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

**16 October 2025**

**Subject: Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge Progress Against the Recommendations**

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### **1 Purpose of the Note**

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) of the progress against the Local Government Association Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge Recommendations of October 2024.

### **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 and 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 service is anticipating a further inspection imminently. 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 seven Children's Homes, six homes have been inspected during 2025, of which five are rated as 'Good' by Ofsted and one rated 'requires improvement'. The ambitious residential homes expansion programme to increase the number of Children's Homes includes a further two to open in 2026.
- 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's 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.
- 3.5 In October 2024, 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 Council's 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 The Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge was held 15-17 October 2024. It focused 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

#### **5 Findings**

- 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, this is now seven with two new homes having opened in early 2025. 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 reduce the spend on high-cost placements.
- 5.3 Since the reunification project commenced in April 2021, the service has reunified fifty-four children to date, enabling and supporting children to return home to their families. This is constantly reviewed to ensure children who can be reunified return home to their families, which is the best outcome for the child.
- 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 The peer team also acknowledged and recognised our mature and effective relationships across the Education partnership.
- 5.8 The peer team 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. Children's Services developed a plan of actions to take forward in response to the Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge. The plan has involved working with the Council and its partners to embrace new ways of working to support more targeted early help work to meet needs at the earliest point in the system.
- 5.9 The introduction of the Children's Social Care Reforms across all local authorities in April 2025 brings several fundamental reforms and opportunities for Councils to further strengthen the focus on early intervention and is a key priority in 2025/2026 and 2026/2027. IMPOWER a project team are working with Children's Services on the delivery of the Reforms and also with a focus on children in care to improve the understanding of children's needs and their associated care costs, identify gaps in support and enhance commissioning processes to better match needs and support through the roll out of their Valuing Care Tool.

## 6 Progress against the Recommendations

- 6.1 Progress against each recommendation is highlighted below:

### **Recommendation 1: Support a strengthened culture between children's and corporate services**

- 6.2 Separate quarterly meetings with the S151 and the Cabinet Member for Finances and Resources were introduced in April 2025 to review finances and resources to provide robust oversight and monitoring of resources.
- 6.3 Children's and Education Services Performance Meeting are also held bi- monthly with the Leader and Chief Executive, Director of Children's and Education Services and Cabinet Member to review performance progress and quality assurance activity to improve and strengthen performance.
- 6.4 In January 2025, Children's Services implemented new performance monitoring arrangements focusing on four key areas:
  - *MASH/Early Help/Children in Need*
  - *Child Protection/Child Exploitation*
  - *Children in Care (Fostering/Children's Homes/Commissioning)*
  - *Children in Care (Care leavers/UASC 16+ and Children and young people with disabilities)*

- 6.5 The new Performance Review Meetings are providing more robust scrutiny and challenge focusing on a specific area of the service.

**Recommendation 2: Consider an organisational review of children and education services to ensure a joined-up approach and identification of financial efficiencies**

- 6.6 Children's Services is anticipating an Ofsted Inspection imminently, a wider review of Children's and Education services will be undertaken after the inspection and will be influenced by the implementation of the social care reforms.
- 6.7 The implementation of the social care reforms is well underway, with Impower supporting a collaborative multi-agency approach that has successfully established clear thresholds and consistent pathways for the Family Help element of the programme. Early outcomes demonstrate strengthened partnership working. The programme now moves into its next phase, with engagement and design for the Multi-Agency Child Protection teams, building on the strong foundations already in place.
- 6.8 The review of the Emergency Duty Team has been completed, and the new EDT structure is now established and operational.
- 6.9 A weekly Resource Panel is held to scrutinise/challenge spend on placements/commissioned providers. alongside weekly placement sufficiency meeting to support planned moves to avoid high-cost unregistered provision. In addition, bi-monthly residential review meetings also take place which review costs/spend and opportunities for step down/ reunification or move to alternative home.
- 6.10 Following the roll out of the new 'Homefinder Form', panels are being adjusted to support additional scrutiny, through the embedding of the Valuing Care Tool into assessment of needs linked to resources.

**Recommendation 3: Have a member endorsed transformation plan approved annually at the time of the MTFS approval.**

- 6.11 A Change Board, chaired by the Chief Executive, has been established. The Change Plan includes children's services and education change programme. The Children and Education Steering Group – facilitated by the transformation team reports to the Change Board on progress. Plans to transform and improve services are scrutinised by the Board.

**Recommendation 4: Decision making on unplanned entrants to care should be made at strategic lead level to promote accountability and ensure consistency of thresholds**

- 6.12 The Local Authority Scheme of delegation was reviewed in November 2024, to reflect the changes in decision making for unplanned entrants to care, being undertaken by Strategic Leads. This provides additional scrutiny from Strategic Leads who have responsibility for children in care. This is promoting accountability and ensuring consistency of thresholds.

**Recommendation 5: Consider opportunities to improve budget oversight**

- 6.13 A number of measures have been implemented to improve budget oversight. The sufficiency risk has been incorporated into the Children and Education Services Risk Register to monitor as part of the overall service risks; this is in addition to weekly resource panel meetings to scrutinise spend on placements.

- 6.14 Weekly Valuing Care Panels are now taking place to review plans for children and ensure grip on arrangements for those children who can be stepped down from residential provision and or reunified to family members.
- 6.15 In August 2025, a corporate audit on purchase card transactions commenced to consider how improvements can be made on budget oversight and compliance on the use of purchase cards and to acknowledge strengths in current practice.
- 6.16 In addition, the Senior Leadership team monitor expenditure monthly at strategic level and ongoing oversight of budget is monitored by all managers on a monthly basis.

**Recommendation: 6 Consider social work practice opportunities**

- 6.17 A number of initiatives and opportunities are being implemented to consider social work practice, including the LGA 's recommendation of a single front door for services to children and families.
- 6.18 The recently launched Families First Partnership Programme, the vehicle for the implementation of the Social Care Reforms requires the implementation of an integrated front door (IFD) for children's services. This is in the process of being developed collaboratively to enable children and families to receive the right help, at the right time, from the right person or agency leading to improved outcomes, earlier intervention, and more effective use of resources across the partnership.
- 6.19 The Effective Support for Children and Families in Coventry partnership threshold document was implemented in July 2025, following a collaborative, multi-agency approach and agreed sign-off across partners. Early indicators are positive, with a reduction in referrals into statutory services already being seen.
- 6.20 A review of Social Work Academy was undertaken earlier in the year, to review the number of newly qualified social workers for each cohort. Growing our own social workers is supporting the workforce and reducing reliance on agency social workers. In the last six months February 2025 to 30 September 2025, the number of agency social workers has reduced from 38 to 25.
- 6.21 Finally, to improve practice and have greater oversight and grip of the budget, the Strategic Leads have responsibility for agreeing independent and specialist assessments, A positive outcome from this has been a reduction in the commissioning of external assessments while delivering significant cost savings.

**7 Next Steps**

- 7.1 Children's and Education Services will continue to monitor progress against the recommendations in response to the Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge. Working with the Council and its partners to embrace new ways of working and deliver further improvements and efficiencies in the future.

Authors:

Sukriti Sen, Director for Children and Education Services  
Sonia Watson, Service Inspection and Improvement Lead

**Contact details:** [sukriti.sen@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:sukriti.sen@coventry.gov.uk)  
[sonia.watson@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:sonia.watson@coventry.gov.uk)

Tel: 02476 978470  
Tel: (024) 76971402