventry’s early years providers across the city remained high. The percentage of childcare providers on non-domestic premises achieving good or better Ofsted outcomes was at 99% even though the overall number of providers in this category decreased. Childcare on domestic premises remained at 97% of providers achieving good or better. Also, 91% of schools with a Nursery class achieved good or better outcomes at inspection, 7% required improvement and 2% were found to be inadequate.

The ongoing number of children identified as requiring support for presenting SEN was continuing to increase month by month across both early years and schools’ settings, saturating the capacity of support services. Early years health and education services, continued to be vigilant in identifying children who required high levels of support, to successfully transition to school in September 2021. Consequently, a higher number of children than ever before began school with an Education Health and Care Plan in place.

Over the last year Coventry had implemented the Early Years Team restructure, which was to increase the emphasis and level of focus on quality in the sector. An Integrated Early Years Strategy had been launched, which included collaborative work related to closing attainment gaps, increasing uptake of early years provision,

providing resources to support families, and offering wider opportunities for training and development.

Schools had received recovery funding to support pupils through a recovery premium, national tutoring programme and school-led tutoring grant. Also Coventry had been invited to join a pre-reception 'Building on Success programme' to provide high quality training to early years staff in order to support children who were at risk of falling behind at a critical stage of their development and have nominated early years providers who meet the criteria.

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

- celebrating and sharing good practice regarding expectations for children being ready for school
- encouraging play at school
- schools being an environment conducive to learning i.e., ready for pupils such as ventilated adequately
- virtual visits providing support during lockdown periods

The Board were encouraged to promote the 2-,3- and 4-year-old provision offered in the City to their constituents.

**RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board:**

- 1) **Note the content of the briefing note**
- 2) **Write to the Cabinet Member (Education and Skills) to encourage the sharing of good practice on readiness for school between schools, early years settings and private providers**
- 3) **Write to Department for Education to request that there is adequate funding to ensure schools buildings were ventilated effectively without leaving pupils and staff cold which will affect their learning**

## 23. **Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Board considered their Work Programme and noted the addition of the following items for consideration in January 2022

- Safeguarding Board Annual Report
- Family Health and Lifestyles Service

**RESOLVED that the work programme be updated**

## 24. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 12.43 pm)