

Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Conference Room 2, Walsall Council House

Thursday 3 November 2022 at 6.00 p.m.

Committee Members Present

Councillor A. Hicken (Chair)
Councillor T. Jukes (Vice Chair)
Councillor A. Garcha
Councillor L. Harrison
Councillor C. Horton
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor S. Nasreen
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor V. Waters

Portfolio Holder

Councillor T. Wilson

Officers Present

Sally Rowe	-	Executive Director Children's Services
Isabel Vanderheeren	-	Director Early Help and Partnerships
Tanya Collier	-	Lead Accountant, Children's Services
Antony Schaffarczyk	-	Principal Social Worker
Nikki Gough	-	Democratic Services Officer
Reena Farmah	-	Democratic Services Officer

20/22 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor F. Mazhar.

21/22 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

22/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations and no party whip of interest.

23/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to be considered in private session.

Minutes

24/22 The minutes of the meeting held on 27 September 2022 were considered by the committee.

Resolved

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 September be approved as a true and accurate record subject to the amendment of the typing error in the penultimate paragraph on page 8, to read ‘A Member asked whether the number of families requiring help had increased due to cost of living pressures’.

25/22 Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2022/23

A report was submitted which provided an overview of the budget monitoring position for quarter 2 financial 2022/23.

[see annexed].

The Lead Accountant introduced the report, highlighting the outturn position for Children's Services. She reported an overspend of £3.68 million for Children's services as at August 2022. . The forecast revenue position for the services under the remit of this committee was an overspend of £3.28 million at period 5, after the net use of reserves of £2.34 million. The key reason for the overspend related to children in care placements. She explained the number of children in care had reduced from 661 at the end of 2020/21 to 651 in July 2022 due to successful implementation of service transformation plans. The demand for higher cost placements had increased in-line with the national picture and as such costs continued to increase, extensive work had been undertaken to effectively manage demand. The use of reserves included the use of £1.04 million general Covid grant to offset increased costs of children in care linked to delays in court hearings and assessments, delays in young people leaving care, increases in personal allowance payments and placement sufficiency issues. Members were asked to note risks to the monitoring position, if materialised these would increase the overspend further.

The Lead Accountant highlighted the service transformation plan for 2022/23, which included approved efficiencies of £5.46 million.

The Chair welcomed questions from the Committee. The Portfolio Holder commented that the finances for Children's Services were complex, whilst any overspend was regrettable, it was justified as delivering services for young people was paramount. The Portfolio Holder responded to questions from members, during which time he confirmed that concerns regarding the budget had been raised with Walsall's Members of Parliament, encouraging them to raise and challenge the issues nationally.

The Executive Director commented that initiatives to make efficient use of resources were in progress, for example the authority were exploring plans to make Walsall a fostering friendly council, encouraging employees and local businesses to support foster care. A discussion was held about writing to the government to discuss and share the challenges faced by Children's Services.

Resolved

- 1. To note the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year end 2022/23 for the services under the remit of the committee.**
- 2. A draft letter, to the Department of Education, be considered by the Committee at its next meeting which highlights the financial challenges faced by Children's Services.**

26/22 Social Worker Recruitment and Retention

A report was submitted which provided an overview of social worker staffing in Children's Social Care, outlining activities undertaken to support the recruitment and retention of social workers.

[see annexed].

The Principal Social Worker introduced the report and informed members that social worker recruitment and retention was a key priority and progress had been made to stabilise and develop the workforce. Members noted the national and regional challenges faced by the profession, the number of social workers leaving was at a five-year high resulting in a crisis both financially and in the capacity to deliver services. There was significant demand for experienced social workers, and agencies were able to offer attractive rates of pay, resulting in experienced staff leaving the profession entirely or moving to agencies.

The Principal Social Worker explained a range of measures had been used to promote retention;

- Extensive consultation and engagement with the workforce.
- Use of retention payments.
- The introduction of a new Senior Specialist Social Worker role as a progression opportunity and defined social worker career pathway.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted that social worker caseload had been an issue in the past, and had been recognised as one of the reasons behind social workers leaving. Caseload was continually monitored to ensure it was manageable for staff.

A discussion took place regarding the role of exit questionnaires and the importance of understanding the reasons behind social workers leaving the employment of the Council. The Committee were informed of the support in place for new starters who had a reduced caseloads, access to weekly supervision and co-working with senior practitioners.

The Principal Social Worker responded to questions relating to social worker pay, he explained that a review had taken place and the authority couldn't compete with agency rates due to the council's pay structure. The authority recognised that staff needed reward and career progression opportunities and therefore a senior role had been introduced to encourage staff retention through progression opportunities.

The Executive Director explained that the issues relating to social workers were complex and related to a supply and demand issue. Nationally there were gaps in the sector with high numbers of vacancies and agencies capitalising on the shortage and often demanding high salaries. The Association of Directors of Children's Services were aware of the issues which are being raised with the Department for Education. Walsall offered social workers levels of competitive pay and additional benefits.

The Portfolio Holder commented that the issues had been raised with local MPs who were supportive, it was suggested that the government should regulate social worker agencies. Members noted that some agency workers were needed to support service delivery and that costs were likely to increase in the future.

In response to a question the Executive Director outlined the memorandum of understanding in place across the West Midlands region which included fundamental principles for Councils to work in collaboration to resolve issues and to not adversely affect other neighbouring authorities.

Resolved:

- 1. To note the report and sector-wide challenges facing the recruitment and retention of social workers.**
- 2. To support the continued work and positive trajectory in the recruitment and retention of social workers.**

27/22 Recommendation Tracker

The Democratic Services Officer confirmed that the committee work programme had been circulated.

Resolved

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

28/22 Areas of Focus 2022/23

Members noted the committees work programme and the forward plan for Walsall Council and the Black Country Executive Committee.

The following areas of focus were agreed by the committee to be added to the work programme for the 2022/23 municipal year:

- Youth Justice priorities and Disproportionately
- Children at Risk Exploitation

- Young Carers
- Placement Sufficiency
- Child Neglect Strategy
- Transition from Children's Services into Adult Services - Update

Resolved

That the areas of focus be agreed for the municipal year 2022/23 with the inclusion of the following items:-

- **Youth Justice priorities and Disproportionately**
- **Children at Risk Exploitation**
- **Young Carers**
- **Placement Sufficiency**
- **Child Neglect Strategy**
- **Transition from Children's Services into Adult Services - Update**

29/22 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was noted as 8 December 2022 at 6:00 p.m.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7:16 p.m.

Signed:

Date: