

CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

THURSDAY, 13 SEPTEMBER, 2012 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Panel Members Present Councillor B. Cassidy
Councillor R. Martin
Councillor D. Shires
Councillor T. Jukes
Councillor D. James
Councillor E. Hughes
Councillor G. Perry

Non elected voting members present S. Rayner (Lichfield Diocesan Education)

Non elected non-voting members present D. Jones (Primary Teacher representative)
R. Bragger (Secondary Teacher representative)

Portfolio holder present Councillor R. Andrew - Children's Services

Officers Present Rose Collinson, Interim Director, Children's Services;
Graham Reiter, Head of Safeguarding;
Dan Mortiboys, Senior Finance Manager
Barry Fielding, Commercial Adviser

221/12 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received for the duration of the meeting from Louise Hughes.

222/12 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

223/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

224/12 MINUTES

The presence of Mr Rayner at the previous meeting was noted.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 August 2012, as amended, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

225/12 EDUCATION DEVELOPMENTS

(Exempt information under Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972) as amended.

The Panel received an update from the Commercial Adviser

226/12 SAFEGUARDING & VULNERABLE CHILDREN SERVICES – IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The interim Director provided the update. The following is a summary of the briefing and subsequent discussion:

- It was explained that a demanding Improvement Plan was being developed. This followed an Ofsted report which stated that the council was not providing an adequate approach to safeguarding and not assessing risks to children comprehensively enough. It was important that these services developed the capacity to improve. The interim Director explained that she had visited staff across a range of services and had found a good spirit and a wish to make a difference;
- The process of delivering the Improvement Plan was now set to continue with the newly established Improvement Board, which will include an independent Chair, set to meet on a monthly basis. It will be formed of representatives from all partners, including the police and health. The Board will monitor the progress of the Improvement Plan to ensure sustainable improvement;
- It was explained that the Secretary of State would be issuing the council's Improvement Notice within the next few weeks. However, it was apparent that it had been recognised that the council had both accepted the findings and acted swiftly to begin improvements. This process included looking at all roles and responsibilities and what had been done since the initial findings;
- The council will shortly be making a new interim Assistant Director for Children's Services appointment to help provide capacity and momentum to delivering the Improvement Plan;
- It was explained that in order to make the necessary improvements it would be important to provide challenge, critique and support. An important element of the process of improving services would be an approach of "no blame, but no hiding" and it was critical to ensure that all officers and partners ensured that they were part of the Improvement Plan;
- Following a query from the Chair, the interim Director expressed the view that it was possible the Panel had not always been provided with all the information required to make an assessment of the performance of services. In particular, there may have been a lack of qualitative information. It was suggested that the Panel should be given the opportunity to follow up and check the credibility of the guidance they receive from officers. It was also explained that it would be a function of the new Assistant Director to focus on genuine impact of effective performance. This would include pursuing lines of inquiry to check and challenge

- and determine the best way to gain good practice. It would be important to arrive at a position where social workers were confident and competent, with equitable and manageable caseloads. There was also a need to ensure that there would be time for social workers to be able to discuss areas of concern with managers and to talk about risks. It was also intended to seek to remove drift and delay in the system, with experienced practitioners contributing to the achievement of this. It was emphasised that social workers have to make life changing decisions and it was necessary to give them the conditions for success. It would also be important to ensure strong and effective relationships with children and families;
- Following a Panel query it was explained that the Ofsted report had concluded that Safeguarding services were not good enough. It would be important to be able to ensure and effectively evidence that children were safe. It was intended to undertake a detailed audit of all children supported by services to ensure that good practice was being followed. The interim Director explained that she was reasonably assured that the children currently known to services were safe. However, this was never possible to guarantee at all times. Officers explained that it was probably inevitable that an increase in the level of sensitivity to risk aversion would follow the outcome of the Ofsted report that there were more children at risk and who should have been in care. This might explain the increase in the number of referrals during July and August. It was explained that at present there were 530 LAC, with 300 on child protection plans. A Member emphasised the importance of children receiving the necessary support over the cost to the council. Officers explained it would be necessary to determine whether this was a post Ofsted report spike, or as a consequence of national trends would need to be determined. However, it is likely to be necessary to re-set the risk button and restore trust and confidence. It was also explained that there had been a significant rise in the number of children with protection plans. However, again this would have to be analysed as it may prove to be consistent with the council's statistical neighbours. It was explained that the nature of these trends would be determined over the next few months;
 - Following a Panel query it was explained that once in post the new Assistant Director will undertake a skills audit to ensure that all staff, from the most recently qualified to the most experienced practitioners have the necessary skills. It was also emphasised that these services must improve and that the improvement must be sustainable. Following a further Panel query it was agreed that at the next Panel meeting officers would set out a number of proposals for the type of questions and lines of inquiry that Members might wish to pursue when seeking quality assurance of the performance of services. It was also agreed to provide Members with an organisational structure;
 - Following a further Panel query, it was explained that some of the problems that emerged from the Ofsted report regarding communication between partners may have been a consequence of concern about the information provided being properly acted upon. For example, it appeared that schools may have ceased to provide information to social workers regarding children as a pattern emerged where it appeared it was not being acted upon. Following an additional Panel query it was explained that one particular issue regarding the multi-agency nature of this work may have been the difficulty of ensuring a consistent message;

- It was also agreed that the interim Director would provide a summary of progress on the Improvement Plan at each meeting, with a more detailed report provided on a three monthly basis;
- It was also agreed that once in post the Assistant Director would identify a suitable well performing council that Members could visit to gain an insight into good practice.

Resolved

That:

1. officers will provide guidance to Members on possible future lines of enquiry and organisational structure chart;
 2. the interim Director will provide a summary of progress against the Improvement Plan at each meeting, with detailed reports provided on a three monthly basis;
 3. the Assistant Director, once in post, will identify a suitable well performing council which Members will have the opportunity to visit;
- &
4. the report be noted.

227/12 SAFEGUARDING & VULNERABLE CHILDREN SERVICES – DISCUSSION WITH HEAD OF SAFEGUARDING

The Head of Safeguarding provided guidance in relation to his role. The following is a summary of the presentation and subsequent discussion:

- It was explained that Safeguarding was a range of protection and prevention for children in Walsall undertaken on a multi-agency basis. However, he emphasised that safeguarding was everyone's business. It was explained that effective safeguarding was based on ensuring that all information from all agencies was shared before a decision was made;
- It was also explained that it was important to identify those who need to come into the system. It was vital that the right children entered the care system while also ensuring that the right long-term outcome was achieved;
- It was explained that the Head of Safeguarding had a dual function with both the council, as his employer, as well the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB). Other roles include responsibility for the Management of the Independent Reviewing Service, the Local Authority Designated Officer and WSCB staff;
- It was explained that the Head of Safeguarding's work with the WSCB included coordination activity, as well as quality assurance. For example, identifying trends and assessing the quality of what is being undertaken. In addition, there was a role in coordinating and developing a quality assurance function. It was apparent that previously the WSCB had lacked sufficient challenge. It was emphasised that it was important for the Head of Safeguarding to be separate from operational line management to enable robust challenge.
- A key feature of practice improvement would be adding quality to the performance management numbers. This would include capturing service user and staff feedback. In addition, senior managers would make use of practice

observations, including accompanying social workers on visits. It was also intended to improve risk analysis and develop more focused plans, together with robust reviewing. In addition, there was a need to develop a consistent programme of auditing, including auditing by theme. It would then be important to feed learning back to front line staff and be able to give confidence that good practice was being applied. It was agreed that anonymised responses from parents be shared with the Panel as these would be valuable in understanding the problems experienced by service users;

- It was agreed that once a new Chair of the WSCB had been appointed they would attend a future Panel meeting to set out the work programme. It was also agreed that going forward the Chair should attend a Panel meeting every six months, and also present the full report each year;
- Following a Panel query it was explained that while structurally the Head of Safeguarding was separate from the social work teams, it was a key part of the role to ensure he spent significant time with the teams.

Resolved

That anonymised responses from service users be shared with the Panel at a future meeting; &
the report be noted.

228/12 QUARTER 1 FINANCIAL MONITORING POSITION FOR 2012/13

The Senior Finance Manager introduced the report. The following is a summary of the update and subsequent discussion:

- It was explained that the report highlighted that for the services under the remit of the Panel that a net revenue underspend of £22k was forecast for the conclusion of 2012/13. The capital programme was also on target, except in relation to education where the financial year follows the academic calendar;
- Table 1 in the report provided a detailed breakdown of the revenue outturn position for 2012/13, indicating a £26k underspend in Prevention and Targeted Services and an overspend in Specialist Services of £4k. Appendix 1 provided guidance regarding year end forecast. This included employing ten additional agency staff to improve the service, with an expectation of 510 LAC placements being required, with a greater proportion in low cost placements. Appendix 2 set out the financial risks to the year end forecast. This included a potential increase in the number of LAC and the associated placements, as well as a possible increase in care packages for disabled children with complex needs;
- The Chair noted that while the service had budgeted for up to 510 LAC placements, the meeting had already established that 530 placements were already in use. It was possible that an independent observer might conclude that this was at odds with the conclusion of the Ofsted report that there more children who should have been within LAC care. It was therefore even more important to determine whether the current increase was a short term spike or indicative of a longer term trend. The interim Director explained that tackling the funding of LAC placements was part of a wider issue. For example, where suitable some

children move swiftly to adoption. It was anticipated that some of the drift and delay in the system will be reduced with national plans to ensure that adoption procedures are completed within twenty-six weeks, with the importance of removing barriers to prospective parents also noted. A Member highlighted that Walsall's adoption service was considered to be amongst the top three best performing in the country.

Resolved

That the Panel receive a note providing an overview of the council's adoption service; & the report be noted.

229/12 WORK PROGRAMME 2012/13 AND FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered the work programme and Cabinet's Forward Plan

Resolved

That the work programme and Forward Plan be noted.

230/12 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair thanked retiring Primary teacher representative Mr D. Jones for his contribution to the work of the Panel. Mr Jones received a round of applause from the Panel.

The Chair informed Members that the date of the next meeting would be 30 October 2012 at 6.00 pm.

The meeting terminated at 7.55 pm.

Chair:

Date: