

## **CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

THURSDAY 16 MAY, 2013 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

<b>Panel Members Present</b>	Councillor B. Cassidy (Chair) Councillor R. Martin Councillor G. Perry Councillor D. Shires Councillor P. Lane Councillor T. Jukes Councillor E. Hughes
<b>Non elected non-voting members present</b>	S. Rayner (Lichfield Diocesan Education) R. Bragger (Primary Teacher representative)
<b>Portfolio holder present</b>	Councillor R. Andrew - Children's Services
<b>Officers Present</b>	Rose Collinson - Interim Executive Director, Children's Services; Sue Butcher - Interim Assistant Director, Children's Services Matt Underhill – Committee Business and Governance Manager

### **290/13 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor R. Thomas and P. Dunn.

### **291/13 SUBSTITUTIONS**

Councillor Lane substituted for Councillor Thomas for the duration of the meeting.

### **292/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

### **293/13 MINUTES**

Members considered the minutes of the meeting held on 26 March 2013.

### **Resolved**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 March, 2013, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

## 294/13 SAFEGUARDING WORKING GROUP

Prior to introducing the working group report the Chair explained that reference had been made to it in an article in the Express and Star. The Chair made the following comments; that she considered the article to be illustrative of the worst kind of “desktop journalism” which was misleading at best and damaging at worst; that she thought the article had the potential to create suspicion and doubt within the Children’s Services directorate, regarding the motives of the Members of the working group. The Chair also emphasised the fact that the article reflected neither the tone of the activity of the working group or its overall conclusions which were that the working group fully recognised that staff are working hard to do the best job they can for the children and young people they support. The Chair also challenged the Express and Star article as it suggested that the working group was set up to overhaul services when its remit was simply to explore how aspects of the improvement plan were affecting front line social workers and staff. The Chair added that members were satisfied that an improvement plan was in place which enjoyed their full support;

A further Member of the working group explained that following a question posed to her by the Express and Star she had emphasised that the conclusions of the working group, while acknowledging the importance of continuing improvements, had also been very positive regarding the work of social workers. She acknowledged that the report identified staff concerns regarding current flexi-time arrangements, but also pointed out that laptops were a necessity for supporting efficient working practises in many types of jobs. The Chair highlighted that the Foreword to the working group report noted the good progress that had been made in services and expressed sadness that this had not been reflected by the article in the Express and Star;

The Chair invited Members of the working group to reflect on their experiences in meeting with staff from Children’s Services. A working group Member explained that she had spoken with both social workers and team managers based in Essington. Concerns that social workers had highlighted included the impact of the new flexi time policy and the size of caseloads. She also noted that it was a very dedicated team, with some social workers even going into the office on their day off. She explained that staff had praised senior officers, including the Interim Executive Director and the Interim Assistant Director, Children’s Services, with staff particularly welcoming the briefings and training that had been introduced;

A further concern raised by staff related to feeling desk bound due to the administrative burden under which they operated. Officers acknowledged this issue pointing out that administrative support is provided to different levels within the service. Following the conclusions of the Ofsted review of services, it had been important to make sure that the right workers were working with the right children. This has meant a change in the practice of using unqualified social workers to complete social care tasks and going forward resources would be re-shaped to better support social workers. For example, through the appointment of additional social workers. The Member also highlighted the issue of the use of agency staff and pointed out that for some social workers based in Walsall this was an attractive option because of the rates of pay and flexibility that it offered. Further issues that staff had raised with the Member were flexi time and the PARIS IT system;

A Panel Member noted the recurring theme of support and satisfaction expressed by social workers towards the senior management team within Children's Services. The Chair agreed explaining that the working group had been a really worthwhile piece of scrutiny. She advised that it would be important to continue this work, in some form, during the new Municipal Year;

Another Member of the working group explained that she had visited the Children with Disabilities Team. She had found staff very committed to supporting the best interests of the children for whom they were responsible. However, concerns regarding flexi time and PARIS had also been expressed by staff. She also explained that staff had requested further training in communicating with some of the more severely disabled children and complex cases. A further issue of concern staff had expressed related to one off direct payments which had created a further administrative burden. It was queried whether this work would be better managed by the Welfare Rights Team. The Member also noted that staff had expressed strong support for the Interim Assistant Director of Children's Services and they had also stated that they felt they were being effectively supported;

In the absence of the fourth Member of the working group the Chair explained that he had visited the Fostering and Adoption Service. It was found to be a very established and settled team which was highlighted as important in achieving continuity in service provision;

The Chair explained that she had visited the Initial Response Service (IRS) which had moved to a new working pattern the previous day. She had encountered a very dedicated group of people and explained that she had been very impressed by the IRS Team Manager who had a wealth of knowledge and experience from working in some of the most deprived areas of the UK. The Chair and officers explained that the previous pattern of working on duty had not built in time to enable social workers to undertake initial assessments within the required timescale. As a consequence the ten day target for the completion of assessments could not always be achieved. The revised pattern supports staff to be able to complete initial assessments within the required timeframe;

Officers also explained that the Multi-Agency Screening Team (MAST) was formed of representatives including social workers and officers from education services. Following a Member query it was explained that while NHS/ Public Health representatives did not physically sit within the MAST at present all information regarding assessments was shared with them. It was also explained that this would ensure that appropriate decisions could be taken regarding whether an individual required health care or social care support in the first instance. It was also hoped that NHS/Public Health representatives would become physically part of MAST arrangements in the future;

In response to the concerns that social work staff had raised in relation to PARIS, officers explained that software development work was being undertaken to ensure that PARIS could be optimised to make it as effective as possible; The Interim Executive Director noted that she found the conclusions of the working group reassuring as they were consistent with and could be triangulated with the findings she and other senior officers had made. She highlighted the importance of delivering safe and sustainable services. She further explained that the front door to

services, the IRS, had received significant attention to ensure that it now operated effectively;

The Interim Executive Director explained that, in terms of further improvement activity and follow up work from the working group report, she would welcome the opportunity to work with all council services;

The Chair invited the meeting to consider pages 7 and 8 of the report which noted, "Staff felt able to discuss any issues openly with both peers and managers, while, "Staff reported positive changes since new leadership arrangements were put in place in 2012". The Chair emphasised that the staff she had spoken with had been highly supportive of both the Interim Director and Interim Assistant Director. In addition, staff training was prompt and the briefings on important legislative changes that were provided effective. The Chair also highlighted the expressions of support which social workers gave for the legal assistance which they receive from Legal Services. She noted the importance of receiving such support when taking the difficult step of initiating legal proceedings. The Chair also highlighted the resilience of social workers and their flexibility in undertaking a job that did not conform to standard office hours. In response to this issue the Portfolio Holder explained that work was currently underway to seek to amend the flexi arrangements for social workers. The Chair noted that this was important as it needed to reflect the fact that where a social worker might need to visit a school age child it would be appropriate to only visit the child following the conclusion of the school day i.e. after 4:30pm. She also noted that the demand on services often centred on Friday evening and weekends;

In response to a Panel query regarding social worker case loads, officers explained that there had been an increase in caseloads as a result of ceasing to use unqualified social workers. However, it was anticipated that caseloads would fall once resources had been reshaped. In relation to the use of agency staff it was explained that this was important in ensuring the effective operation of services. It was emphasised that the views of agency staff were highly valued although it was recognised that in general terms permanent staff created greater stability. In this respect significant efforts had also been made to recruit permanent staff. This included senior officers promoting opportunities at the council at the Compass Fair in Birmingham in March. This was followed up with a recent event held at the council with 120 qualified or near qualified social workers attending. It was explained that these attendees would be notified of vacancies, while they would also be regularly updated on the latest from Children's Services. It is hoped that the level of external interest generated in permanent vacancies will result in many agency staff seeking permanent positions with the council;

The Portfolio Holder agreed that the report had been a very valuable exercise in triangulating what senior officers understood the current position of services to be with the views of front-line social workers. The Interim Executive Director also suggested that a future Panel meeting might wish to view a ten minute presentation on the views of children and young people. The meeting also agreed that a further step in the activity of the working group would be to speak with children currently being supported by Children's Services. Following a further Panel query it was explained that any timescales attributed to the working group's recommendations would either coincide with Panel meeting dates for reporting or earlier;

The Panel supported all of the working group's proposals set out below which they recommended to Cabinet.

## Recommendations

1. That updates on the move to single assessment be reported to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel in the 2013/14 Municipal Year;
2. That detailed analysis be undertaken in relation to the amount of hours lost by Social Workers following the implementation of the new flexi system and reported to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months;
3. That the Head of Human Resources reconsiders the use of the flexi system for social workers providing a report detailing alternative models which better meet the needs of the service to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months;
4. In relation to the PARIS system:-
  - (a) An in depth investigation be undertaken in consultation with all levels of staff within social services to understand the limitations and potential areas for improvement of the PARIS system, together with costs for implementation of any improvements within two months;
  - (b) that an options appraisal be produced and submitted for consideration by the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel to include introducing an alternative system once the investigation above has been completed;
5. That the workload weighting tool be revisited to ensure that it is fit for purpose within two months;
6. That the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel receives regular updates on caseloads to enable them to monitor levels and assess the impact of the screening team in assisting teams to reduce the backlog;
7. That serious consideration be given to the relocation of social work teams as many buildings are not fit for purpose;
8. That the Smarter Workplaces Programme Manager be requested to provide the short, medium and long term vision for social services to the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel within three months;
9. That the Family Room at The Quest be completely refurbished in order to make it more child friendly and welcoming thereby creating a good impression of Walsall Council at 'the front door';
10. That the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) and Interim Assistant Director (Specialist Services) undertake to establish a social work community to develop understanding and communication between teams and services with a view to improving understanding around thresholds and reducing tension at transfer points;

11. That further work be undertaken to better understand why agency workers within Walsall are reluctant to take up permanent positions with a view to ensuring that Walsall's offer is as good as it can be within the parameters of local pay and conditions;
12. That all social workers be issued with laptops to enable them to work more flexibly as this prevents time waste travelling to and from the office;
13. That care be taken given the implementation of the screening team to ensure that key relationships such as that between schools and the disability team are not lost;
14. That the One off Direct Payment Scheme be revisited to ensure that it is best administered within the Children with Disabilities Team or whether alternative resources, such as The Welfare Rights Team, are best placed to deliver.

#### 295/13 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that the calendar of meetings for the 2013/14 Municipal Year will be approved by Council in May, 2013.

The meeting terminated at 7.15 p.m.

Chair:

Date: