

CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

TUESDAY 15 OCTOBER, 2013 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Panel Members Present	Councillor B. Cassidy (Chair) Councillor D. Shires Councillor P. Lane Councillor T. Jukes Councillor E. Hughes
Non elected voting Members present	S. Raynor (Lichfield Diocesan Education)
Non elected non voting Members present	R. Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative) D. Blackwell (Secondary Teacher Representative)
Portfolio holder present	Councillor R. Andrew
Officers Present	Rose Collinson - Interim Executive Director, Children's Services; Sue Butcher - Interim Assistant Director, Specialist Services Louise Hughes - Assistant Director - Preventative & Targeted Services Sue Morgan - Strategic Lead - Early Intervention & Family Support Neil Picken – Senior Committee Business and Governance Manager Colin Teasdale Principal Corporate Performance Officer

341/13 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillors R. Martin and G. Perry.

342/13 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

343/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

344/13 MINUTES

Members considered the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September, 2013.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September, 2013, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

345/13 CHILDREN'S SERVICE INSPECTION FRAMEWORK

Members received a presentation [annexed] from the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) regarding Ofsted inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) explained that the new inspection process would last four weeks. It was emphasised that it was important to get the start of the inspection process right so that inspectors could begin without a hindrance. The new process would require case sampling information which would need to be made available within three days of the inspection being announced. This meant having the right information available at the right time was key and recording and writing down information, using the correct system, was critical. During the process inspectors would look at between 80 – 100 cases.

Members were advised that Ofsted intended to inspect all 152 Councils over a 3 year period. It was also explained that a new single inspection would replace the separate inspections of local authority fostering services and adoption agencies. The Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) advised that there hadn't been an adoption or fostering inspection in Walsall for over three years.

In relation to judgements, Members were advised that:-

- There would be a four point judgement scale ranging from inadequate to outstanding;
- 'Requires improvement' would replace 'adequate';
- Inadequate in any key judgement would limit overall effectiveness to inadequate;
- There is a qualifier for 'leadership' in inadequate places;
- Graded judgements about effectiveness of fostering and adoption and care leavers influence but are unlikely to 'limit alone';
- Review and graded judgement of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

It was highlighted that, under the new arrangements, should any key judgment of the inspection be rated inadequate the whole service would be classed as inadequate. A rating of 'good' would be the minimum standard that Walsall should seek to achieve.

The interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that a leadership grip was important. A clear line of sight was required ensuring that staff at all levels have a shared understanding and vision.

Overall it was explained that Walsall had to;

- know its children and know how it was helping and supporting them;
- ensure that data was useful and used effectively;

- ensure that safe practice was being carried out both at and behind the front door and;
- ensure that early intervention made a difference.

A Member asked for further clarity about the need for information to be recorded. In response, it was explained that the PARIS system would need to be used wisely and well until such time that a new system was in place as only information on the system will be considered by Inspectors. In addition, it was explained that inspectors would sit with Social Workers and request them to navigate the system. Whilst Inspectors would see that it is 'clunky' social workers' knowledge both of the system and their casework should overcome this and be demonstrated to inspectors.

Resolved

That the presentation be noted.

346/13 CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITY

The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) presented a report [annexed] providing an overview of performance and progress towards delivering the priorities set out in the Strategic Improvement Plan for Safeguarding in Walsall.

A member queried the role of the Health and Wellbeing Board (H&WBB) asking whether it was taking the child element of its role sufficiently seriously. In response, the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that within Walsall the Board were attempting to be inclusive but were finding that, nationally, it was harder to profile Children & Young People in the way requested. It was challenging as aggregating by age within the Health Service was not easily done. The Chair advised that she had attended a Walsall Children's Safeguarding Board meeting and it appeared that Health was well represented in comparison to other areas. Whilst the Board was engaging it appeared to be a disparate group.

The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that whilst internally it was clear in public health as to who does what, externally, it was more difficult for partners and practitioners to navigate the landscape of health commissioners and providers.

The Chair drew Members' attention to the Minister's letter appended to the report in which recognised at paragraph 2 '...the dedication of elected members working with senior management in Walsall to drive change.' The Chair thanked members of the Panel for their work in the improvement journey.

In relation to people capacity, further information was requested in respect of the report to the Black Country Chief Executives which set out a collective approach to the challenges recruiting and retaining experienced social workers. In response, the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that unless something different was attempted, there was a danger of recycling inadequacy. In particular it was pointed out that offers of increased remuneration, from neighbouring Authorities, was not helpful when trying to recruit. Children wanted a social worker that they trusted and continuity was important. Within Walsall appointing newly qualified social workers was important however equally as important was the retention of experienced Social Workers to

ensure that practice wisdom was cascaded and retained. A career pathway for staff was also key to retention of staff. It was asked whether there was a commitment to work together from other Authorities to which Members were advised that there was, however, 'plans' needed to be turned into action.

The Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) advised that Walsall already had a pro active recruitment campaign. A number of appointments had been made - 15 in July and 6 in September. Within the September round 22 people were interviewed for 15 positions, however, only 6 were recruited as Walsall were committed to ensuring that only the most suitable candidates were appointed. It was acknowledged that the majority of those appointed were newly qualified however the calibre of each applicant was high. The process from offer to start date was lengthy for social workers due to the number of background checks required. A Breakfast Meeting for qualified social workers considering coming to work in Walsall Children's Services was planned for 25th November 2013 after which there would be a further recruitment exercise. In closing, it was explained that only one of the team managers within the safeguarding and family support team was an agency worker which showed good progress had already been made. Members acknowledged that newly qualified staff would not have a full caseload and could not work on child protection cases for their first year however there was a need for the Authority to 'grow their own'.

The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) that the appointment process for Assistant Director Posts was underway with long listing expected to take place toward the end of October, 2013.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

347/13 CHILDREN'S CENTRES

The Panel received a report and presentation [annexed] relating to the findings from the consultation and future provision of Children's Centres.

A discussion took place around the outcomes of the findings, the options available and next steps of the process. The Assistant Director (Preventative & Targeted Services) advised that a report would be considered by Cabinet in October, 2013. If approved, delegated authority would be given to the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, to progress the development of an operational model going forward which was fit for purpose both now and in the future.

A Member stated that the way in which resources may be allocated was important. A discussion took place relating to the need for resources to be allocated to those areas which suffer the highest levels of deprivation meaning that some areas such as Streetly, would not be considered as a priority in the future, however, it was noted that the current facilities in that ward were very well used and served a good purpose.

Officers advised that a number of Authorities had changed the focus of Children's Centres in-line with statutory requirements and with regard to the new Ofsted framework which would focus on 'reach' and the most vulnerable.

Further discussion took place on clustering arrangements. The Chair asked officers if they had formulated some kind of 'blueprint'. Those present were assured that that this had not happened, although options had been discussed with Children Centre Managers and other key professionals.

In relation to timescales for implementation it was explained that once Cabinet had considered the options available further engagement would be undertaken which would include Children's Centre staff and other partners.

Members enquired as to whether any other opportunities existed other than clustering? In response, officers advised that they were looking at practice elsewhere to inform possibilities and that a no change option would be inadvisable given consideration of statutory obligations and the new policy direction which meant that the present system was not fit for purpose.

The Assistant Director (Preventative & Targeted Services) advised that a 'hub and spoke' model would better fit children's needs. A member of the Panel questioned the proposed changes suggesting that it was not just an organisational change but a change in what and how services would be delivered in future. A member asked whether a different staffing structure would be required to deliver the new service. In response, the Strategic Lead - Early Intervention & Family Support advised that a new model would enable better co-ordination of skills and that smaller centres would benefit by 'grouping'.

A number of pertinent points were raised as follows:-

- Members raised concerns that the 'hub and spoke' model had not been included within consultation;
- Members raised concern that 'clustering' or 'no change' were the only options offered in consultation thereby creating a built in bias as consultees were led to believe that the grouping of centres was the only option available;
- When completing consultations online it was not possible to save progress and return to it later;
- That there were potential pitfalls of using a 'hub and spoke' model. Members noted that residents from areas outside of Walsall were using Streetly Centre as a result of Birmingham adopting a 'hub and spoke' model as it was too far for them to travel to access services.

The Chair invited members of staff from Children's Centres present at the meeting to address the Panel. A member of staff stated that they were not consulted about the 'hub and spoke' model. They also advised the Panel that they were informed during consultation that there would be no redundancies. The Assistant Director (Preventative & Targeted Services) advised that no such assurances could be given, however, this was a separate matter and staff would be consulted as part of the council's budget setting process.

Following a question from the Chair regarding the next steps, the Assistant Director (Preventative & Targeted Services) explained that subject to Cabinet's decision, further

engagement with lead professionals in the first place would be undertaken. The revised operational system should be implemented no later than the end of March, 2014.

The interim Executive Director (Children's Services) highlighted that Children's Centres were an important part of Walsall's Early Help offer as they provided linkages and connections making it easier for children and families to get help.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

348/13 WORKING IN A CHALLENGING FINANCIAL CLIMATE TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LOOKED AFTER IN WALSALL

The Panel received a presentation [annexed] which provided an overview of work being undertaken to better support children and young people looked after in Walsall in a challenging financial climate.

Members were advised that the project scope, priorities and membership had been agreed in September, 2013 and that the project board convened in October, 2013. The Chair asked for clarity on the board structure to which the Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) advised that a number of project leads had been assigned to each of the following work streams:-

- Foster Care Recruitment;
 - Aim: To recruit 20 additional fostering households;
- Children on the Cusp of Care
 - Aim: To increase preventative action to avoid accommodation;
- Already Looked After Children & Young People;
 - Aim: To work to reduce the number of looked after children who need to be in our care by c50;
- Structural Change;
 - Aim: To achieve more efficient and effective working practices;
- Voice:
 - To ensure that children and young people are involved in shaping services;
- Children's Services & Public Health Project;
 - Aim: To research & identify joint change opportunities for reducing LAC numbers.

A member of the Panel queried how it was proposed to cut costs of children's homes managed by the Council? The Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) explained that assurances needed to be gained that homes were run efficiently and effectively. In particular the provision of 'waking nights' staff could be revisited to ensure that the service was provided in the right circumstances rather than as a matter of course. The member responded raising concern that any reduction in waking nights, such as having only one person, could leave staff vulnerable. The Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) agreed that finding efficiencies was a challenge and assured members that all options would be explored.

The interim Executive Director (Children's Services) explained that the Council's Children's homes were good but weren't always taking the most vulnerable and challenging young people. It was important to make best use of a precious resource spreading good practice wherever possible. There was a need to put more complex cases into in-house provision and up skill staff.

In relation to the cost of care, a Member asked whether this was fixed. A response was given which explained that there was a commissioning framework in place across the West Midlands. The interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that there was some leverage as a West Midlands region to shape the market and a need to ensure that the Council were getting value for money.

A discussion ensued on the decision of individuals to foster rather than adopt children and whether or not this was down to adopting not being financially viable. In response, officers advised that should a person adopt they take on full responsibility for the child, including financial responsibility. There was an adoption allowance however this was means tested and regularly reviewed.

The chair made reference to the projected overspend of circa 3.4 million. The Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) stated that this could be the case should the increase in looked after children continue. Action was underway to ensure that this would not happen. The total number of children in care was 606 and this had been maintained recently. .

Resolved

That the presentation be noted.

349/13 MALADMINISTRATION CASE

The interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that The Local Government Ombudsman has issued a report of maladministration following a complaint by a young person in the Council's care. The Council received a complaint from the Ombudsman in January 2013. The Ombudsman summarised the complaint as being that the Council failed to follow the requirements of the law when attempting to move the complainant from a residential school placement.

The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that she had written to the young person to apologise for the Council's failure to progress her complaint or freeze the planned move when asked to do so by her advocate, the Ombudsman and the Office of the Children's Rights Director; and the social worker's attempt to get her to sign an agreement to move. It was also confirmed that £1k had been placed in trust for the individual.

The Chair moved that further consideration of this matter take place in private session in accordance with Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, to enable further detailed discussion to be undertaken.

Resolved

That the Panel move into private session to discuss the maladministration case in more depth as doing so may reveal the identity of the individual.

450/13 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC

Resolved

That during consideration of item 10 on the agenda (maladministration case), the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel considers that the item for consideration is exempt information by virtue of the appropriate paragraph(s) of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972, and accordingly resolves to consider the item in private.

351/13 MALADMINISTRATION CASE

Members gave further consideration to the maladministration case. The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) provided further details with regard to the complaint being submitted.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

352/13 PUBLIC SESSION

At the conclusion of item 10, Maladministration Case the Panel returned to Public Session for the remainder of business.

353/13 WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the work programme.

Resolved

That the work programme be noted.

354/13 FORWARD PLAN

Members considered the forward plan [annexed].

Resolved

That the forward plan be noted.

355/13 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as 26 November, 2013 at 6.00 p.m.

The meeting terminated at 8.10 p.m.

Chair:.....

Date:.....