

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY 14TH JANUARY 2021 at 6.00 p.m.

Virtual meeting via Microsoft Teams

Held in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020; and conducted according to the Councils Standing Orders for Remote Meetings and those set out in the Council's Constitution.

Present:

Councillor M. Statham (Chair)
Councillor D. Barker
Councillor H. Bashir
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor M. Follows
Councillor C. Statham

Officers

Helen Billings	Family Safeguarding Lead
Mark Halliwell	Assurance Lead Officer
Helena Kucharczyk	Head of Performance Improvement and Quality
Colleen Male	Director (Children's Social Work)
Andrea Potts	Director (Commissioning & Early Help)
Antony Schaffarczyk	Principal Social Worker

Portfolio Holder

Councillor T. Wilson

Welcome

At this point in the meeting, the Chair opened the meeting by welcoming everyone, and explaining the rules of procedure and legal context in which the meeting was being held. He also directed members of the public viewing the meeting to the papers which could be found on the Council's Committee Management Information system (CMIS) webpage.

Members confirmed that they could both see and hear the proceedings.

78/20

Apologies

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor L. Jeavons and Councillor T. Jukes for the duration of the meeting.

79/20 **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

80/20 **Declarations of Interest and party whip**

There were no declarations of interest for the duration of the meeting

81/20 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items to be considered in private session.

82/20 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 10th November 2020 were considered by the Committee.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th November 2020 be approved, subject to the inclusion of Councillor T. Wilson and Councillor C. Statham as in attendance.

83/20 **Recruitment and retention of social workers**

The Principal Social Worker introduced the report and highlighted the salient points. An overview of social worker staffing in Children's Social Care was provided, and an outline of activity undertaken over the last year to improve the recruitment and retention of Social Workers. The stability of the worker force and consistency of staff was noted as essential to provide a foundation for all work in children's social care. The positive direction of travel was highlighted, although there was further work to be carried out.

The Committee were advised that in the previous two years staff turnover, vacancy rates, and the use of agency staff had reduced. It was noted that the recruitment of experienced social workers was a challenge (both regionally and nationally). Therefore, focus had also been placed on staff retention, through individual progression and consultation with staff to better understand their experiences of working in Walsall. A staff wellbeing strategy had been developed to support staff. The Family Safeguarding model had assisted Walsall to stand out as an employer as it allowed good social work practice and attracted staff to work for Walsall. Incentive payments used to attract and retain staff were described.

In response to a question from a Member, Officers described the importance of the support received from Managers. A stable and consistent group of group managers was important. It was also noted

that as well as access to high quality management support it was also necessary for staff to have access to specialist support, when required, which allows staff to process emotions and to reflect on difficult situations. It was confirmed that this is a corporate offer, which allowed staff to access counselling if needed.

A Member asked how inequalities were being addressed; the committee were informed that discussions were held with staff from minority groups to consider their development and how this could be supported. The Principal Social Worker explained that progression into management and leadership roles was evident and this would be further developed to consider the Authority's leadership offer.

Members discussed how staff were kept safe, and they were reassured that where necessary police support was provided.

A Member asked if there were internal targets for recruitment; however, Members were informed that Officers were continually attempting to reduce vacancy rates and staff turnover. The Committee were reassured that the focus was on outcomes for families and children. The Portfolio Holder stated that this was regularly reviewed by the Senior Management Team in Children's Services.

A Member asked for the reasons that the absenteeism rate of staff had reduced, Officers suggested that the importance of a stable team could help as staff felt more supported. However further work needed to be completed to understand this.

Members considered caseloads, and Officers stated that the direction of travel had been positive with an average 14 children per social worker. The Portfolio Holder stated a briefing note on this would be sent to Members on this outside of the meeting.

Resolved that:

- 1. The recruitment and retention of social workers report be noted.**
- 2. A briefing note on social worker caseloads would be distributed to Committee Members outside of the meeting.**

Family Safeguarding: the first four months

The Family Safeguarding Lead presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Committee were informed that the aim of the Family Safeguarding model was to keep families together wherever possible. It was a Department for Education funded partnership model, developed in Hertfordshire, which supported families with children aged 12 years and under where parents have issues of substance abuse, mental ill-health or domestic violence, and the child(ren) were subject to Child in Need or Child Protection Plans.

The programme went live on 1st September 2020, and virtually launched on 20th October 2020. Staff felt that this was a positive way to practise social work.

The Committee were informed that in order to achieve sustainability, data was being collected to evidence the model's effectiveness. A Member questioned how this approach was tailored to communities in each locality. The Family Safeguarding Lead stated that teams were working in localities and local relationships were developing. Data would be analysed to indicate and resource locality needs.

The Portfolio Holder stated that Walsall had been analysed to determine if this programme would work in the area and had been successful in achieving funding. The Director stated that there was confidence that this would work across the whole of Walsall; however, the demand for different types of adult workers may be different in particular communities. The Director stated that locality working allowed the authority to understand and respond to local need. This need could be profiled to provide help and support at the earliest point and responses tailored to the locality.

In response to a question from Members, Officers explained that the Covid-19 pandemic had delayed the programme from going live, this had created staffing costs (for those already recruited). This would be part of an ongoing conversation with the DfE and it had been identified as a Covid-19 cost. Officers were confident that this would be recouped.

A Member asked for reassurance that this approach was focused on individual family needs. Officers confirmed that this was the case, and stressed that it was needs based and tailored to families.

Resolved that

To note the implementation of the Family Safeguarding model and to give thanks to the staff involved in its establishment.

85/20

Annual complaints report

The Assurance Lead Officer presented the annual complaints report (annexed), and informed Members that it covered the period 1 April 2019 through to 31 March 2020 and reported on complaints made by, or on behalf of children and young people who received services from Children's Social Care in Walsall.

The key headlines were highlighted to the Committee, which included both complaints and compliments received.

It was noted that there was a continuing trend for fewer complaints, in comparison to other West Midlands Authorities; Walsall appeared to have received a lower number of complaints. Complaints that had

progressed through the complaints procedure and had been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman had increased, however a limited number of these complaints had been upheld with the number in line with national figures.

A Member asked for further information on the number of complaints referred to the Local Ombudsman. It was noted that this number had increased, however it was in line with national averages. It was agreed that further detail on these complaints, and the outcomes would be provided to Members of the Committee. In addition, data from the last 4-5 years for statistic comparison was requested.

The Portfolio Holder stated that each complaint and compliment provided the opportunity for the Team to learn.

A Member asked how much longer complainants who waited longer than 10 days for a response wait. It was agreed that this information would be provided to the Committee outside of the meeting. In response to discussions, the Committee were advised that the complaints procedure was easily accessible to the public.

Resolved that:

- 1. The annual complaints report was noted.**
- 2. A briefing note be provided to Committee Members on:**
 - **Data relating to complaints from the last 4-5 years,**
 - **Further detail on timescales for those complainants who waited longer than 10 days for a response to their complaint.**

2019-20 Children's Services Performance and Outcomes

The Head of Performance Improvement and Quality presented an overview of the outturn data for 2019-20 with some benchmarking data. It was noted that there were high levels of poverty in the Borough, and Walsall was the 19th most deprived Local Authority in the country. The application of the 'Right Help Right Time' guidance had impacted on the indicators that were derived from the statutory returns submitted to the DfE. The salient points from the presentation were:

- The number of children open to statutory services reduced, and continued to reduce.
- There was a reduction in requests for support from children's social care.
- There had been an improvement in the timeliness of assessments.
- Child protection investigations were reducing (and were timely when they took place).
- The number of children were subject to a care protection plan was reducing.

- The number of children in care was increasing (due to delays as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic).
- There were more children placed in foster care than comparators and fewer placed at a distance from home.

The Committee were informed that in 2019-20 the main reason children were the subject of child protection plan was for emotional abuse followed by neglect. This was different to previous years and comparators where neglect was the main category of abuse.

It was noted that there had not been a significant increase in referrals when children returned to school in September 2020. This gave confidence that children who needed referring into children's social care were picked up by other organisations. The Covid-19 pandemic had affected elements of performance such as children placed at distance, a reduction of care leaves in education, employment and training, and a reduction in the number of care leavers in suitable accommodation.

A Member questioned what had contributed to the improved performance of completing child and family assessments in a timely manner. Officers explained that work had been completed to ensure stability of workforce and also the reduction in referrals (as a result of new guidance), this was a consistent trend and suggested this was embedded.

In response to a question from a Member, Officers informed the Committee that care leavers were supported up to the age of 25 years of age, although often many care leavers kept in contact with the social care team after this age. The level of contact was determined by the needs of young people. Members challenged if the Council attempted to maintain contact with young people who were in crisis. Officers confirmed that they would, and often referred young people to other professionals and organisations. The Portfolio Holder reassured the Committee that care leaver support was substantial and was monitored by the Corporate Parenting Board.

Resolved

That the 2019-20 Children's Services Performance and Outcomes be noted.

The Director spoke to the report to highlight the salient points (annexed). The Committee were informed that at a previous meeting, the Committee discussed draft revenue budget proposals and the feedback was included in the draft report that went to Cabinet in December 2020. This report focused on the draft capital programme, there was one proposal within the remit of this committee, which related to the children's locality model. The four locality buildings had now been identified and a schedule of necessary works compiled,

which includes additional security measures. Initial costings of £0.270m costings have not yet been finalised. Some aspects of this work had been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and it was stressed that staff would only move into the buildings when it was safe to do so.

Resolved that

1. The Committee fully support the draft capital budget proposal that relates to the remit of this committee, that being the completion of works to the 4 designated locality buildings.

2. The Committee note that consultation continues on all revenue policy proposals previously reported and that feedback will be presented to Cabinet on 10 February 2021, along with further revenue options to close the gap to ensure a balanced budget was set for 2021/22.

86/20 **Areas of Focus**

The draft areas of focus 2020/21 was considered.

Resolved

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

87/20 **Forward Plans**

The forward plans were noted.

Termination of Meeting

The meeting terminated at 8.15 p.m.