

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 11 September 2025

Present:

Members: Councillor L Kelly (Chair)
Councillor J Birdi
Councillor J Gardiner
Councillor M Mutton
Councillor S Nazir
Councillor E M Reeves
Councillor K Sandhu (by invitation)
Councillor P Seaman (by invitation)
Councillor R Thay

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

Employees (by Service Area):

Education and Children F Parlken, R Sugars, S Sen, A Whitrick

Law and Governance G Holmes, A Veness

Apologies: Councillors B Christopher, S Jobbar and A Tucker

Public Business

5. Declarations of Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

6. 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 12 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.

7. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 10th of July 2025 were agreed and signed as a true record.

There were no matters arising.

8. **An Overview of Coventry Outdoor Education Service (Coventry Outdoors)**

The Board considered a briefing note of the Director of Children and Education that provided an overview of the Coventry Outdoor Education Service including future developments and plans for celebrating 60 years of Dol-Y-Moch.

Coventry Outdoors delivered a diverse programme of educational and personal development experiences for children, young people, and adults through outdoor learning and activity. The service operated at Coombe Abbey Country Park and the outdoor residential centre, Plas Dol-y-Moch situated in North Wales (Eryri National Park).

From 1966 – 2021 Coventry had operated an Outdoor Education service comprising Plas Dol-y-Moch, and in more recent years an Educational Visits Advice and Guidance service, and some Duke of Edinburgh provision.

Coventry's outdoor education had traditionally centred on Plas Dol-y-Moch. Whilst these were highly valued experiences this one-off experience approach did not promote children's access to sustained and broader outdoor learning. The concern was that this disproportionately impacted disadvantaged children who may already face significant barriers to accessing green space.

In 2021, following consultation with schools and partners, the City Council committed to expanding the service. This led to the launch of the In-City Outdoor Education Service at Coombe, aimed at providing more children and young people with regular local access to high-quality outdoor learning with the aim of providing wide-ranging benefits for health, wellbeing, and education. There was also an outreach service into schools.

Coventry Outdoors operated as a traded hybrid model of educational provision and commercial delivery to ensure a financially viable service met the City Council's expectation that traded services operated on a full cost recovery basis.

In considering the briefing note, the Board questioned officers, received responses, and discussed matters as summarised below:

- Accessibility was afforded to low-income families, particularly those with limited access to green spaces, with many schools funding the majority of costs, with some splitting costs between students, to ensure trips were the best value possible for the lowest cost.
- Efforts were being taken to support low-income families, including using Coombe Abbey for further in-city trips and encouraging sustained and intergenerational connection with and use of available resources such as allotments for example.
- Although other companies claimed to offer lower upfront prices, the Council's holistic approach included transport and food, indicating that the Council did offer competitive rates.

- The profile of the programme had been raised using the use of HAF and family hubs leading to over 700 students accessing the programme in the city last year alone.
- The programme was financially self-sustainable in a traditionally difficult market through extensive effort and effective planning with further expansion being planned.
- Working alongside the Duke of Edinburgh award and the King's Trust had led to numerous success stories, with details given of two previously NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) young people using the support of the programme to become more confident, better trained and employed with one put forward for a Pride of Britain award.
- The 75 apprentices on the course were undertaking level 5 apprenticeships, equivalent to a foundation degree, and all were already employed. This would support the creation of outdoor education specialists who would, through CPDs, become qualified teachers in 2 years' time.
- Out of 122 schools only 20 didn't use the service as, although there was increasing take-up, use of the service was optional, and they could choose alternates.
- Due to the protected nature of the floodplains surrounding Dol-Y-Moch, there were significant limitations on any building or expansion on site.
- There was some collaboration with international partners but there were currently no plans for liaising with American scout groups due to constraints over booking availability and remaining financially self-sufficient.
- Efforts were being made to encourage more diverse participation in the programme e.g. protective helmets for activities that worked with different types of religious/cultural headwear, and through liaising with key agencies who promote similar inclusive programs.
- Due to school led bookings it was difficult to ensure specific age groups attended. Most students currently attended during year 6, an important transitional time and therefore a valuable time to build a connection with nature.
- Some home educated students stayed a Dol-Y-Moch with their families and efforts were being made to increase inclusion at in-city provision.
- Joint teambuilding exercises were being done at Coombe Abbey with the Army Cadets.

The Board requested that Plas Dol-Y-Moch took into account cultural and religious considerations in future developments, and further requested they be kept informed of Dol-Y-Moch 60th anniversary celebrations.

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

- 1) Notes the information provided in the Briefing Note.**
- 2) Agrees that an additional meeting be added to the Work Programme to be held at Coombe Abbey to enable the Board to visit the outdoor education facilities and further discuss the city-based aspect of the Coventry Outdoor Education Service.**

9. The complexities involved in finding homes for children in care and associated costs

The Board considered a briefing note of the Director of Children and Education outlining ongoing challenges in the children's social care market, recent national developments, and local authority responses.

A corresponding private briefing note detailing confidential matters relating to individuals was also submitted for consideration (Minute 12 below refers).

In the last 4 years there had been a marked increase in the number of children and young people in care that local authorities had struggled to find appropriate homes for. This continued to be a widely reported national issue and was a consequence of several interlinked factors, which were highlighted in the Competition and Market's Authority report of March 2022, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care of May 2022, and the Government's response to this review – Stable Homes, Built on Love (February 2023).

There was national recognition that the children's 'placement' market was broken. Recent research published by the LGA in May 2025 considered the 'Costs and complexity in care. The real drivers of high-cost placements for children in care'.

Nationally, there had been a reduction in the number of mainstream foster carers of 9.6% since 2021, alongside a significant growth in new children's homes of 15% in the last year, with 84% of all homes being run by private organisations. However, it is important to note that the size of a mainstream children's homes (how many children are cared for) continues to reduce with the average new home now caring for only 3 children, compared to 4 in 2023/2024.

Research had identified that these problems broke down into two main areas and the Government had started to consider ways in which these could be addressed, alongside wider Social Care and Education reforms. As reported to the Scrutiny Board in November 2024, the two main areas were identified as:

1. A lack of placements of the right kind in the right place, thereby increasing risk of unregulated placements with providers making materially higher profits and charging significantly higher prices than if the market were functioning effectively.
2. A concern of the high level of debt some providers have and the impact if they exited the market as this would further exacerbate sufficiency and the ability of local authorities to meet the needs of these children.

The effectiveness of the fostering excellence programme, which supported a wide range of children including those with health issues or in complex needs homes, were specifically outlined.

In considering the Briefing Note, the Scrutiny Board asked questions, received responses and discussed a number of matters as summarised below.

- The Board acknowledged the overspend on children's placements, which was primarily the result of a broken placements market. Steps were being taken locally as well as nationally to address the issues, but there was

recognition that children were not always placed in their home local authority and there were children from other authorities placed in Coventry.

- The 14 local authorities included authorities from the wider West Midlands area and not just West Midlands Combined Authority members.
- There was a broad national reduction in the number of public and private foster carers, although there were attempts to conduct local and national recruitment campaigns.
- Family group conferences were not self-funded but could be very effective at reducing the numbers of children coming into the care system.
- Efforts were being made to ensure recruitment of foster carers was as efficient and easy as possible without compromising the high standards of foster carers. The council frequently worked with potential foster carers to resolve issues such as lack of spare rooms.
- Whether standards, which were largely set at the national level, could be reviewed for foster carers to make recruitment more accessible. It was noted that any reduction in standards could put children's wellbeing at risk and that the Council needed to be completely assured in relation to placing its vulnerable children in the care of others.
- Where possible, the aim was to keep children with their families, and the Council would support family led solutions in any way it could.
- The Council put child safety as its highest priority and took standards of care very seriously.
- Short stay homes were valuable for keeping children with sudden changes in situation safe, whilst at the same time saving the Council significant money that would have been spend on alternative external placements.

The Board resolved to update the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) with their responses to referred questions.

RESOLVED that, subject to the consideration of the additional confidential information contained in the corresponding private report (Minute 12 below refers), the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2):

- 1) Notes the information provided in the Briefing Note.**
- 2) Formally acknowledges Coventry City Councils support of the 14 local authorities in the West Midlands by managing the West Midlands Commissioning Hub and leading on the Regional Frameworks for both Fostering and Residential homes.**

10. **Work Programme**

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board's Work Programme for 2025/26 be noted.

11. **Any Other Business**

There were no items of public business.

12. **The complexities involved in finding homes for children in care and associated costs**

Further to Minute 9 above, the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) considered a private briefing note of the Director of Children and Education that contained confidential information relating to individuals.

RESOLVED that further to Minute 9 above relating to the public aspects of the briefing note the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2):

- 1) Notes the information provided in the private Briefing Note.**
- 2) Agrees that an additional meeting be added to the Work Programme to reconsider this item at the end of the municipal year to scrutinise the regional aspects of the West Midlands Commissioning Hub, the Safe Centre and any proposed legislative changes.**

(Meeting closed at 12.20 pm)