

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Tuesday, 25 March, 2014 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Members in attendance Councillor S. Coughlan (Chair)
Councillor J. Rochelle (Vice-Chair)
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor M. Longhi
Councillor D. Shires
Councillor R. Worrall

Other Scrutiny Members in attendance Councillor D. James
Mr. S. Rayner

Portfolio holders in attendance Councillor C. Towe (Resources)

Officers Present Rory Borealis - Executive Director (Resources)
Rose Collinson - Interim Executive Director (Children's Services)
Craig Goodall - Committee Business and Governance Manager

Others in attendance Wendy Powell - Director of Transformation - CaldmoreAccord Housing

269/14 APOLOGIES

There were no apologies of absence for the duration of the meeting.

270/14 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

271/14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

272/14 MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting which took place on 11 February, 2014, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

273/14 SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The Panel considered the approach being taken to improve school performance along with the school improvement strategy.

The Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) reported on the current situation in Walsall and the West Midlands, activity taking place to reverse the decline of local schools, the school improvement recovery programme and how schools had been supported and challenged to become recognised by Ofsted as "good" or "outstanding".

Following questions from Members about engagement and implementation, it was explained that the new strategy had been developed in partnership with local head teachers and Governors. A new Assistant Director would be responsible for overseeing the successful implementation of the strategy over the next two years. The strategy would be supported by a suite of operational plans which would contain monitoring arrangements.

A strand of the strategy was focussing on improving the school readiness of children through early years provision. It was important to reach out to parents to encourage and help them to develop their own children and get them ready for school and learning. It was important to break down the barriers between deprivation and attainment and early years engagement was one method of raising the bar from the very outset of a young person's life. An Ofsted report on early years learning was expected in the near future.

Members were concerned about the high level of changes that schools had been subjected to recently and in the future. The meeting discussed the transfer of education services to the Council from Serco and were informed that the change had been successful but ongoing work was taking place to fully embed change. It was explained that changes to the national curriculum were due to be implemented in September, 2014. Whilst the changes were significant, schools were aware of what was expected of them and the higher bar being set for attainment. Similarly, schools were responsive to changes to inspection regimes; to which further changes were currently being consulted on. Further reforms were anticipated for special educational needs and disabilities in order to continue the good work taking place.

In terms of managing the performance of Academy Schools, the Council had the power to refer schools to the Secretary of State to drive improvement and enforce standards.

Following a question on how excellent performance amongst pupils was encouraged, Members were informed that each school had a "gifted and talented" policy to challenge more able pupils.

It was clarified that "vulnerable learners" covered young people who, for example, had special educational needs, a disability, a looked after child or spoke English as an additional language.

The Chair thanked the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) for her hard work in this important area.

Resolved

That:-

- (1) Members be provided with further information on school bandings;
and;**
- (2) the report be noted.**

274/14 THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM IN WALSALL

The Panel received the final report, conclusions and recommendations of the Welfare Reform Working Group.

The Chair introduced the report and explained that the Working Group had met with a wide range of Council officers and partners receiving a vast selection of evidence. It was the intention that the report would be a position statement on the current position but noted that this would change as reforms were introduced and amended. He also requested that further analysis take place on the data contained in the report to ensure that the latest figures were available as the report moved forward.

The meeting discussed the report and the impact of some of the reforms. A Member suggested the benefit cap was encouraging residents to work as in 2012, 265 households were affected. The latest figures demonstrated the number of households affected had reduced to 153. The Chair noted there were also some perverse impacts, for example, those residents who had downsized from a two bedroom property into a one bedroom flat where a combination of rent and service charges was increasing the benefits bill as the total cost was higher than the rent of a two bedroom property. This additional cost would be covered by Housing Benefits.

Members were concerned about the proposal to pay benefits in one monthly lump sum when Universal Credit (UC) was introduced. There was concern that some residents were not budgeting effectively and failed to pay their rent. A Member was worried that this concern could lead landlords in the private sector to be reluctant to accept benefit recipients as tenants. This would place further pressure and demands on the Council and social housing providers. A representative from Caldmore Accord Housing reported that they had seen a rise when they piloted the UC approach with a small group of tenants. Members suggested that work needed to take place to ensure that residents were ready and able to cope with the changes. The Chair highlighted a newspaper article to Members that asserted the welfare reforms were passing costs onto social housing providers.

The Chair thanked Members of the Working Group for their hard work.

Resolved

That:-

- (1) the following report and recommendations of the Welfare Reform Working Group be accepted;**

- (2) the following report and recommendations of the Welfare Reform Working Group be forwarded to Council for consideration;**
and;
- (3) the following report and recommendations of the Welfare Reform Working Group be forwarded for information to the following:-**
 - (a) Scrutiny and Performance Panels;**
 - (b) Health and Wellbeing Board;**
 - (c) Registered providers;**
 - (d) Job Centre Plus.**

275/14 WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered their work programme and the latest version of Cabinet’s Forward Plan of key decisions.

Resolved

That:-

- (1) the work programme be noted;**
and;
- (2) the Forward Plan be noted;**

276/14 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the time and date of the next meeting would be set at Annual Council on 18 June, 2014.

The meeting closed at 7.32 p.m.

Chair:.....

Date:.....