

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

11 March 2024, 6:00pm

In Conference Room 2 at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor Hicken (Chair)
Councillor Jukes (Vice Chair)
Councillor Latham
Councillor Nasreen
Councillor A. Nawaz
Councillor Rattigan
Councillor C. Statham

Portfolio Holder

Councillor S. Elson

Officers present:

R. Homer	Director (Children's Social Care).
I. Vanderheeren	Director (Early Help)
Z. Morgan	Head of Service
R. Phillips	Head of Early Help, Family Support and Youth Justice
P. Rutherford	Strategic Lead, Youth Justice
S. Gittins	Community Safety Manager
N. Gough	Democratic Services Officer
A. Duff	Violence Reduction Partnership
Inspector Fagan	West Midlands Police

50 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Harrison, Garcha and Whitehouse.

51 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

52 Declarations of interest and party whip

No declarations of interest or party whip were received.

53 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no agenda items requiring the exclusion of the public.

54 **Minutes**

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2024 were submitted.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2024, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

55 **Youth Justice Partnership – Reduction of Youth Violence**

The Head of Youth Justice presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report detailed the aims, roles, and responsibilities of partners within the Youth Justice Partnership to reduce serious youth violence in Walsall. The Committee was informed that reducing violence was one of the 5 priorities of the Youth Justice Services 2022 – 2025 Strategic Plan. This priority was aligned to the Safer Walsall Partnership.

Members were informed that a Serious Violence Needs Assessment had been undertaken and the outcome of this had been translated into a serious violence delivery plan. Violence was the most common offence type reported to Walsall Youth Justice Service. The range of programme and activities carried out to prevent violence were described and the effectiveness of such approaches.

In response to questions relating to the work carried out with children and knife crime, the Committee was informed of the range of activities which took place with children and within schools to prevent such activity.

Challenge was provided in relation to the collection of data in relation to demographics – recognising the ethnicity bias in the justice system. Members were informed that the service had developed the way it worked with children who were overrepresented within the service. Specific programmes were designed for these groups. Plans were in place to influence other Partnerships and work with colleagues to prevent this bias in the first place.

Walsall Children's Alliance and Walsall Learning Alliance was working on exclusion and belonging to ensure that children felt included, and that their needs were met at school. Further challenge was provided on the unmet health needs of children entering the youth justice system. The Strategic Lead for Youth Justice stated that children in the youth justice system often had a range of unmet needs that led to a greater risk of youth violence and support was provided to mitigate this alongside provision of services. Officers stressed that if needs could be met in the first instance, then vulnerabilities could be avoided.

Members questioned what was being done to address the issue of unmet needs and prevent the situation in the future. The Director (Early Help) described this work, which included the following:

- Work with health partners.

- 0-5 family hubs advice and guidance.
- Mental health support.
- Longer term system changes in the voluntary sector.
- An Early Help offer for Siblings and Peers.

Members were advised that the system could not meet demand and there were generations of parents who did not have good experiences with such services. It was also stressed that once a child entered the youth justice system, they were often better able to access the support that they needed.

In response to questions, Officers stated that success for the service was fewer children in the system and when they did enter the system they did not re-enter. This demonstrated that the whole of the system was operating effectively. It was important that the child's voice was considered as part of the strategic plan and there was an apprentice role which facilitated this.

A discussion was held around the process when a child was arrested. It was stressed that the Police tried to utilise different options to avoid the arrest of a child. Although there was not a specific team to deal with children, they would be dealt with by a skilled officer. The Police representative explained that Officers often had to deal with the situation that presented itself, however appropriate adults were present to advocate the needs of the child. It was stressed that decisions made relating to child were made more slowly and there was time to gather information to influence this. The principle when working with children was to punish at the lowest possible level. Information on such cases was shared at the partnership panel, which was chaired by the Police and the Youth Justice Service.

The Head of Youth Justice stated that a custody triage question list had been made more child friendly and that distraction packs were now provided.

The Committee was informed that reoffending rates for Walsall (25.3%) were positive compared to the West Midlands (26.5%) statistical neighbours (26.9%) and England and Wales (32.2%). Members were advised that one event which involved lots of children could affect data, so it was important to consider long term trends.

Members considered the importance of attendance at school and were advised that for children in the youth justice system this was monitored. Attendance was a big focus across the system and was in the violence reduction plan.

Resolved that:

- 1. The Youth Justice Reduction of Violence report be noted.**
- 2. The Committee supported the direction of travel of the youth justice partnership.**
- 3. The Committee congratulated Teams involved in lowering the reoffending rate amongst children.**
- 4. That further information is provided on unmet health needs and contributing factors towards the rise in children entering the youth justice system.**

- 5. Members remained concerned that attendance and exclusions appear to be a contributing factor to children entering the youth justice system and invited the Youth Justice Partners to attend a future meeting to discuss this issue.**

56 Supporting Children with Disabilities

The Head of Service presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). This report outlined how the service meet the needs of children with a disability. The Walsall Disabled Children and Young People's Team was a specialist Social Work Team which supported the families of children who had a complex disability in Walsall. It was stressed that not all children who were defined as having a disability would meet the threshold for a service from the Disabled Children and Young People's Team as the majority of children and young people in Walsall, including those who were disabled, would receive services through health, education and universal or targeted provision within their local community. A service was provided when needs couldn't be met through universal services and/or there was a safeguarding concern regarding a disabled child.

The demographics of the children using the service were described, with 144 children allocated to the team. 82% of allocations were supported as children in need, and the greatest cohort was those aged 10- 14 years. It was noted that 73% of children were male, which was in line with boys being more likely to have an additional need.

Work to prepare young people for adulthood was described which included the transition between children's and adults' services. The Transitions Panel tracked and monitored the support offered to those leaving care, this forum included input from health, education, and commissioning partners with the aim of ensuring that services were aligned when the young person turned 18. It was noted that this Panel was newly established and would be further developed.

In response to questions the Head of Service clarified that most of the children in care, using this service, were in residential care. The most common area of unmet need was the mental health of young people, this was a complex area but also the biggest challenge. It was clarified that this children in care were supported up to the age of 25 years old.

A further discussion was held around the recognition of a child's needs by parents and how this was supported. It was stressed that assessments incorporated schools and health services providing the opportunity for relationships with families to be built.

Resolved

That the Supporting Children with Disabilities report be noted.

57 Recommendation Tracker

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

58 **Areas of Focus**

Resolved that:

The Areas of Focus be noted.

59 **Date of next meeting**

The next meeting would be 16 April 2024.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7:53 pm.

Signed:

Date: