

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 28 November 2024

Present:

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

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

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

Employees (by Service Area):

Children's and Education A Coles, R Hamblett, S Kinsell, N Macdonald, R Sugars, S Watson, A Whitrick

Law and Governance G Holmes, T Robinson, A Veness

Apologies: Councillors S Nazir and P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People), Mr D Jackson (Co-opted Member)

Public Business

49. Declarations of Interests

The Board noted that Councillor CE Thomas was a trustee at Willenhall Community Forum, Councillor R Lancaster was involved in the delivery of the Coventry Holiday Activities and Food Programme, and Mrs S Hanson was the Vice Chair of Inspire. As these were not disclosable pecuniary interests, they all remained in the meeting.

50. Exclusion of Press and Public

RESOLVED that the Board agrees to exclude the press and public under Sections 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 relating to the private report in Minute 57 below headed 'Homes for Children in Care – Update Report' on the grounds that the report involves the likely disclosure of information as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The grounds for privacy are that it refers to information relating to an individual and the financial or business affairs of an organisation and the

amount of expenditure proposed to be incurred by the Council under a particular contract for the supply of goods or services. The public interest in maintaining the exemption under Schedule 12A outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

51. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 October, 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

52. Coventry Holiday Activities and Food Programme

The Scrutiny Board consider a Briefing Note of the Director of Children and Education, together with a video at the meeting, which provided an update on the Coventry Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme over the past 12 months.

The Briefing Note indicated that the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme is a national initiative, aimed at addressing holiday inequalities through a blend of free positive activities and experiences coupled with healthy food and support to families. The national aims of the programme are to ensure a high-quality experience that will result in children:

- receiving healthy and nutritious meals
- maintaining a healthy level of physical activity
- being happy, having fun and meeting new friends
- developing a greater understanding of food, nutrition and other health related issues
- taking part in fun and engaging activities that support their development and well-being
- feeling safe and secure
- getting access to the right support services
- returning to school feeling engaged and ready to learn

Similarly, families should also be able to benefit from this support, and this could be through:

- providing opportunities to get involved in sessions, for example cookery classes.
- ensuring they are signposted towards other sources of information and support, such as health services or employment and education opportunities.

In terms of funding arrangements, Coventry City Council is in receipt of an annual Department for Education grant (£1,587,840 for 2024/25 with a further investment of £50,000 from Coventry Building Society) and leads a multi-agency partnership to deliver activities in the Easter, Summer and Christmas school holiday periods.

Therefore, the core eligibility criteria are statutory school-age children (reception to year 11) who are entitled to benefits-related free school meals. Local Authority areas have discretion to broaden eligibility and Coventry have extended this to include children assessed through a Children and Families assessment,

undertaken by Children's Services, as in need, on a child protection plan, in care, assessed to be in financial hardship (through an early help assessment), or referred via the Migration and Resettlement teams. Children and young people in years 12-13 are eligible if they are in receipt of benefits-related free school meals (FSM) and have an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP) or are receiving special educational need (SEN) support at their place of education. There is also discretion for parents to refer appropriate children.

The national roll-out of HAF took place in 2021, with the first Coventry face-to-face delivery taking place in the 2021 summer holiday. This has included wider support through in person events in the build up to going live for the Summer 2024 HAF Programme, including a live cooking demonstration, support to the resettlement team event and in person booking support for families across the city.

The Board were informed that HAF funding is in place until 31 March 2025, with Christmas 2024 currently being the last funded holiday and that Coventry City Council is part of the national HAF network which focuses on building the case for funding to be continued post-2025 in the context of increasing needs (e.g. Cost of Living Crisis).

Councillor K Sandhu, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, began the discussion by highlighting HAF as one of the Council's biggest success stories, involving more partners, more young people, and more diversity than in the previous four years of the programme. She stated that being able to offer young people a place to feed their aspirations and their confidence while eating a healthy meal was having a continued impact throughout the city.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to the HAF Programme:

- Delivering the programme while staying within budget and utilising an extra £50,000 investment from Coventry Building Society to prioritise children from Special Schools.
- Positive indications of continuing government funding past March 2025.
- Expanding provision of the programme to the children of home educators, especially those with SEND considerations – expanding the programme criteria locally whilst bearing in mind the programme's capacity.
- The possibility of co-ordinating with the ICB (Local Integrated Care Board) and the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Sport to communicate both the educational and health benefits of the programme.
- Community organisations and building trusted relationships between the council, the providers, the children and their families.
- Contingency plans for funding and the prospects for the programme if funding stops.

Councillor K Sandhu thanked the Board for their contributions and the officers for their continued successful delivery of the programme.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Notes the information in the Briefing Note about the Coventry Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.**

2. Promotes the Coventry HAF programme and supports the national case for continued HAF funding post-March 2025.

3. Requests the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills:

- **Makes the case for continued funding in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People.**
- **Requests the criteria for discretionary eligibility be considered to include home educated pupils.**
- **Works alongside the Cabinet Member for Public Health, Sport, and Wellbeing to identify potential funding from health partners to enhance the HAF programme.**

53. Social Worker Recruitment and Retention - Workforce Update

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Director of Children and Education on the Social Worker Recruitment and Retention implementation and the impact to date.

The Briefing Note outlined that recruitment and retention of social workers continues to be a national problem and accepted in the government's response to the Independent Review of Social Care. The workforce profile over the past few years has led to Children and Education Services supporting a "grow our own" approach, with a key focus on enabling social workers into the profession and developing into experienced social workers with high quality practice standards.

Therefore, the local picture in Coventry in many ways mirrors the regional and national picture. Coventry has continued to face challenges to recruitment and retention of social workers, which has impacted the stability of the workforce, and the number of agency staff required to cover vacancies. Coventry is based within the West Midlands but also within commuter distance to East Midlands. It is therefore in an area where there are several local authorities all competing for the same pool of social workers, which makes it a competitive market for social workers.

Previously, in 2023/2024 investment was approved for Children and Education Services to support the recruitment and retention of social workers. This was in response to a challenging period, where a mix of high case levels, difficulty recruiting experienced social workers and a limited supply of suitable agency staff meant that children's social worker vacancies were significantly high.

Importantly, Coventry Children and Education Service's vision for the Social Work workforce was to secure a stable, permanent, highly skilled and capable workforce. Coventry's practice approach has evolved since the launch of Coventry Family Valued, as Coventry Children and Education Services has become more relational and restorative, and more recently, Rethink Formulation has been introduced as a tool to support practitioners to rethink practice 'with' children and

families further, and to support the growing relational and restorative culture in Children and Education Services and across the partnership.

The key recruitment and retention initiatives implemented over the last twelve-month period have included but were not limited to:

- In 2023/24, a retention payment was paid to experienced social workers, advanced social workers and senior practitioners who remained in post for a period of twelve months up to 31 March 2024.
- A Progression Pathway for experienced social workers launched in April 2024 to provide experienced social workers the opportunity to progress to Advanced Social Workers.
- A Progression Pathway for newly qualified social workers launched in September 2024 to provide newly qualified social workers the opportunity to progress six months earlier subject to meeting ASYE and competences.
- A review of the Social Work Academy has been completed to embed a structure to support delivering the workforce to meet service demand and the needs of our children, families and communities.
- A total of 25 Apprentices are undertaking a Social Work Apprenticeship (5 commenced in in September 2024; 6 Apprentices complete in June 2025, and 14 complete in June 2026).
- Flexible Working 9-day fortnight has been piloted and rolled out to the wider service area to support staff/social workers with maintaining a work life balance.
- A successful wellbeing offer for all staff continues to be offered to support wellbeing and retention of staff.
- Regular Social Worker Recruitment open evenings, held jointly with Adults Social Care to increase the number of social workers.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to social worker recruitment and retention including:

- How flexible working arrangements operate for staff and the benefits of this new system.
- Coventry as a challenging geographical location for recruiting social workers in terms of its vicinity to other local authorities.
- The competition with other local authorities over retention payments.
- Adopting progression models to provide new starters with an assurance of progression.
- Coventry being slightly higher on average compared to the national average of retention when benchmarked against other local authorities due to:
 - The 'grow our own' approach of training and development including the social work academy model.
 - Good starting salaries.
 - Good retention payment offers.
 - Coventry being highlighted for good standards and practices.
- The primary reasons for staff leaving – namely work/life balance and money – and circumventing this through flexible working arrangements and wellbeing offers.
- The positive impact of flexible working on levels of sickness that continues to be a national issue.

- The impact on budgets and sustaining relationships with children and families when staff members leave.
- The proportion of staff members leaving the profession completely and being confident that Coventry's offer is enough to retain staff members.
- Possibility for a cap on social worker's caseloads and the difficulties in this approach because of the legal requirements for provision.
- One-year restrictions on employing agency staff who have previously worked for the local authority.
- Rotating social worker roles and encouraging staff to gain experience in multiple areas and with multiple families.
- Tracking social workers for their safety and the piloting of the Oyster personal safety device.
- The balance of experience and average age of Coventry's staff.

The Board requested that officers consider accelerated increments for retention payments for Social Workers to support retention of staff

RESOLVED that the Board notes the current progress.

54. **Homes for Children in Care - Update Report**

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Director of Children and Education which provided an update on the complexities of finding homes for children in care following the Briefing Note previously considered by the Board at the meeting on the 23rd of November 2023.

The Briefing Note stated that in the last 2-3 years there has been a marked increase in the number of children and young people in care that local authorities have struggled to find appropriate homes for. This is a widely reported national issue and is a consequence of several interlinked factors, which were highlighted in Competition and Market's Authority report of March 2022, the Independent Review of Children's Social care of May 2022 and the Government's consultation response to this review – Stable Homes, Built on Love (February 2023). There is national recognition that the children's placement market is broken.

As officers reiterated during the meeting, Pro Bono Economics reported on the national challenges in October 2024: The number of children in residential care has more than doubled (102% increase) since 2011 with spending on these placements jumping by 90% (an increase of £1.1billion). Almost half of this increase has come in the last two years.

To tackle this, the Coventry practice model 'Family Valued' works on the premise of keeping children and families together when it is safe to do so. This approach seeks to enable families to find the solutions to challenges they face. Families are supported through Family Network Meetings and Family Group Conferences (FGC) and additional support to identify family led solutions. Family led solutions include kinship arrangements (connected fostering) which are sought, when a child is unable to remain safely with their parent/s. This area has seen significant growth in Coventry, with around 120 children now being placed in a kinship arrangement and 40 children being supported to achieve permanence through a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) last year.

The Briefing Note outlined that the number of children in care decreased earlier this year, with 668 children being in care as of April 2024. However, in line with an annual trend of more children entering care over the summer period, this increased to 720 by September 2024. There are currently 69 children living in a residential children's home (end of September 2024), placed by Coventry Children's Services, an increase of 10 children from April.

However, when children enter care urgently or need to move at short notice, officers stated that finding the right home for a child in the current market can be challenging, providers may request funding for additional resources particularly if a child is moving from one children's home to another. In addition, the impact on the child having to move can further perpetuate their sense of rejection, self-worth & subsequent trauma.

Officers highlighted that the new 'Short Stay, Same Day' children's home which is due to open imminently, sought to address some of these challenges by enabling a planned move, supporting a robust search for the right home, at the right time, in the right place.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to homes for children in care including:

- Covering the costs of children's placements when they cross local authority borders.
- Joint working and preventive services arrangements – specifically trying to prevent children in mental health crisis from waiting in accident & emergency and using the Hope Model to steer them in alternative directions.
 - Similarly investing in the Kooth counselling and support service to allow children from different ethnic backgrounds the space to talk about their mental health.
- Work being undertaken to simplify and streamline becoming a foster carer while recognising the importance of safeguarding – future updates to the national minimum standards to facilitate this process.
- Trauma reactions and self-sabotaging behaviour of some of the most vulnerable looked after children.
- Projected savings if using council owned homes for children instead of private provision.
- Future plans to bring looked after children into council owned homes for children and the impact this would have on the children and their families.

The Board thanked officers for their responses and for their continued hard work.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Continues to support the Residential Strategy 2023-2026.**
- 2. Notes the two additional homes for our children with the most complex needs.**

3. Supports the work being undertaken in relation to sufficiency, addressing high-cost placements and improving outcomes for our children in care.

55. Work Programme

The Board noted the Work Programme.

56. Any Other Business

There were no items of public business.

57. Homes for Children in Care - Update Report

Further to Minute 54 above, the Board received and noted a private Briefing Note of the Director of Children and Education which set out the personal and commercially confidential matters relating to the Homes for Children in Care – Update Report.

(Meeting closed at 12.20 pm)