

# Portfolio Holder Briefing



**Walsall Council**

# Cabinet Member Briefing – Cllr Elson

## Children’s Early Help, Social Care and Youth Justice portfolio

### Introduction

The Children’s Directorate has three service areas, Children’s Social Care and Safeguarding, Early Help & Commissioning and Access & Inclusion.

As Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services, my report details those activities within Early Help, Social Care and Youth Justice we are most proud of, the challenges we face and the areas upon which we are focussing attention to ensure better outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people in the Borough.

In December 2023 Children Services began to review the WR4C vision, foundations and priorities to ensure alignment to both the current Council Plan and the ‘Child Friendly Borough’ and ‘Feel Safe’ themes within We are Walsall 2040. The updated strategy released in April 2024 was shaped by performance data, feedback from children, young people, and our workforce through the Big Conversations consultation.



We want to ensure we can provide services to better support children and families and that they can access a range of activities to have fun, grow, learn, and thrive locally. Resilient children and thriving families are key to ensure Walsall’s children can achieve their potential to become successful adults from 2040 and beyond.

### Our Service Delivery

#### Family Hubs

In July 2024 we celebrated our 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of our Family Hubs in Walsall, providing a welcoming space where children, young people aged 0-19 and up to 25 for those young people with additional needs and their families can go to receive advice and support when they need it. Our 4 Integrated Locality Family Hubs and 9 community family hubs are in the heart of our local communities where services have come together providing one ‘front door’ access to get help and to talk to someone in a safe space about sensitive things that maybe worrying them.

Family hubs in Walsall offer services like birth registration, speech and language support, parenting advice, stay and play sessions, targeted programmes for new dads, guidance apps, and emotional support. We have a group of 40 volunteers who help parents in the community – ‘support for parents by parents’. The work in this area has become an important part of the whole system to improve school readiness for children in Walsall and the impact can already be seen.

### Early Help

Our focus this year has been to strengthen Early Help partnerships and collaborate to grow our early years integrated offer, add value in our SEND work, work with the community in reducing exploitation and establishing a dedicated young carer's team.

We have delivered successful Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF) provision in collaboration with 75 providers to host activities, operating across 117 venues in and around the borough. This summer alone 8053 children and young people booked onto sessions across the four weeks, and 21,919 healthy lunches were distributed.

We also welcomed two peer LA's (Sandwell and Lincolnshire) to undertake peer reviews of our early help work and partnerships, which has helped us to identify strengths and areas for development for next year.

### Youth Justice

We launched new strategic collaborations, including the Safer Walsall Partnership and the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership, to address serious incidents of violence. This work involves academic research on violence causes, community responses for children at risk of remand, and the Serious Violence Duty. We also deliver interventions like the Street Doctors Programme, the Virtual Reality Knife Crime Programme, and mentorship from those with lived experience.

We have had a focus on reducing disproportionality by creating a documentary screened at cinemas during Black History Month, created a dedicated employment pathway for black and mixed heritage boys and commissioned a mentor for black and mixed heritage children.

We also have a focus on early intervention, an example of this is our turnaround programme.

### Family Help – including the Families' First Pathfinder Programme

Our Locality Family Safeguarding Model, implemented since 2019, aims to help children and families remain together. Multi-disciplinary teams support parents through assessments, motivational interviews, and interventions to address issues such as domestic abuse, substance misuse, and mental health. This strategy has led to a reduction in the number of children with child protection plans, entering care, and time spent in care.

Building on this model, we successfully became a Wave Two Pathfinder for the Families First Programme, which seeks to implement the findings of the Independent Care Review to provide earlier assistance to families and better protect children. The programme focuses on four key reform areas: family help, child protection, family networks, and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Our plan involves capitalising on the strengths of the Family Safeguarding Model and fostering a service-wide Big Conversation to centre children's and families' experiences in service design and delivery.

### Children in Care

This year, we've prioritized timely decision-making for children entering care, with a strong focus on Early Permanence. We continue to lead the Black Country Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) and the DFJ Trailblazer programme for Wolverhampton, aiming to reduce delays in the Family Justice system.

Our principle that children in care are there 'for now' is promoted through workshops, balancing permanence with flexibility. We use the Valuing Care tool to understand children's evolving needs, supporting either reunification or better placement matching.

In response to the pandemic and challenges in health services, we prioritize the health outcomes for children in care through partnerships with health commissioners. Our Virtual School has enhanced the quality assurance of Personal Education Plans to improve educational outcomes.

We have seen more separated migrant young people due to our commitment to the national transfer scheme. This year, we've focused on accurate age assessments and training practitioners on the impacts of the Illegal Migration Act. We've also strengthened our relationships with the Home Office and local hotels to support efficient decision-making for these young people.

## Care Leavers

Our services for Care Leavers have developed over time in response to the changing needs of young people. In the last few years, we have seen an increase in young people who came into our care late (16/17) and separated migrants who were children in care but now are adults who need support. This growing number of young people have specific needs, which this year we have sought to meet through the recruitment of a dedicated Social Worker and Personal Advisor.

We have a comprehensive local offer for care leavers and continue to develop this in line with local need and the renewed regional focus. This year we have joined the growing number of Local Authorities who are treating Care Experience as a protected characteristic, and we are now embedding that within our work. We are also maximising our own opportunities for apprenticeship and intern opportunities for our young people.

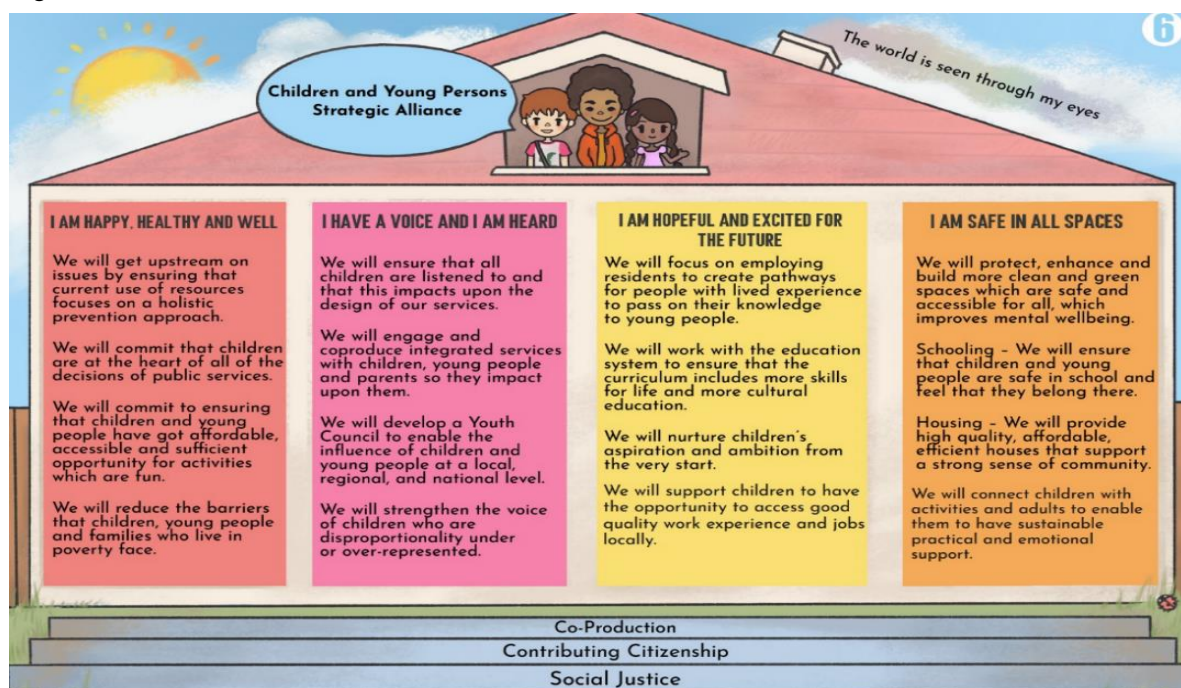
We are working with the House Project to further strengthen our housing offer for young people, offering a clinical model of intensive support to young people who are likely to struggle to live independently

## Our Strategies

None of our plans can be achieved without a whole system approach and the buy in of our partners. In Walsall we have worked hard over the last 18 months to develop a strong Children and Young People's Alliance, to explore more effective strategic collaborations and long-term decision making, across the Partnerships in relation to children, young people and family. The members of the Alliance have all signed up to an agreed common moral purpose; to create and maintain a strategic alliance, which will regularly consider how the living experience of children and young people in Walsall can be improved.

As a result of the work undertaken in understanding the lived experience of children in the Borough the Alliance published its We Are Walsall Children strategy focusing on 4 key areas:

Creating this strategic landscape has enabled us to develop good partner relationships across organisations, and at all levels, as we have a shared vision and aims.



## Our Projects

### Voices of today shaping our tomorrow

In June, the "Voices of Today Shaping Our Tomorrow" Children Services Staff Conference engaged with 300+ staff members. This event was a collaboration with children, young people, and parents, focusing on lived experiences to inform service planning against our strategic priorities.

### Shaping my Tomorrow Youth Summit

On the 14<sup>th</sup> August 2024, 95 young people aged 9- to 25-year-olds came together in our first Youth Summit where young people identified their priorities for action including the need to develop a youth council as a way to get young people involved in decision making and hold leaders to account

### **Anti-Racism Conference**

On May 1, 2024, children services hosted the Anti-Racism Conference at Walsall Town Hall. This event was designed to foster a collaborative environment for colleagues in Children's Services to discuss how we can all contribute towards anti-racist change.

The conference featured a range of speakers, including performance poets from 'Stand Up to Racism,' who addressed the challenges faced by migrant and asylum-seeking families and young people. A young adult with care experience provided valuable insights on the significance of identity, while our Team Managers and Practitioners shared practical methods for integrating anti-racism into our work.

### **Workforce Recruitment and Retention**

Recruitment and retention continue to be our focus across Children's Services, we know that in order for our transformation to be successful there is need for a stable and skilled children's services work force. The shortage of experienced social worker is a national issue. In Walsall, we understand that providing adequate tools, reducing operational barriers, and offering a positive environment with advancement opportunities will increase staff retention. This creates more stable and experienced teams, delivering better services for children and families.

### **Future works**

As Lead member for Children Social Care, Early Help and partnership I have made a commitment to supporting following 3 priorities:

1. Establish a Youth Council to enable equal partnership with young people in the implementation of the We are Walsall 2040 Children strategy and hold Council leaders and partners to account in responding to the priorities identified by young people through the Big Conversations and Shaping My Tomorrow Summit.
2. Implement Families First for Children pathfinder model of practice and establish a robust outcome framework that measures success and outcomes.
3. Valuing the Workforce and Maintaining a Stable Workforce. Ensure we are regularly consulting with the workforce and creating the right environment for innovation, transformation and for practice to flourish

### **Thank you**

In conclusion, the last 12 months have seen significant progress and activity, in line with children's services ambitions for continuous improvement and ultimately better outcomes for our children in Walsall.

As the portfolio holder for Children's Services, I want to take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt thanks to the leadership team, staff, and partners. It is a privilege to have the time to visit numerous activities and engage with the dedicated professionals, children, and families throughout our borough. Time and time again, I am deeply impressed by the unwavering dedication, commitment, skill, and creativity of our teams. Their tireless efforts make a significant difference in the lives of our most vulnerable children, and their passion for their work inspires a brighter future for all. Furthermore, their continuous efforts in closing the gap on inequalities ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to thrive.

*Stacie Elson*

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