



To: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)

13 February 2025

Subject: Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) of the Local Government Association Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge outcome and next steps.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Scrutiny Board (2) are recommended to:
- 1) To note the outcome and current progress
 - 2) Identify any recommendations for the appropriate Cabinet Member.

3 Information/Background

- 3.1 Corporate and political leaders in Coventry are passionate and committed to achieving the best for children. Over the past decade, Children's Services have been focused on improvement and there has been a political and corporate commitment to making the necessary resources and funding available to support the Children's Services journey.
- 3.2 In August 2022, Children's Services were rated as a 'Good' service by Ofsted. The Youth Justice Service were graded 'Outstanding' after an Inspection by HMI Probation in February 2023. Followed by a Joint Targeted Area Inspection focusing on Serious Youth Violence receiving a positive report in May 2024. The service has five Children's Homes, all rated as 'Good' by Ofsted in the last twelve months and ambitious residential homes expansion programme to increase the number of Children's Homes further, with a further two due to open this year.
- 3.3 Building on the significant improvements within Children's Services, the integration of Children and Education on 1st April 2024 provided an opportunity and capacity to explore new ways of working. The integration has resulted in changes to the roles and responsibilities of the senior leadership team and the external appointment of a new Director of Children and Education Services appointed in August 2024.
- 3.4 The financial position remains a challenge for all local authorities, the One Coventry Transformation Plan sets out how the Council will respond to the challenges and embrace new approaches and technology. The council currently faces a budget gap and needs to deliver savings and efficiencies.
- 3.5 A Local Government Association Peer Challenge team were invited by the Council to review how Children's Services provide services to children and young people to identify potential opportunities to control and reduce costs and ensure efficiencies. Peer Challenges are improvement focused and are not an inspection.

3.6 The challenge is similar to one that the Council underwent in January 2024 and does not result in any grade. The Council was given positive feedback about the Corporate Peer Challenge and many great comments about the Councils work, highlighting some areas for improvement on how the council can work in the future. The Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer challenge has provided a further opportunity to build on the excellent work and identify areas for improvement.

4 Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge

4.1 Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge was held on 15-17 October 2024. Peer Challenges are delivered by experienced officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflects the requirements and focus of the Peer Challenge. The Team consisted of five peers:

- Lead Peer – a former Chief Executive
- Social Care Peer – Director of Children and Families
- Finance Peer – Director of Resources (S151)
- Commissioning peer – Head of Commissioning
- Peer Challenge Manager – LGA

4.2 The Peer team were asked to focus on four key areas as agreed with the Council.

- Cost of placements
- Structure, capacity and opportunities through integration.
- Understanding and analysing costs, and incorporating best practice
- Use of organisational capacity, resources, and support

4.3 The Peer team used their experience and knowledge of Children's Services to review and reflect on the information presented. The team spent three days on site meeting with the Leader, Cabinet Members, Corporate Leads: Senior Managers and a range of council staff and partners. This equated to twenty-eight meetings with over seventy people.

5 Findings/ Recommendations

5.1 The Peer Challenge team provided a report in December 2024 highlighting the positive feedback and areas for development. The team were impressed with public and private sector partnership work which has contributed to attracting sponsorship and avoiding costs, whilst contributing to bringing more organisations together around Child Friendly Cov.

5.2 The service has proactively developed its in house residential provision with five homes in operation and two new homes to open this year. The planned approach of seeking to utilise available in-house residential provision for the hardest to place children with the most complex needs has the potential to significantly reduce placement spend.

5.3 The reunification project has supported thirty-four children to return home over the past two years, with improved outcomes for children and considerable cost avoidance savings.

5.4 The Children's Services commissioning function is well integrated with the operational service, the peer team saw evidence of effective and robust joint working between the sufficiency and children in care leadership leading to good outcomes for children.

- 5.5 The outcomes led quality assurance of external residential providers to ensure that Coventry children are having their needs met to high quality provision is a real strength.
- 5.6 The council's One Coventry approach is evident across the system, partners are committed and passionate about working together to deliver the best for the "Cov child" and there is evidence of organisations working effectively together: including working together to secure external funding, and co-ordinated partnership responses to serious youth violence, recognised as a strength in the recent Joint Target Area Inspection.
- 5.7 There are mature and effective relationships across the Education partnership.
- 5.8 The peer team have identified six high level key recommendations for the Council to consider supporting Coventry to navigate through the financial challenges faced, whilst keeping children's needs central:
- ***Support a strengthened culture between children's and corporate services.***
 - ***Consider an organisational review of children and education services to ensure a joined-up approach and identification of financial efficiencies.***
 - ***Have a member endorsed transformation plan approved annually at the time of the MTFS approval.***
 - ***Decision making on unplanned entrants to care should be made at strategic lead level to promote accountability and ensure consistency of thresholds.***
 - ***Consider opportunities to improve budget oversight.***
 - ***Consider social work practice opportunities.***

6 Next Steps

- 6.1 Children and Education Services are developing a plan of actions to take forward in response to the Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge. Work is progressing and will be developed further with the Council and its partners to embrace new ways of working and support more targeted early help work to meet needs at the earliest point in the system.
- 6.2 The plan, once finalised, will be monitored monthly by the Children and Education Services Leadership team in conjunction with council leads to deliver further improvements and efficiencies to support the funding gap whilst ensuring that children and young people remain at the heart of everything the Council do.

Authors:

Sukriti Sen, Director for Children and Education Services

Sonia Watson, Children and Education Services Improvement Manager

Neil Macdonald, Strategic Lead, Safeguarding, Practice and Workforce

Contact details: Sukriti.sen@coventry.gov.uk Tel: 02476 978470
neil.macdonald@coventry.gov.uk [Tel:\(024\) 76976703](tel:02476976703)
sonia.watson@coventry.gov.uk Tel: (024) 76971402