

EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 SEPTEMBER, 2016 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Committee Members Present	Councillor C. Towe (Chair) Councillor T. Jukes (Vice-Chair) Councillor D. Barker Councillor A. Ditta Councillor N. Gultasib Councillor M. Follows Councillor E. Hazell Councillor Ward Councillor T. Wilson
Portfolio Holders Present	Councillor R. Burley – Children's Services and Education
Non elected voting Members present	T. Tunnell (Parent Governor)
Non elected non voting Members present	R. Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative)
Officers Present	David Haley - Director (Children's Services) Lynda Poole – Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) Debbie Carter - Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) Ross Hutchinson – Lead Accountant Julie Hill – Senior Youth Support Worker Neil Picken – Senior Democratic Services Officer

596/16 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of P. Welter and Councillor A. Kudhail.

597/16 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

598/16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

599/16 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)**

There were no agenda items that required the exclusion of the public.

600/16 **MINUTES**

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 June, 2016, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record subject to the removal of the names Councillor G. Perry, Councillor D. Shires and Councillor M. Follows from the list of apologies and the inclusion of Councillor E. Russell.

601/16 **CORPORATE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE**

A report was submitted [annexed] which summarised that 2016/17 forecast revenue and capital position as at quarter 1 for the services within the remit of the Committee.

It was highlighted that Children's Services continued to experience significant budget pressures relating to further increases in the placement costs of Looked After Children (LAC) being supported. This impacted not only on the existing overall LAC budget but also the ability to deliver savings associated with reducing LAC costs.

Members were further advised that following a review of current levels of caseloads a need for an additional 25 social workers had been identified.

In terms of current forecast overspend it was advised that, taking into account pressures as detailed above, overspend was currently predicted to be £4.062m prior to any mitigating action and use of reserves. With the use of mitigating actions (including the use of earmarked reserves) the remaining forecast overspend was £1.229m.

The Chair sought assurance that mitigating action to reduce the overspend was achievable as he was concerned that costs would continue to rise. The Lead Accountant advised that action was in place but the ability to achieve the savings would depend on demand for the services. If the number of LAC rose to levels above those predicted it would impact on the ability to realise savings. The number of Out of Borough placements was also expensive and would be reviewed. That said he advised that where savings were within the councils control he was confident that the savings would be achieved.

Members of the Committee pushed for further details as to how savings could be achieved. The Lead Accountant advised that there were a number of plans and strategies in place, particularly in relation to safely reducing the number of LAC as this was a significant part of the budget. Senior officers advised that a rigorous LLAC

training process was in place to ensure children were being discharged from LAC where it was appropriate and safe to do so.

The Portfolio Holder (Children's Services and Education) advised that every effort was being made to reduce Out of Borough placements but that this needed to be carried out safely as the child's needs were paramount.

Resolved:

That

1. It be noted that the forecast 2016/17 year end financial position in the Children's Services Directorate is a revenue overspend variance of **£1.229m** (net of the use of earmarked reserves and assuming the full implementation of the currently undelivered action plan items). A £1.000m Corporate earmarked reserve for additional social worker posts was agreed at Cabinet on 27th April 2016 following a review of current levels of caseloads. £589k is forecast to be utilised in year against the original requirements, with a request to Cabinet to utilise £158k of the remainder to offset other Children's Services pressures identified in 2016/17 and the balance being carried forward to support ongoing pressures within the Youth Service during 2017/18.
2. Without the use of Corporate and Service Reserves (excl. those reserves being utilised in relation to the Dedicated Schools Grant of £4.334m), and implementation of the in year action plan, the over spend would be **£4.062m**.
3. It be noted that the total capital programme for the Directorate is £10.673m with forecasted costs of £9.831m as at the end of June and the remaining balance of £891k to be requested to be carried forward into 2017/18. The Children's Services Forecast Capital outturn 2016/17 is summarised in the table on page 8.
4. The actions being taken to address the areas of over spend be noted.

602/16 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE PERFORMANCE DATA

A report was submitted [annexed] which described and commented on the performance and impact of services to children and their families.

A number of key themes emerged from debate including:-

Rising numbers of Looked after Children (LAC)

A Member expressed concern that the number of LAC continued to rise. They sought assurance that efforts were being made to manage the number of LAC and asked for clarity on the potential pressures both on finances and service delivery should the Council accept further children seeking asylum.

The Executive Director (Children's Services) clarified that this was a challenging area to control and if a child needs to be looked after then the Council will ensure that this happens. In relation to numbers, there are two key areas:-

- The number of children entering the system;
- The duration of time that they remain in care.

He clarified that the aim was to reduce the number of LAC when it was appropriate and safe to do so. A corporate approach was being adopted to develop a different strategy to address the number of LAC. In addition, the Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) monitored and challenged social work teams to ensure that discharges are made but only when it was safe to do so.

In terms of the number of asylum seekers, there are 7 unaccompanied young people in the care of the Council. Whilst it was not anticipated to accept further asylum seekers on the National Dispersal Scheme in the short term, there was continued pressure from central government to do so. Should all Local Authorities be mandated to accept further asylum seekers equivalent to 0.07% of its existing child population this would equate to 38 children at a predicted cost of £2.1m.

Early Help

In light of the fact that the number of LAC was rising, Members challenged what impact Early Help was having and what the impacts of budget cuts could have on the service in future years.

The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) explained that the number of LAC and Child Protection Plans (CPP) was rising nationally. She acknowledged that some Partners were reluctant to discontinue existing plans, to reduce the number of LAC, as they were risk averse. The Independent Reviewing Officers are working with Partners to provide guidance on this issue. In terms of Early Help and Early Intervention, the services were crucial as a preventative measure and also as a service to support those children that had been stepped down from a CPP to a Child In Need Plan and subsequently to early help, to sustain the necessary changes. It was clear that any budget reductions in Early Help would impact on the number of children with a CPP as services would not be available to support them following a step down which would result in them returning to a CPP.

Fostering and Adoption

Members stated that foster carers were important and integral to providing care for children and young people. The investigations of a previous working group into Fostering and Adoption Services made it clear that whilst many people showed an initial interest, few completed the process to become a foster carer. It was important to maximise the number of internal foster carers and officers were challenged to explain what action was being undertaken to entice, engage and support applicants. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that the fee strategy was

being reviewed and a marketing and recruitment drive was underway following the recent appointment of a marketing officer.

A Member referred to the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family noting with concern that it was 521 days. It was stated that this wasn't acceptable and Officers were asked to explain what could be done to reduce this time. Officers advised that due to the complexity of the adoption process, 521 days was classed as good performance. That said, every effort was made to ensure that placements were made without any unnecessary delays and that children were matched well with adopted parents. It was highlighted that Walsall had a low number of placement breakdowns which was positive.

Child Protection Plans (CPP)

Officers acknowledged that, when compared with statistical neighbours, the numbers of children on Child Protection Plans in Walsall was too high which highlighted that work needed to be done. Members sought assurances that work was being undertaken with neighbouring Local Authorities to identify best practice. It was explained that there were a number of regional forums attended by Officers and the Assistant Director (Children's Social Care). In addition, representatives were visiting North Yorkshire to consider their approach to LAC to identify any areas of learning which could assist Walsall. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that it was important to understand what impact the 'No Front Door' model used by North Yorkshire was having. Members requested that an update be provided on the outcome of the visit.

It was asked why some children and young people had repeat child protection plans. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that a significant number of children on child protection plans were in place because of neglect and domestic violence. This meant that work undertaken to resolve issues resulting in a young person being removed from a CPP was, sometimes, unsustainable which resulted in a further CPP. To reduce the number of repeat CPP the Council had adopted a new Domestic Violence Risk Assessment Model (DVRAM) as developed by Barnados which was used to train Social Workers. In addition, Social Workers were trained in graded care profile (developed by the NSPCC) which helps them measure the quality of care being given to a child. Members were reminded that whilst every effort was made to ensure long term stability, there would always be some repeat CPPs.

Recruitment and Caseloads

A Member challenged Officers on the Council's ability to recruit social workers due to the high number of caseloads and competition both from other Local Authorities and Agencies.

The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that this was a complex area but agreed that it was important to reduce caseloads noting that a social worker with 31 cases, for example, would not have capacity to spend enough time with families which leads to risks that plans would drift and not be worked appropriately. It was

important that Social Workers have the time and training to manage risks and work with families to enable the children or young people at home where it is the right and safe thing to do. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that one of the most common reasons social workers gave during exit interviews for leaving was because the new employer offered a lower number of caseloads.

The Executive Director (Children's Services) explained that a cultural change was required to move from transactional to relationship based social work with more interaction with families. Whilst this could take between 3 and 5 years to fully implement, Essex and Leeds had reduced the number of LAC significantly using this model. In Leeds, Social Workers had caseloads of 15 which enabled them to concentrate on a more relationship based approach.

A Member focussed on the importance of appointing experienced Social Workers as this appeared to be an issue for Walsall. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that it was a real issue across the West Midlands. He reiterated that a number of Local Authorities offered significantly lower caseloads, often 15 for experienced social workers and 12 for newly qualified social workers. Many Local Authorities also offered financial incentives or 'one off' payments towards, for example, a mortgage. All of these were being considered at Walsall so that the Council could attract Social Workers to reduce the level of caseloads per Social Worker. He advised that in terms of newly qualified social workers, Walsall was good at training and retaining staff. However, they were unable to carry out child protection work for a period of time which meant these vacancies were often filled by agency staff.

The Chair stated that recruitment, retention and caseloads were an ongoing problem which never seems to be resolved. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that Frontline had been secured with 8 trainees due to commence in September, 2017 for a period of 2 years. Existing workers that were not qualified were also being given the opportunity to undertake an Open University Course. 3 placements were in progress and being funded this year. Existing staff were also afforded the opportunity to undertake the 'Step up to social work' course. Retention incentives are also in place and having an impact.

A Member queried the difference in cost between an agency worker and a worker employed by the Authority. It was explained that agency workers cost, on average, 30% more.. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that recruitment and retention was difficult in the current market. A market supplement is offered to staff within Initial Response to try to recruit and retain staff and it was constantly reviewed. Often offering incentives to permanent staff was less costly than appointing agency staff.

The Chair challenged the Executive Director (Children's Services) as to how he would make Walsall's offer competitive whilst being mindful of the constant budget pressures. He advised that a more wholesale approach to enhancements and pay packages was being considered to ensure that Walsall is well placed to provide an attractive offer for applicants.

Mosaic

A Member challenged the fact that the system was implemented to assist Social Workers and ultimately reduce red tape making administration and case recording easier. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) responded stating that the system did enable easier recording and better reporting mechanisms. However, finding time to enter the information was challenging as the system embeds. Without the input of information the systems function was limited and would not be as effective.

The Chair suggested that a briefing be provided on MOASIC for Members of the Committee as it was clear that there was still work to do to optimise the system.

Care Homes

A Member referred to the Redruth Home which had been repurposed in terms of provision. Officers were asked what had happened to the young people that were previously within the home. Officers advised that all but 1 were due to leave their placements and 1 had been provided with an alternative placement. It was asked whether there would be long term provision for disabled children in future. Officers advised that placements would be commissioned.

Out of Borough Placements

In response to a question asking where 'Out of Borough Placements' were, the Executive Director (Children's Services) explained that he had put a stop to children being placed Out of Borough unless it was absolutely vital. It was his view that the Council needed to think more creatively to ensure that provision within the Borough was sufficient to support those that required access. The principle was that children need to be in the Borough and each case should be looked at to see how we support the individual 'in-house' using a systematic approach across services.

In addition, all out of Borough placements were being reviewed. Assurance was provided that where there were long term placements it would not be appropriate to bring the child or young person back. However, there were some individuals which could be consulted with to bring them back into the Borough.

Social Work Training

A Member sought clarity as to whether the Council provided training for agency workers. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that there were a range of very good training options for permanent staff which were not offered to agency staff. There were, however, mandatory courses – such as using MOSAIC and child protection that all staff were required to undertake whether agency or permanent. It was also important that agency staff received relevant training as many were stable in their roles and had been in place for some time. All those working - whether agency or permanent - would need to be involved with certain training if the culture of the service was to change. It was highlighted that agency

staff in Walsall had a turnover rate of 20% which compared well to other Local Authorities and statistical neighbours.

Basic practice of social work

The Chair referred members to page 24 of the report where it was stated that the quality of basic practice and recording was still too variable. He was concerned to read that this was the case and challenged the Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) seeking assurances that every effort was being made to ensure that it was being addressed.

The Assistant Director explained that service at the 'front door' had improved but the quality of assistance by the Initial Response Service could sometimes be better. Practice within family support and looked after children was too variable. This is being addressed rigorously. To improve consistency, work was undertaken to understand the reasons before identifying the most appropriate method to improve matters. If the situation did not improve then performance management and formal disciplinary proceedings would commence. In terms of time recording it was highlighted that this was part of the mandatory training and was of the utmost importance. The impact of high caseloads did have an effect on this issue.

A Member challenged this stating that MOSAIC was meant to sort this out and support workers, making recording more efficient and easier. It was disappointing to hear that there were still issues with recording and officers were asked if MOSAIC had been a wasted investment. The Executive Director advised that Mosaic was a much better system than the previous system, PARIS. It enables a much better range of reports. The issue was that people have to enter the data into the system in a succinct way. This was an area which required further work. The Chair stated that this should be addressed.

Resolved:

1. That an update be provided on the outcome of the visit by Officers to North Yorkshire to understand their approach to Looked After Children.
2. That a briefing be offered to Members on the MOSAIC system.

603/16 YOUNG CARERS

The Committee received a report [annexed] summarising the current position in regard to Young Carers in the Borough.

The Senior Youth Support Worker advised that a pathway for reporting was being created to enable the service to access and populate the MOSAIC system. The Young Carers Group was developing a toolkit for use by professionals which would also be available on Mosaic.

The Chair noted that there were only 76 young carers which appeared to be low. He questioned school's role in relation to identifying and supporting young carers. The Senior Youth Support Worker advised that historically there was a reluctance to notify the Local Authority as there was a misconception that it would involve social workers and the young person being taken into care which is not the case. It was important to notify the Local Authority so that appropriate support can be offered to the entire family. Numbers were beginning to rise thanks to early help interventions.

The Chair stated that in many situations, the young person may not be aware that they are caring. The Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) advised that work was carried out to raise the profile of young carers in schools. Schools also made allowances for young carers to ensure they were not penalised.

In terms of engagement, Members challenged why an average of only 18 carers attended the weekly Carers Group activities. The Senior Youth Support Worker advised that not all young carers wanted to participate in the group but assured Committee that all 76 were engaged using a number of methods, including 1 -1 support. Attendance had increased as it was previously much lower.

A Member stated that young carers should be recognised for the work they undertake. It was recommended that young carers work be acknowledged at the Looked After Children Excellence night.

A Co-opted Member sought clarity in relation to children with siblings with a disability. It was understood that this had now merged with young carers. In response, the Senior Youth Support Worker confirmed that this was the case.

Resolved

That Young Carers be included and recognised for their work in future Looked After Children Awards Nights.

604/16 WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLANS

The Chair noted that the work programme had been omitted from the paperwork and asked for the information to be circulated.

Resolved:

- 1. That the work programme be circulated to Committee;**
- 2. That the forward plans be noted.**

605/16 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was 11 October, 2016.

The meeting terminated at 7.50 p.m.

Chair:

Date:.....