

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 16 January 2025

Present:

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

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson, David Jackson and Ghulam Vohra

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

Employees (by Service Area):

Children's and Education R Eaves, J Monk, R Sugars

Governance Services G Holmes, C Taylor, A Veness

Others Present: D Benson, Independent Chair of Coventry Safeguarding Adults Board

Apologies: Councillor R Lancaster

Public Business

58. Declarations of Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

59. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 28th of November, 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

60. Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership Yearly Report

The Board considered a Briefing Note and a presentation of the Director of Children and Education regarding the annual report in relation to activity of the CSCP April 2023- March 2024.

Working Together 2023 states that, 'Safeguarding Partners must jointly report on the activity they have undertaken in a 12-month period. That reporting should be transparent and easily accessible to the families and professionals. The focus of these reports should be on multi agency priorities, learning, impact, evidence and improvement.

The note also emphasised that Safeguarding Partners should make sure the report is widely available. A copy should also be sent to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.

The CSPC had 3 priorities for 2023-2024:

- Child Sexual abuse
- Exploitation
- Making the system work

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

- That recruitment to the Horizon team was no longer an issue and there were no vacancies currently.
- The recent comments at parliament concerning grooming gangs in Coventry and the steps the local authority had taken in preventing and combating child exploitation.
- The national level of sexual abuse experienced by children, how this is calculated and what age is classified as a "child".
- How E-Learning is adapted to suit 6 key faiths and work in places of worship.
- How data surrounding low income was calculated and defined, as well as if data was available more recently than 2021-2022.
- Whether a glossary could be included to explain some of the jargonistic terms and acronyms in the report.
- The promotion and use of Education, Health and Care Plans and whether it affected access to children's services.
- Why, despite high numbers of referrals to MASH there was a relatively low conversion rate and whether the thresholds for intervention were at the appropriate level.
- That the Cabinet Member and officers were confident that a new approach to address harmful sexual behaviour would be in place following the withdrawal of the previous provider,

The Board requested:

- The presentation be circulated to all board members
- Data regarding ages of children likely to suffer child sex abuse to be circulated to the board.
- E-learning package to be shared with board members.
- Background to the house project and information on supported lodgings to be brought back to the board.

RESOLVED that the Education and Children’s Services Scrutiny Board (2):

- 1. Agreed to note the information in the report about the Coventry Safeguarding Children’s Partnership Annual Report.**
- 2. That the Coventry Safeguarding Children’s Partnership provides a glossary of key terms to be included in future yearly reports and circulated to Members of the Board.**

61. School Attendance Duties

The Scrutiny Board considered a Briefing Note from the Director of Children and Education which provided information on the Local Authorities duties for School Attendance.

The Briefing Note stated that new guidance from the DfE set out statutory responsibilities and expectations for all key stakeholders: schools, multi-academy trusts (MATs), Local Authorities (LA), parents / carers. The initial intention was that the guidance would be statutory from September 2023, and this was presented to Education and Children’s Services Scrutiny Board alongside the changes to the service in Autumn 2023. The guidance became statutory in August 2024 following further updates.

The Cabinet Member for Education & Skills, Cllr K Sandhu welcomed the reforms on School Attendance Duties following the implementation of new guidance. She emphasised the importance of school attendance, adding that attendance rates were a national problem but that through a partnership approach, these statutory duties were being managed well. She added that these statutory duties were additional however, they had not incurred additional resource, and the council had managed to meet the statutory duty. Cllr Sandhu advised the focus of the bill was the well-being of the child.

LA’s made changes to the operation of the Attendance Service to implement updated guidance from the DfE. LA’s locally, regionally, and nationally have continued to make representation to the DfE pointing out that the attendance reforms create additional burdens for LA’s and schools for which there has been no additional resource provided.

The LA have recruited additional staff to ensure delivery of the new reforms. This equates to two additional Local Authority Attendance Officers (LAAO), an extension of hours for two existing LAAO’s and an increase in administrative support time. In addition, the time available for traded service has reduced. The majority of this has been funded from the Dedicated Schools Grant, achieved through re-prioritisation of existing funding

The LA have made further amendments to the service and processes to deliver the updated statutory guidance from September 2024.

The revised guidance sets the same expectations for LAs as previous, to:

- Rigorously track local attendance data;
- Monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker through the Virtual School;
- Resource a School Attendance team providing core functions free of charge to all schools (e.g. communication & advice; targeting support meetings with every school; support access to multi-disciplinary family support; legal interventions)

Questions from Members were answered by officers as follows:

- Root causes of school non-attendance included special educational needs (SEN), parental struggle to get children to school, schools' ability to meet the needs of children, anxiety, attachment, low mood, low self-esteem (impact of covid) and parental value on going to school.
- SEN children attendance rates at Special Schools were static pre and post covid. However, the SEN cohort in mainstream schools experienced absence due to a number of reasons including awaiting a, EHCP plan, and the child's refusal to go to school. Officers were targeting these groups to ensure schools were putting the right support in place. New reforms gave a better oversight across the city.
- The key theme running through the reforms was 'support first'. Support first was identifying what the barriers were, what support could be put in place and which other agencies needed to be involved. A flow chart was available which was shared with schools.
- Only high-level attendance codes were available to the local authority however, work was ongoing with schools to ascertain why some children were persistently absent. Under the new reforms, schools undertook horizon scanning which looked for patterns in cohorts or communities, facilitating a conversation with Attendance Officers. This information could be gathered directly from schools.
- Officers had close links with the Early Help team who linked with Attendance Officers in a partnership approach to ensure children were receiving early help if needed. Early Help assessments were undertaken by schools.
- The Council's ability to monitor children who are home educated.
- If a child is on a Child Protection plan, then Elective Home Education will be determined as unsuitable by Coventry on the grounds of safeguarding.
- Understanding additional capacity needs and ensuring schools were fully briefed on the reforms would be key going forward.
- Plans to introduce a unique identifier for children would need to be compatible to the systems in place.
- Leave of absence during term time was recognised as a national issue however, prosecutions did take place and under the reforms there was a national framework of fixed penalty notices to deter parents to request leave during term time.
- Schools were able to request evidence of medical conditions if they felt this was necessary.
- DFE guidance stated schools should not grant leave of absence during term time unless in exceptional circumstances, however there was no definition of "exceptional" so was at the discretion of individual schools.

Councillor K Sandhu thanked the Board for their contributions and the officers for their continued successful work in the field.

RESOLVED that the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) agreed to note the information in the briefing note

62. **Work Programme**

The Board noted the work Programme.

The board agreed they would discuss the Early Help programme at the meeting on 17th April.

The Board agreed to add the work of the Horizon team to the work programme.

63. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of business.

(Meeting closed at 11.45 am)