

Council – 21 February 2013

Portfolio Holder Report of Councillor R Andrew, Children's Services

What we have done

A Peer Review was completed in March 2012, followed by an Ofsted inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services of Walsall Council and its partners in June 2012. Although the Peer Review found 'Front line children's social care is safe', Ofsted judged Children's Safeguarding services to be inadequate and services for Looked after Children to be adequate, but with a need to reduce delay and drift and to improve quality assurance processes. In response elected Members, officers and partner agencies across Walsall have been determined to deliver rapid, visible and sustainable improvements to children's services. The scale of the challenge means that improvement work will need to take place over the next 18 months. Key changes include;

- The appointment of an interim Director of Children's Services – Rose Collinson, in September and an interim Assistant Director – Sue Butcher, in October
- Appointment of new independent Safeguarding Board Chair – Robert Lake in December 2012
- A robust and wide ranging strategic improvement plan that focuses on three themes
 - capacity, capability and culture
 - improving the quality of partnership and governance
 - quality and effectiveness of front line practice
- The Walsall Children and Young People's Services Improvement Board (WIB) was established in September 2012, with an independent and experienced chair, Chris Spencer, to oversee the development and implementation of the agreed Improvement Plan of the Children and Young People's Partnership and monitor compliance with the delivery of key milestones as required by the Improvement Notice issued by the Government.
- The Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel receive regular reports on safeguarding and Looked After Children improvement and provide appropriate challenge.

What's gone well

While the overall Ofsted Inspection judgement for LAC was adequate, two areas were rated as good - making a positive contribution, including user engagement and Being Healthy. The Peer Review also noted Walsall was a 'national leader' on Voice of Young People –and our turnout for the Youth Parliament elections was the 2nd highest nationally in 2011.

Since September the interim Director of Children's Services, together with the Assistant Director (since October) of Specialist Services have focused on establishing the scale of the Children's Services improvement challenge. This has been achieved by following up the lines of enquiry from the July Ofsted report on Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services in Walsall, triangulating these with analysis of current data, and practitioner and service users' views.

Key principles have been shared widely to inform the new way of working:

- prioritise rigorously and act strategically
- collaborate effectively and motivate more
- invest productively and maximise resources
- learn constantly

A social work health check survey found that 77.5% view their caseloads as manageable, and 91.8% were satisfied or very satisfied with support from their line managers and there was a general wish for more input into decision making and more time for direct work with children and families. The results of this health check will inform our workforce development strategy. Staff are now being regularly engaged in improvements through staff briefings, emails and visits to teams by Strategic Leaders and through development activity.

C4EO (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services) has been commissioned to provide support in the following areas;

- **Performance and data** – a diagnostic review with recommendations for improvement and examples of 'what works'.
- **Quality Assurance and Audit** – Sector Specialist has been to develop an audit framework that is simple, visual and has a common core section across all services, which includes talking to service users and learning from audits. This includes a data specialist working in the service for three days a week for three months to grow in house expertise.
- **Complaints** – the focus of improvement is to reduce the number of complaints received that reach stage 2 and 3, and ensure learning from complaints is embedded.
- **Improvement Plan** - support to identify performance measures for the Improvement Plan which align with the Improvement Notice milestones and targets.
- **Early Help** - A review of the strategy and services for Early Help is underway

In addition we have secured expert support to drive improvements in;

- Children with Disability Services
- Consistent application of thresholds
- Team Manager development
- 'Front door' arrangements
- Childrens Centres performance management and preparation for inspection

We are working with The Children's Society to make recommendations about better listening to the voices and views of children and ensure their voices and views shape, inform and improve service delivery and improve outcomes. They are also working with us to improve our services to Children at risk of Sexual Exploitation and we are a pilot site for data collection.

Our five LA Residential Homes were all inspected in 2012 and 3 were judged Good and 2 Outstanding. Our latest inspection judgements on key services were all good - Private Fostering Arrangements (19.1.11), Council Fostering Service (14.9.10) and Council Adoption Service (12.8.10)

Our Adoption scorecard shows that overall we perform better than the national average (on 6 of 10 indicators). The number of children awaiting adoption in Walsall have fallen from 25 to 10 (60%), whereas nationally it has increased by 34%. We are using the adoption grant to fund a project officer to drive through the new expectations on the adoption service and the family justice review.

Our Key Stage One results were excellent increasing from 44th to 33rd from 2011 to 2012 in terms of reading. A new screening test was introduced in 2012 for phonics for Year 1 pupils. In Walsall 61% of pupils reached the required standard of a score of 32 or more out of 40 and ranked 33rd.

In the recent HMCI report, tables were produced showing the percentage of schools that were good or better. In Walsall (as of December 2012) 57.3% of primary schools, were judged good or better (47/82), 78.6% (11/14) secondary schools and 85.7 (6/7) Special schools. Currently 80% (4/5) primary academies are judged good or better and 90% (9/10) of secondary academies. We have been supporting schools formerly judged to be satisfactory, now termed 'requires improvement' by Ofsted, to become good. This work will continue, including the brokering of school to school support to increase the number of schools rated good or better – particularly our primary schools.

The termination of the education contract provided by Serco has required a considerable effort to manage the transition with minimal disruption to the levels of support provided to schools. Two phases of transition have already been successful - the transfer of some services in April of last year and Childrens Centres in December. Learning from these transfers and involvement of stakeholders and cross-party members will help ensure a successful and seamless transfer on the 1st April 2013 of the remaining services and around 300 staff.

An important part of the Transition project is developing a new relationship with Schools – 'the Walsall Way' – key aspects are;

- Supporting school improvement so that all children and young people have access to a good quality education irrespective of where they live
- Improving opportunities for collective conversations to help shape future educational support and provision for Walsall children and young people through, for example, the development of Thinking Suppers, Headteacher and Chairs of governor network and Lead Member visits to schools

- Developing opportunities to share and improve practice across schools through new Learning Community projects– groups of schools working together to improve pupil outcomes
- Walsall's first education show took place in October – giving senior leaders the opportunity to talk to service providers both within and outside of Walsall to support developments in their schools

The Early Help Offer is improving with Childrens Centres reaching 67% of children in 2012 and playing a clearer role in the pathway of care for children and families. The establishment of 5 Multi-agency locality based teams, all now fully operational, have worked intensively with over 250 vulnerable children; the teams will continue to target our Troubled Families for 2013/14. We have invested in more evidenced based Parenting Programmes supporting the training, accreditation and delivery to 140 multi agency Parenting Practitioners reaching over 700 parents and carers of children and young people. Assessment regarding the quality of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has demonstrated improvement through regular operational and independent audit.

The 'Team around the school' project has helped to improve multi-agency working with schools; focusing on a pro-active approach to identifying and meetings the needs of children and families and in so doing improve outcomes for the children and young people of Walsall and their families. We are working with a number of clusters of schools in an Early Adopters programme that will develop the model on the ground and produce a way of working that provides impact on a practical level to directly improve the early support provided for vulnerable children.

Increased engagement by young people in positive activities and further targeting of support by IYPSS has led to a further significant reduction in youth related ASB – down 34% from 10/11 to 11/12. The completed redesign of the Youth Justice Service has helped ensure that our first time offenders and re-offending rates show continued improvement over previous years and both are lower than the national average.

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment recognises the importance of supporting children and their families due to the lifelong benefits this brings to our community and this is reflected in the draft Health and Well Being Strategy which encourages partners across the Borough to prioritise support for children and their families.

What could have been better

While we were successful in 2011 in reducing our Looked After Children numbers – by enhancing our preventative services and support to families, in early 2012 there was an increase in numbers for 9 months in a row. This is likely to be as a result of to the Ofsted Inspection impact on risk thresholds. Concerted efforts led by the interim Assistant Director on challenging the need for care and enhancing our Early Help Offer has produce a reduction in LAC for 2 months in a row and officers are confident that the post-inspection effect has now ended.

While our reported NEET Levels have reduced to 7.3% - and is currently 6.3% - and our Youth Unemployment has fallen from around 14% to 9.1%, youth unemployment continues to be a priority for the Council. Between August 2012 and January 2013, 662 apprenticeships started across the Borough and the council has directly supported 71 apprenticeships and 72 pre-apprenticeships through the 'Walsall Works' programme.

Dips in educational attainment at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 mean both are in the bottom quartile. This is to some extent because of 2 schools KS2 results being excluded and the national English GCSE grading issue affecting KS4. We are also bottom quartile position at KS5. Actions are in place to improve our support by working with schools and the College.

The return of the services for children with a disability to the council from Serco revealed a poor standard of service that was criticised by the Ofsted Inspectors and following intensive support the service has now improved. A number of complaints about the transport service for Children with SEN run by Serco were managed by increasing monitoring of the service by council staff and meeting with parents to resolve their concerns. The Service will be retendered to ensure a high quality service is provided.

Looking ahead

Our key priorities are

- Ensuring the voice of children and young people shape and inform our improvements
- Delivering our Improvement Plan Imp Board/Notice
- Narrowing the gap in attainment and life chances
- Improving Standards and Effectiveness
- Increasing proportions of Good and better schools
- Ensuring the Directorate is 'fit for the now and the future'

Our core task over the next year is to deliver our improvement plan on time and to a high quality, embedding and sustaining improvement to deliver services of the right quality. This will be achieved most effectively by the complete re-culturing of the Directorate demonstrated by all staff acting together to continue our improvement journey. Equally important is the engagement and ownership of our partners to the changes needed to make sure that we are ready for the follow up inspection by Ofsted - which we expect in June/July this year.

The transfer of 300 staff from Serco in April provides opportunities for re-aligning our resources to focus on the areas of greatest need. We will consult widely with staff and stakeholders over the summer to agree the best way forward.

Numerous capital projects are under way with regard to resolving the most urgent condition items at Walsall schools and this will be an ongoing theme over the next funding period. In addition to continuing to address priority items, a plan is currently under development to identify options around school expansions to ensure the

Council can fulfil its statutory responsibility to deliver sufficient pupil places to meet the increasing pupil numbers entering our primary schools.

The Improvement Plan will drive change in 3 key areas over the next year;

Capacity, capability and culture

- Agree and implement re-shaped performance framework.
- Scope the reshaping of the Children and Young People Plan to reflect the scale and extent of the safeguarding improvement agenda.
- Initiate and review the operation and structure of the Children and Young People Partnership.
- Further develop and communicate the vision and ambition for children.
- Propose a quality management framework for social worker responsibilities and workloads, setting out clear expectations, standards and entitlements.

Improving the quality of partnership and governance

- Continue to grow and evidence emerging impact of learning from complaints on service improvement
- Self assessment of Walsall Safeguarding Children's Board strengths and gaps in relation to support, challenge and scrutiny of safeguarding activity.

Quality of effectiveness of frontline practice

- Propose a framework for thresholds and referral mechanisms to step up to and down from specialist safeguarding services.
- Scope the scale of improvement needed to the protocol and practice relating to children missing from home, care or education.

The Department for Education (DfE) will also assess and evaluate progress and impact on a 6 monthly basis. This will include written reports from the independent chair of the improvement board and from the Leader of the Council as well as other supporting evidence, including external review and inspection. The Safeguarding board will develop a more robust role – championing and challenging safeguarding practice across the borough – to help ensure all our children are safe.

Councillor Rachel Andrew
Cabinet Member
Children's Services