

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 17 October 2024

Present:

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

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

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

Employees (by Service Area):

Children's Services: H Bedford, M Clayton, N Stirling

Law and Governance: S Bennett, G Holmes, A Veness

Apologies: Councillors J Gardiner and A Tucker

Public Business

43. Declarations of Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

Further to Minute 46 below, the Scrutiny Board noted that Mr Vohra is a member of the Safe Spaces Stakeholder Group.

44. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 July, 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

The Scrutiny Board noted that information requested at the last meeting in relation to dental health had been circulated.

45. Family Valued and Reunification Project

The Scrutiny Board consider a Briefing Note of the Director of Children and Education, together with a presentation at the meeting, which provided an update on the impact of Coventry Family Valued, including the Reunification Project, and outlined proposed next steps.

The Briefing Note indicated that Family Valued was introduced in Coventry Children's Services on 1st April 2021 as part of the national Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (SFPC) Programme; a 5-year programme funded by the Department for Education (DfE), focussing on safely reducing the number of children entering care, through introducing restorative practices and services. Coventry City Council received grant funding of £4,204,141 over a 2.5-year period (April 2021 – September 2023). The grant funded 36 full-time equivalent (FTE) additional posts in Children's Services to support the implementation of Coventry Family Valued. These posts saw the significant expansion of the Family Group Conference (FGC) Service, additional capacity within the Connected Persons Team and Participation Team, the implementation of a Reunification Project and the creation of a Restorative Practice Team.

Over the funded period, the Coventry Family Valued Programme delivered against a challenging backdrop, with national issues in relation to social work recruitment and retention, rising numbers of children in care nationally, and a placement market which is untenable. Despite these challenges, culture and practice in Coventry shifted; becoming more relational and restorative, and this was reflected in the improved outcomes for children and young people, with a safe reduction in the number of children who were in care, year-on-year, over the funded period, as well as practice improvements and improved outcomes for children, young people and their families being recognised by Ofsted (inspection dates 20th June – 1st July 2023), with Coventry Children's Services receiving a 'good' grading in all areas of judgement, with the report recognising that 'relational social work and restorative practice are embedded across services'.

The SFPC Programme has now ended, but Children and Education Services remains committed to Coventry Family Valued, having seen the impact this has had for children, young people and their families, with Coventry Family Valued now being seen as the practice approach 'with' children, young people and families, rather than a programme.

It was envisaged that the posts created through SFPC funding would financially sustain themselves, post funding, due to the projected financial savings which would be made through to the safe reduction of children in care. However, while a safe reduction of children in care was achieved year-on-year, over the same period, the placements market spiralled, thus the projected financial savings were not achieved. This resulted in the difficult decision to delete numerous Family Valued posts, as these could not be funded through the core Children and Education Services budget. The Scrutiny Board noted that, while financial savings were not achieved, if Coventry Family Valued had not been introduced, it is likely that there would have been increased pressures on Coventry City Council's budgets, due to the number of children likely to have been in care, without this change in approach.

Due to significant financial pressures, post-funding, the Family Group Conference (FGC) Service and the number of Restorative Practice leads were reduced and the service restructured, details of which were contained in the Briefing Note. Further developmental work has taken place in FGC, supported by Leeds Relational Practice Centre, to deepen FGC practice. In addition to this developmental work, the referral criteria for FGC have been modified, both

reflecting the reduced capacity within the FGC Service, and to ensure that FGCs are taking place 'with' families where the greatest impact can be achieved. The current referral criteria for FGC was outlined in the Briefing Note.

The number of families who have benefitted from an Initial FGC has increased year on-year since Coventry Family Valued was introduced and this was evidenced in the Briefing Note. Examples of the difference that FGC has made to children and their families is included within the Coventry Family Valued Impact Report and Next Steps (April 2021 – March 2024) which was appended to the Briefing Note. The success of FGCs is measured 12 months following the FGC process ending based on the reason for the referral, and if the FGC process achieved this. The data from 2023/2024 shows positive outcomes for children and families where the FGC process had been completed 12-months prior (2022/2023) and the rates of success were outlined in the Briefing Note.

The Briefing Note also provided details about the Reunification Project, which commenced in May 2021 and which was developed with the aim to reunify children in care into the care of their family, where it is safe and appropriate to do so. The Project provides intensive support to children and families which includes out of hours and at the weekend. The support is intensive, responsive and consistent. Due to the success of this Project, both in relation to improved outcomes for children and young people, as well as placement cost avoidance, the team was further expanded in July 2022, funded through Children's Services core budget). There continues to be success for children, young people and their families through this project, with 44 children and young people having returned home from care to live with their families as a result. The Coventry Family Valued Impact Report and Next Steps (April 2021 – March 2024) contains examples of the impact that this Project has had to the lives of children and their families. As well as the improved outcomes for children and young people, the Project has made considerable savings due to placement cost avoidance, details of which were contained in the Briefing Note.

The Briefing Note also detailed work being undertaken by Family Valued Practice Leads, including driving the implementation of Rethink Formulation, as a tool to support practitioners to slow-down their thinking, to rethink their practice, and to support family-led solutions wherever possible.

The Briefing Note concluded that, since the launch of Coventry Family Valued, the number of children in care has safely reduced year-on-year, with more children living at home safely with their families. There has been a recent spike in the number of children in care, and this is being explored internally to gain a better understanding of the reasons for this, so that appropriate actions can be put in place, to support the continuation of the improved outcomes for children and their families which have been achieved to date. The increasing number of children in care, does correlate with the FGC Service and Family Valued Practice Lead team being scaled back, and further exploration is needed in relation to if this has contributed to the recent rise in numbers of looked after children.

The number of children who require a Child Protection Plan continues to require a specific focus, and improvement activity is taking place in this area, to support a safe reduction. These numbers have started to reduce, and it is envisaged that through the focussed improvement work in this area, that this will continue.

The Scrutiny Board asked questions, received answers, sought assurance and made comments on a number of issues including:-

- The average weekly placements costs children in care and the significant cost savings of providing placements in house. It was noted that more information in relation to the costs of placements would be considered at the next meeting
- The impact of the reduction of staff following the end of the funding on both the service and the remaining staff
- Reassurance regarding the significant checks and monitoring in place both before and after a child has been reunited with their family
- Good practice share with the Leeds Relational Practice Centre on the Reunification Project
- Action that would be undertaken, including working with other Local Authorities, if a family that had been reunited left the City
- Staff acceptance of the change in practice and how training has supported and enabled this
- Work undertaken to ensure that the diversity of the City is understood and dealt with appropriately and how staff are trained to ensure that a child of any age is able to have a voice and have the opportunity to be heard independently from family members. It was noted that this was dealt with in an age appropriate manner, for example play therapy for younger children
- The extensive work undertaken to ensure that families are understood
- Information regarding costs of intervention
- Safeguarding work undertaken with schools and the successful partnership working undertaken in this regard
- The impact on the service of children changing schools following successful school appeals and then the service having to build new relationships with professionals at the new school
- Court costs
- How the Reunification Project is initiated and how the child's need are always put first
- Staff welfare, particularly for those Teams that have reduced in number

Officers were thanked for their informative presentation and commended for all of the work undertaken in this regard.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board:-

- 1) Notes the Briefing Note in conjunction with the “Coventry Family Valued Impact Report and Next-Steps”.**
- 2) Notes, welcomes and supports the current progress and impact for children, young people and their families.**
- 3) Notes the challenges highlighted in relation to financial sustainability post funding and how this has been addressed.**

- 4) **Requests that the following information be circulated to the Scrutiny Board:-**
- **The ethnic profile of children involved in the Reunification Project**
 - **Costs of different levels of intervention per child if not included in the Peer Challenge report**
 - **Information in relation to the impact on the service of children changing schools following successful school appeals and the service then having to build new relationships with professionals at the new school**
- 5) **Requests that sickness levels of staff be included when the Scrutiny Board considers Social Worker Recruitment and Retention at a future meeting.**
- 6) **Requests that the Scrutiny Board's thanks and appreciation for all of the work in this regard be forward to all appropriate officers via a letter to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People.**

46. **Child Friendly Cov**

The Scrutiny Board considered a Briefing Note of the Director of Children and Education which provided an update on the activity and impact of Child Friendly Cov which was introduced as part of Coventry Family Valued. It is a partnership approach, between Coventry City Council, partners and local businesses, to make Coventry the best city in the UK for children and young people to live and grow-up in.

The Briefing Note indicated that Child Friendly Cov is co-produced with children and young people across Coventry, with Children and Education Services Participation Team being key to driving this forward, and co-ordinating young people, partner and business involvement. It was launched in February 2023, and since this time there has been considerable progress made. Some of the impact that Child Friendly Cov has made in its first year can be found in the Child Friendly Cov Impact Report 2023/2024, which was appended to the Briefing Note.

Initially there were four Child Friendly Cov pledges, with a fifth pledge added following the first year. The Child Friendly Cov pledges are that all children and young people in Coventry will:

- Be and feel safe
- Be and feel loved
- Be and feel healthy
- Be and feel valued
- Have opportunities

All of the priorities for Child Friendly Cov sit underneath one or more of these five pledges.

The One Big Voice Survey took place in 2024, with plans for this to be a bi-annual survey. The purpose of One Big Voice was to give children and young people

across Coventry the opportunity to help to shape the direction of services for children and young people in the city. The survey looked to seek the views of what Coventry's children and young people consider to be their priorities, and the results were analysed to influence the priority areas for Child Friendly Cov for 2024/2025. There were 3660 One Big Voice Surveys sent to schools, and 2797 surveys were completed. 30 schools in Coventry took part in the survey, 26 primary schools and 4 secondary schools. The results of the One Big Voice Survey are outlined in the Child Friendly Cov Impact Report 2023/2024.

The One Big Voice Survey results helped to shape the priorities for Child Friendly Cov for 2024/2025. These priorities are as followings:

- Promoting a healthy city
- Continuing to empower youth voice
- Addressing climate change
- A city for all
- Providing recreational opportunities
- Prioritising safety
- Fostering pride in Coventry

The Briefing Note highlighted some of the activities which have taken place under the different priorities:-

‘Promoting a healthy city’

- CAMHS Commissioning Service have created a website for children and young people outlining the different mental health and wellbeing services in the city.
- Coventry Rugby Club Development Team hosted 4 schools for sports day sessions on the day of Pupil Parliament.
- Sky Blues in the Community are running a Street Soccer Academy for care experienced young people.

‘Continuing to empower youth voice’:

- The second Pupil Parliament was hosted at the University of Warwick in June 2024. 18 primary schools from across the city were represented, with over 90 young people in attendance.
- A Young Person Accountability Group has been set up to feed into the partner led Child Friendly Cov Steering Group.
- The Participation Team and My Tomorrow (West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership) are co-hosting quarterly sessions with key decision makers in the city. The first session took place with senior representatives from West Midlands Police and Coventry's Youth Justice Service, and the Police and Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands.
- The Herbert Art Gallery has hosted ‘The Unspoken Word of Art Exhibition’, featuring artwork created by children in care.

‘Address climate change:’

- The ‘Running Out of Time’ Relay Team visited Coventry on their journey from Ben Nevis to Big Ben, and the team ran a session focussing on climate change with young people as part of Pupil Parliament.

‘A city for all:’

- Consultation is taking place with young people around the provision for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) to review the local offer and identify any gaps in service provision.
- The Care to Dance project has commenced, with performances planned for the Care Leavers Awards (November 2024) and Children in Care Awards (February 2025).

In addition to the above, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme continues to ‘provide recreational opportunities’ for children and young people during the school holidays.

‘Prioritising safety:’

- The Safe Spaces initiative has been launched alongside West Midlands Police, providing safe spaces across the city for young people who need support.

‘Foster pride in Coventry:’

- One of the hosts of Pupil Parliament was an inspirational person from Coventry, who has gone on to be educated at Harvard. Coventry Live published a spotlight on his achievements.

The Briefing Note indicated that the key to Child Friendly Cov is the partnership approach across the city as a whole. While Child Friendly Cov is largely driven from within Children and Education Services, there are aspirations for Child Friendly Cov to be viewed not only as a Coventry City Council initiative but an opportunity for the whole city to come together for Coventry’s children and young people. To drive this partnership approach further, the Child Friendly Cov Steering Group has been restructured, with representatives from across the partnership, voluntary and business sectors, with the Young Person Accountability Group, feeding into this group and holding members to account. There are also plans in place for partners to lead on workstreams, under each of the Child Friendly Cov pledges, in order to drive the work of Child Friendly Cov forward, from both inside Coventry City Council, and wider, with stakeholder events planned with a focus on the pledges.

The Scrutiny Board asked questions, received answers, sought assurances and made comments on a number of issues including:-

- The location of Safe Spaces in the City, noting that the location in certain fast food outlets has been a result of close partnership working, and the possibility of extending those locations.
- The possibility of including licensed premises as Safe Spaces
- Information regarding the survey undertaken and responses received and how particularly secondary schools might be encouraged and incentivised to participate in future surveys. It was noted that every school had been afforded the opportunity to participate and that the results of the survey had prompted interest in schools for their inclusion in future surveys.
- The need to include those children not in school and electively home educated in future activity

- The work undertaken by the Child Friendly Cov Stakeholders Group and the membership of that Group
- The possibility of using the Child Friendly Cov logo as a “Kitemark” in schools
- Engagement with Primary and Secondary Heads
- Involvement in Local Democracy Week

The Scrutiny Board requested:-

- That all Members be offered Child Friendly Cov badges and stickers
- That the link to the new Child Friendly Cov video be circulated to all Members and co-opted Members of the Scrutiny Board when its available
- That the Chair of the Scrutiny Board be invited to future Safe Spaces Stakeholders meetings
- That the link with details of all of the Safe Spaces be circulated to Members of the Scrutiny Board

The Scrutiny Board thanked the officers for their presentation and commended all the work undertaken in this regard.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board:-

- 1) **Notes the Briefing Note in conjunction with the “Child Friendly Cov Impact Report 2023/24” and welcomes and supports the current progress and impact for children and young people**
- 2) **Requests that the following Recommendations be forward to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People :-**
 - **That consideration be given to other types of food outlets, including food hubs, and community centres and libraries being included in Safe Spaces**
 - **That Home Educators be included and involved in all future work in this regard, particularly the survey**
 - **That Secondary schools be further encouraged to participate in future survey and consideration be given to providing incentives to participate**
 - **That consideration be given to licensed premises being included in Safe Spaces**
 - **That the possibility of using the Child Friendly Cov logo as a “Kitemark” in schools be investigated**
 - **That the engagement with Primary and Secondary Heads be welcomed and continued**
 - **That consideration be given to participation in Local Democracy Week particularly visiting Parliament by members of the Pupil Parliament.**
- 3) **That the Scrutiny Board’s thanks and appreciation for all of the work undertaken in this regard be forward to all appropriate**

officers via a letter to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People.

47. Work Programme

The Scrutiny Board noted a report of the Director of Law and Governance appended to which was the Work Programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

48. Any Other Items of Public Business

There were no items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 12.20pm)