

Portfolio Holder Children's Services – Councillor Wilson

Safe, happy and learning well

I wanted to begin this, my third report to Council by recognising the significant contribution made by those of you working with and on behalf of the children and families of Walsall. As the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, I passionately believe that all children deserve to be safe, happy and learning well and that this is the most important role that our council performs. Over the last 12 months we have collectively shown great determination, commitment, dexterity, thought and resilience in our continued quest to support and safeguard the most vulnerable children in Walsall. The multi-faceted impact of COVID 19 on Children's Services and on our children and young people has added pressure on top of the existing challenges facing the sector nationally. Here in Walsall, it has also highlighted resilience and innovation, driven significant improvements and been the catalyst for the formation of better, more powerful partnerships locally, something I take immense pride in.

Thanks

So before I move on to set out the achievements and priorities for Children's Services, I want to start with some thanks.

First and foremost I want to formally recognise the Children's Services workforce; I cannot thank those working across Children's Services enough for their hard work and the dedication shown, for being so adept at managing risk and responding to the prevailing circumstances so that our children and families continue to receive the help and support they need. That goes for those colleagues working in support services too, whose contribution is so crucial to the work we do support. I also want to commend Sally Rowe and her leadership team for their dedication to the delivery of our Wr4C transformation programme, the dividends of which are evident in my achievements section of this report.

Next, I would like to recognise our partners, statutory and voluntary, for their continued commitment and contribution to working in partnership to improve the lives and life chances of children and young people this last 12 months. Working collaboratively to ensure the children of Walsall have the best possible start in life, are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well is a necessity not a choice. The stakes are high but getting it right means, we can better safeguard children and young people.

And of course, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Leader, the Chief Executive, Cabinet and my fellow elected members, here in the council chamber, for the strong corporate commitment and investment you have shown and for the relentless focus on prioritising services to improve outcomes for children and young people, from which we are now seeing tangible progress and benefits for children, families and the workforce. Specific mention must go to Councillor Towe, my fellow Portfolio Holder for Education & Skills with whom I have shared a children's platform with for the last 3 years, stepping down this year to take up deputy mayoral duties; to Councillor Hicken who took over chairing of Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee earlier this year, to the members of those respective Boards as well as the Corporate Parenting Board for their continued support of Children's Services

Finally, before I set out Children's Services achievements over the preceding 12 months and our priorities for the coming year, I would like to pay tribute to the many children, young people, parents, carers and advocates, including some of our most vulnerable children, those looked after, those who have left care, those with special educational needs and disabilities and those who find themselves in the criminal justice system for whom the pandemic has been extremely difficult.

Our achievements

Despite the challenging environment, we have continued to implement our vision and improve outcomes for children, young people and families in Walsall. There are many achievements, Covid-19 and non Covid-19 related, a selection of which I have set out in the paragraphs that follow.

Our Ofsted good rating

In October 2021 Walsall Children's Services was inspected by Ofsted under the Inspecting Local Authorities Children's services (ILACS) framework. Arguably our most notable achievement this year, and one that the Leader, the Cabinet and I am immensely proud of, is the outcome of that inspection which saw Walsall Children's Services move out of a 'requires improvement' rating to an **overall 'good' rating**. This is the first time that Walsall have received this judgement from Ofsted. Although we recognise there is still more to do, this is significant achievement and testament to the hard work and tenacity of the leadership team, managers and front line staff, the wider council and partners.

In their report Ofsted highlighted exceptional practice from social workers, a deliberate corporate investment in Children's services and a culture of continuous learning, self-awareness and a commitment to improving services for children. The considerable progress we have made would not have been possible without our shared commitment to achieving the right outcomes and doing this by creating the right conditions where effective social work has been able to flourish.

Three years ago we launched our ambitious **Walsall Right for Children (Wr4C) transformation programme**, encompassing all Children Social Care, Early Help, Education and our partner agencies to make sure the right children and young people receive the right help at the right time. I am pleased that inspectors recognised the positive changes we are making to the lives of children and their families who need our support and that our drive and determination to deliver improvements through our transformation programme has been sustained in spite of the challenges of the pandemic; that they recognised senior leaders have actively sought the views of children and their families and staff and that this has been integral to shaping the positive cultural and structural changes within our transformation journey and that inspectors acknowledged that partners from across a range of organisations across the Borough work closely together and collaborate well. I want to thank every one of you who played a part in our improvement journey so far.

Locality working

We have created **four locality hubs** seeking opportunities to co-locate teams, connect practitioners with each other, with community resources and families have enabled easier access to integrated services giving the right help and the right time, the demonstrable impact of which was recognised by Ofsted in its published report (October 2021); "Impressive, effective and creative multi-agency intervention in the locality safeguarding teams is providing sustained change by improving children's experiences and reducing risks. Co-location of professionals is providing intensive wraparound support for children, which has helped parents make and sustain changes to improve children's circumstances. Staff work sensitively and skilfully, using the implemented model of social work practice to understand parental and family histories and the impact on parents of mental illness, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Co-location in the west locality with early help colleagues and other partners working within the locality, including the Department for Work and Pensions, school nurses and health visitors, is being undertaken as a pilot and will be rolled out across other locality areas in 2022."

We have secured opportunities to **strengthen the capacity and capability of the voluntary sector** as part of our locality model, enabling us to better meet the needs of Walsall's diverse

community, redirect demand appropriately and ensure community 'scaffolding' is available to sustain change for vulnerable families following statutory intervention. This work provided a strong learning platform for the development and successful delivery of our Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF) in 2021 funded from £1.7M investment by the DfE. A total of 3000 children (21% of our Free School Meals cohort) enjoyed this innovative face-to-face and online programme of enriching activities and healthy food hampers, delivered by 47 local providers during Easter, summer and Christmas 2021.

Workforce investment

We have continued to invest in our workforce by developing our Workforce and Wellbeing Strategy, based on feedback from staff through our annual health check; revised our social work career progression pathway; invested in senior practitioner posts; designed and implemented a Team Manager Development Programme and continued to hold our annual staff conference.

Practice Improvement

We have continued to focus on practice improvement by implementing our five practice priorities focussing on assessment, planning and review, supervision, direct work and case recording. Last summer we held our first Practice Week to provide a dedicated focus on quality of our practice. We have continued to strengthen our quality assurance framework to understand the impact of demand and quality of practice and rolling out Power Bi dashboards to front line managers, giving them access to up to date performance and management information at the touch of a button.

Voices of children and young people at the heart of decision making

We have used information gathered from our Big Conversation (a programme of activities, aimed at strengthening our reach and engagement, listening, learning and acting collaboratively on what children and families are saying) during summer 2021 to help us to understand children and young people's experiences of growing up in Walsall, how the pandemic has impacted their lives and inform our operational business and partnership plans including the development of an emotional and wellbeing partnership framework with schools, the Neglect Strategy and the WR4C Strategic Alliance work.

Preventing children coming into care

We have continued to develop existing and implement new programmes to prevent children coming into care. Our **Daisy Programme** is a multi-agency disciplinary service designed to prevent the need for parent and infant separation and care proceedings through providing intensive intervention to support vulnerable mothers and fathers as they transition to parenthood. So far, as at January 2022, the Daisy Service has supported 14 families (19 parents) through its full programme, 8 of the 14 children on the full programme have been born. Through successful intervention, three of the eight have remained in the care of their parents.

We have continued to develop **Turning Point**, our service that works with families to prevent family breakdown that can result in adolescents becoming looked after. Over the past 12 months, Turning Point has worked with 84 children with only 12 coming into the care of the local authority.

We have implemented the **Family Safeguarding Model**, as part of the DfE' Strengthening Families Protecting Children programme, working with over 400 children and their families to deliver a whole-system change via children and adult specialists working in a unified team providing whole family support to tackle the impact of the 'trio of vulnerabilities' (domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental ill-health) on children's lives.

We implemented our **Family Drug and Alcohol Court Programme** in partnership with Dudley and Sandwell to support alcohol and substance addicted parents and to prevent vulnerable children from entering care.

We have combined our **Early Help front door with the MASH**, co-locating a domestic abuse provider and further strengthening our understanding of needs within localities to drive improvements to pathways, support and local partnership working.

We have improved our **virtual Early Help offer** and maximised the use of digital resources to provide easier access to support, advice and self-help tools for families and professionals, including a full review and update of our website.

We have introduced an **Early Help Volunteer Service**, recruiting 15 volunteers to provide low level support to families and deliver group work as part of our development of 'community scaffolding' to build community resilience and are using the delivery of our Holiday Activity and Food Programme to build capacity in the voluntary sector

We commissioned an independent assurance review of improvements made following HMIP's 2019 inspection of **Youth Justice Services** and this has reported significant progress against recommendations, strengthened oversight and governance arrangements and statutory compliance.

Priorities going forward

Turning to our priorities for the coming 12 months and beyond, our 3 strategic priorities enabling us to realise our vision, improve outcomes and life chances of children and young people remain steadfast and unchanged. These are:

Reducing demand: stopping failure demand coming to Children's Services by default and re-directing it appropriately through self-help and outline clear role and responsibilities of partnership offer of support. **Preventing escalation** of demand with graduated evidence-based programmes, from targeted help to placement support and **Avoiding high cost help and support** by strategically commissioning the right, most cost-effective placements for our looked after children and the right packages of support for our children with SEND.

Developing a highly skilled/stable workforce by developing our profile as an employer making the job do-able and enabling our workforce to do the right thing; supporting our staff with an effective workforce and wellbeing strategy; developing a clear career pathway and succession planning and having a clear recruitment and retention strategy.

Co-ordinating and influencing the establishment of a mature WR4C partnership platform to drive the delivery of the WR4C vision in order to reduce demand for council services and prevent children and families from needing costly statutory interventions approach. Connecting transformation across Walsall in the interest children and families will be key including integrating services around our children and families where this makes sense for them, strategies, processes, adopting the same thresholds, removing duplication between partners and co-producing with families and the community.

Our focus over the next 12 months includes:

- Addressing the four Ofsted recommendations.
- Continuing to improve recording systems via our MOSAIC health check and linking information across social care and youth justice systems.

- Continuing to implement and embed our locality model with the opening of further locality buildings and rolling out the Family Safeguarding model to all children open to social care.
- Continuing our drive to improve outcomes for children and families with a focus on quality of practice, staff well-being and equipping our social workers to deliver outstanding services, making Walsall a place where workers want to come and stay.
- Continuing to develop our service offer to vulnerable adolescents, including those at risk of exploitation.
- Continuing to focus on working 'with' families to bring about change so that children and families can stay together where it is safe to do so, including embedding the Family Safeguarding model so that it is sustainable.
- Responding to the findings of the Independent Care Review of Children's Social Care, which is being led by Josh MacAlister. Findings of this review are expected this year.

Conclusion

My report has highlighted some of our many achievements on our journey of improvement as well as our future priorities. Those priorities will undoubtedly keep us busy over the next 12 months and beyond, but I wanted to conclude by acknowledging the significant progress that has been made, that we have all made, that has been endorsed by Ofsted, and by reiterating my thanks, gratitude and praise to every one of you who played a part in our improvement journey to date.

As a Council we have put children first, shown incredible resilience at an unprecedented time and worked at outstanding pace to resolve the problems posed by the pandemic. I was personally delighted that Ofsted recognised what I, as the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services have the privilege of seeing first hand on a regular basis. I have every confidence that will use the collective spirit and commitment we have amassed and channelled this last 12 months to drive further change that will benefit the children and young people of Walsall now and in the future.



Councillor Tim Wilson
Portfolio Holder Children's Services