

CHILDRENS SERVICES Scrutiny AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Tuesday 15th September 2020 at 6.00 p.m.

Conference Room 2, Council House, Walsall

Committee Members Present

Councillor M. Statham (Chair)
Councillor T. Jukes (Vice-Chair)
Councillor D. Barker
Councillor H. Bashir
Councillor B. Douglas- Maul
Councillor M. Follows
Councillor L. Jeavons
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor S. Wade

Portfolio Holders Present

Councillor T. Wilson - Children's
Councillor C. Towe – Education and Skills

Officers Present

Colleen Male	Assistant Director
Andrea Potts	Assistant Director
Nikki Gough	Democratic Services Officer

58/19 Apologies

There were no apologies for the duration of the meeting.

59/19 Substitutions

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

60/19 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

61/19 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to be considered in private session.

62/19 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 9th March 2020 were considered.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9th March 2020 be approved.

63/19 Covid-19 update

a. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Children's Services.

The Portfolio Holder (Children's Services) addressed the Committee to commend the staff who had worked tirelessly during the pandemic to support families in Walsall. The adopter recruitment campaign was described to Members.

The Assistant Director spoke to the presentation and informed Members that the service had responded quickly to ensure that children were safeguarded. The Service moved to the use of Teams and WhatsApp (business use) to communicate with children and families and to ensure that the service continued to operate and fulfill its statutory obligations. Although statutory responsibilities were relaxed through the 'Coronavirus Act 2020', allowing visits to be maintained virtually.

In order to adapt, two buildings were kept open and a 'business as usual' office that was open. This provided a base for social workers to work from on a rota basis and a collection place for PPE. Initially the service experienced a drop in referrals to children's social care, this recovered quite quickly. There was an increase in referrals due to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and neglect. All children were risk assessed within two weeks of lockdown, with the highest risk children and young offenders (at risk of re-offending) continuing to receive face-to-face visits. Practice needed to be adapted to maintain relationships with families. Specific Covid-19 practice guidelines were issued to staff.

There had been a focus on staff wellbeing, to ensure that the service continued to operate well and support children and families. Staff briefings were held to ensure staff were supported and make sure staff had access to tools and ensure children could be engaged virtually.

The implementation of the Family Safeguarding model had been paused, however adult workers had already been recruited to this service. These staff were able to support the service in the increase in referrals due to their areas of specialisms (domestic abuse, alcoholism, substance misuse). Staff continued to be trained virtually in the family safeguarding model, and the model went live on 1st September 2020.

Feedback had suggested that children had preferred virtual meetings, Members were assured that the interaction with children had been meaningful. Face-to-face family time was stopped initially, and this had recently been reintroduced.

The Committee were informed that there had been positive elements that been established because of working this way. These would be taken forward where it has been proven effective. Social work recruitment had continued throughout the pandemic, this included the recruitment of social work students.

The Courts had been significantly impacted by Covid-19 as face-to-face court hearings could not take place, and it was not appropriate for hearings to take place virtually. This had impacted children's social care and the youth courts. The progression of children in care moving into a permanent family option had been affected by delays with the court system. The planning for children in care had continued, children were progressed through the system where possible such as special guardianship orders and children moving back home. Although adoption orders could not be progressed from a court perspective, children had been moved to their adoptive placements.

Innovative approaches had been taken to support families, and care leavers. The Government made laptops and IT equipment available, and the service ensured that high proportion of vulnerable children were provided with this IT equipment. Trackers were established to monitor the attendance of vulnerable children at school, with a specific focus on children with a health and care plan.

Early Help had received an increased number of referrals for support, and families were supported by the partnership. There had been a focus on partnership working to ensure that early help was effective for families. Parenting support programmes had been delivered virtually. It was important that the things that had been delivered successfully were continued and provided new and innovative ways to build better arrangements for the future.

During the pandemic 'Home to School', transport remained responsible for taking vulnerable children to school, however this was a reduced number. This service was also used to deliver welfare packs, PPE and associated support. Services were offered to NHS staff to transport staff to hospital. Guidance support, meetings and work with public health had taken place to plan and deliver Covid secure transport. This enabled the school transport service to restart safely from September.

Regular communication and shared working between Children's Social Care, Education, and Early Help had been key. Moving forward into the future the service would be built better and learn the lessons from the innovative ways of working throughout the pandemic.

A Member queried if 'Covid secure' transport was accurate due to anecdotal stories of this not being the case. Officers assured Members that this could be investigated outside of the meeting however, transport had been planned around school bubbles and in full discussions with Head Teachers.

Officers were asked why the type of referral into children's social care had changed and if this could be masking other issues. The Assistant Director stated that the referrals had changed due the closure of schools, and referrals coming from the ambulance and police service as issues emerged from crises in families. The differences in types of referrals would be expected due to the pressures on families. The picture is the same nationally and there was no evidence to suggest that families were being missed. A spike in referrals is expected now that children were returning to schools and the service was prepared for this.

A member asked for an update on locality working, Officers stated that the locality working had been progressed virtually and staff were working within their teams.

However, staff were working from within Essington Lodge at the moment as work needed to get local buildings ready had to be paused. It was noted that the benefits of locality working were not the same when working virtually.

In response to a question from Members, the Assistant Director stated that staff morale was high. Staff were credited for working tirelessly and embracing changes, staff had responded innovatively despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. Overall, the feedback from staff was that they felt supported. A Council wide staff survey had also taken place.

A Member challenged how well residential and foster carers had been supported throughout the pandemic. The Assistant Director responded to describe support provided to foster carers, through individual emotional support, drop-in support, and a network of foster carers. Residential staff had also faced challenges, however had been innovative to encourage young people with learning and education. A special focus had been placed on carers in recognition of the difficult time they had faced.

A Member queried if there had been an increase into issues with mental health and if bereavement services had been provided for children. Officers stated that the Team had adult practitioners who could offer specialist support and pick up families and children that required support because of mental health difficulties. There are existing bereavement services which children would be able to access, however the Assistant Director stated that she would determine if any further information was held in relation to this and would respond directly to the Member. A Member asked if funding for the family safeguarding model was ongoing.

Members thanked staff for all their hard work and the impressive response to the pandemic. Officers responded to explain that this was a partnership model and overseen by a Safeguarding Partnership Board. It had been fully funded by the DFE for the first year and this was reduced year on year, and the intention was it was then funded through the outcomes it achieves which would make it sustainable going forward.

The Portfolio Holder stated that young people and families would be consulted on those ways of working that had and had not worked during the pandemic. Members were reassured that staff morale was high on the agenda to ensure that they were well supported.

Resolved

That the Covid-19 Update be noted.

b. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's routine health assessments.

The Chair advised the Committee that this item would be deferred and the Accountable Officer for the CCG would providing a briefing note to Members of the Committee.

64/19 Areas of Focus

The draft areas of focus 2020/21 was considered.

Resolved

That the draft areas of focus 2020/21 was agreed.

65/19 Forward Plans

The forward plans were noted.

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 7.30 p.m. The date of the next meeting would be held on 10th November 2020.

Signed:

Date: