

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 7 December 2023, 6:00pm

In Conference Room 2 at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

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

Portfolio Holder

Councillor S. Elson

Officers present:

R. Homer	Director (Children's Social Care).
I. Vanderheeren	Director (Early Help)
J. Jones	Group Manager
N. Gough	Democratic Services Officer

28 Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor Latham and Councillor Whitehouse.

29 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

30 Declarations of interest and party whip

No declarations of interest or party whip were received.

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

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

32 Minutes

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2023 was submitted.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2023, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

Walsall Annual Safeguarding report 2022 – 2023

The Independent Chair presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Walsall Safeguarding Partnership annual report provided an overview of multiagency safeguarding activity during the year 2022-2023 and reflected the efforts of partner agencies who had worked in collaboration to promote the welfare and safeguarding of the children and young people of Walsall.

The Committee was informed of the work undertaken during this period to strengthen the statements that underpin the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership purpose, vision, and ambition. An overview of Walsall's demographics was given, and it was noted that there were rising concerns about youth and violent crime and issues of disproportionality amongst the cohort of young people involved. The Walsall Safeguarding Partnership, Safer Walsall Partnership and Youth Justice Board to work in collaboration to consider a strategic response to address the issues identified.

The Independent Safeguarding Chair described the Partnership's progress against priorities, and it was noted that neglect was a serious issue in Walsall, however nationally there had also been a significant increase due to financial hardship families were facing. It was also stressed that all age exploitation remained a priority for the partnership.

The Committee were provided with performance data, and informed that this had been analysed to provide information to meet need and to deliver services to children and young people.

It was concluded that partnership work was progressing well, and that practice was effective. A series of questions ensued.

In response to a question relating to actions that had taken place following the thematic overview of the findings of Jane Wonnacut, the Independent Chair explained that a multi-agency plan had been produced, and there had been extensive training provided. Families in poverty were supported and the 'think family' approach had been embedded. 'Seven minute' briefings were described, which clearly outlined the issue, the action and what needed to be done to better equip staff with information.

The Independent Chair provided informed on the multiagency audit, and the programme for the year. A sample of cases were audited, and recommendations were made accordingly. This followed through to the Quality and Performance Group. Senior Members of staff, from within the partnership, considered the outcomes of the audit and the actions that needed to be taken as a result.

Members questioned how the impact of schemes introduced were measured. It was stressed, by the Independent Chair, that a variety of actions needed to be taken to have an impact. The impact was measured through an audit, the type of referrals were monitored, along with the way that families were being supported. Further questions were asked around the impact of training, and the Chair clarified that the impact of this could be seen – although feedback was considered with training tweaked.

Further detail was provided on the Quality and Assurance Group, Members were informed that each partner took an assurance report to the meeting and partners were fully invested in the group.

The Independent Chair explained that the Partnership was endeavouring to find and support children who were being exploited, these were difficult areas to deal with as it was often hidden. The Committee were assured that every effort was made to ensure that these children were identified. It was confirmed that foster carers and residential home staff were trained on this issue.

Members were advised that referrals remained low, however had not declined.

Resolved

- 1. That the Final draft of the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2022-23 be noted**
- 2. That Child Sexual Abuse is an issue that needs further consideration and should remain a priority for the Partnership.**

34 Locality Working and Family Hubs

The Director presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed) and provided an overview of the progress to date and on-going planning for the delivery of locality working including co-location of Children's Social Care, Early Help and key locality partners within the North, West, Central South and East locality.

Members were informed that in addition to the four locality hubs, community-based support and services were provided through ten 'community spokes' which were delivered through voluntary and community sector partners. They provide a range of local community activities and sessions. In addition to this a range of other services and support had been developed such as online help, leaflets, booklets and parent Panels.

The successes of the model were described and included the development of a skilled workforce, stronger relationships with partners, time to talk had become embedded in three localities, the development of a unified language, and the removal of barriers - allowing greater engagement with families.

In response to a series of questions, the Director stated that it had been noted that Fathers were not being reached out to, work was taking place to rectify this. Members asked what was being done to ensure that localities were sustainable beyond government funding. The Director stated that the sustainability was a priority for Walsall Together as joint commissioners, and the impact it was making had been demonstrated.

Further to discussion the Director explained that localities met the needs of the locality and worked in a coordinated way to meet the demands of the community. To understand these needs, data was analysed and used to provide a better understanding of the locality needs to provide a more flexible response.

A Member noted that the East timetable was well developed, and questioned what was being done to ensure the same offer was available in the other locality areas. The Director stated that the service was 1 year in to a 2/3 year programme, a round table event would be held, which would consider the achievements of each locality. Funding would be used to close the inequality gap and put in targeted resources. The year 3 focus was considering those post codes which were not taking up offers to understand what was preventing families from using the services offered.

Officers stated that data was monitored, it was hoped that outcomes for children born this year could be followed to measure the impact of the programme in Walsall.

Resolved

- 1. That the Locality working, and family hub report be noted.**
- 2. That the direction of travel to date be supported.**
- 3. That the service continues to work with the voluntary and community sector to future proof the provision.**

35 Early Help Strategy

The Director presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed), an update was provided on the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Supporting Families programme 2022 and beyond, the Walsall's Early Help Partnership and the Walsall Early Help Strategy 2021-2024. The Committee were advised that 'The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' national framework set out how all local strategic partnerships had to work as part of the Early Help System.

Members were informed that Sandwell Council carried out a peer review of how the Early Help Partnership had performed against a set of criteria of measures. As a result of this an overall score of 4 out of 5 was given, recognising that there was still work to do.

The Early Help strategy was due for review; however, the Early Help Partnership had suggested a 12-month interim strategy to allow time to understand the potential changing national and local landscape. Members were informed that the demand for early help services had continued to increase, along with the complexity of families requiring help and support.

The Committee was provided with details of a £1million funding stream to deliver a programme for children with SEND and showing vulnerabilities to exploitation (but were below children's social care of EHCP threshold). In addition, a transition pilot had taken place in 2022/23 due to concern at a number of young people in year 7 who were at risk of being excluded from school.

The Early Help Partnership was currently working with Lincolnshire to complete a peer review, where an independent review of the Early Help offer, the strength in partnership, the gaps and barriers can be identified to help the partnership in specific areas.

Further to discussion Officers explained the possibilities for the CARE project to be sustained, given the outcomes that were being achieved. Officers explained the opportunity for work with the voluntary sector to maintain the project – and health had helped to fund this work.

A Member questioned how the data was used to monitor outcomes/impacts, Officers explained that the scorecard indicated the number of children and the re-referral rate – adding that the data was used on a locality basis.

In response to a question from the Committee, the Director explained that the priorities for the interim strategy would be informed by the data available to the partnership. It was acknowledged that if a child was not in school they were at risk, and the Committee were assured that attendance was monitored.

The Portfolio Holder paid credit to and thanked the team in children's services.

Resolved

- 1. That the direction of travel for the Early Help Partnership be supported.**
- 2. The progress and achievements of the Early Help Partnership were noted.**

36 Recommendation Tracker

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

The Committee were encouraged to attend the Total Respect training programme.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

37 Areas of Focus

Resolved that:

The Areas of Focus be noted.

38 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be 29 January 2024.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 8.10 pm.

Signed:

Date: