

Council – 4 November 2019

Portfolio Holder Children's

Children's Services

This time last year, I reported to the council on my first 6 months as Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Early Help, Social Care & Safeguarding). I reflected on how that demonstrated a **sense of purpose, pride and achievement**. I am pleased to say that, 12 months later, all of those attributes continue to be applicable but now, I have many more examples to share with you.

My sense of purpose is engendered by my continued work with the Executive Director, her senior leaders and a committed staff group; over the last year, there have been some changes amongst the senior leaders and I am pleased to welcome the new members to the senior leadership team. Together they have taken forward the "**Walsall Right for Children**" transformation programme. In consultation with children, young people and their families, partner agencies and our own staff, we have agreed the underlying principles, the service design and are now in the process of implementing a new, locality based service model, starting in early 2020. Our '**big conversation**', listening to and working with children and families, has enabled us to embark on a collaborative transformation journey to uplift our practice, shaped by them

I am extremely proud of the achievements of some of our most vulnerable young people for whom we, the council, are responsible for. These achievements are regularly reported to the **Corporate Parenting Board**, which I chair, directly by some of those young people who have also invited me to meet with them at the Children in Care Council, the **Council4Kids**, and at my second **Excellent Night Out** held in October of this year. This year we were fortunate to attract sponsorship from **Tarmac** for the event for which I would like to record my thanks. These young people have also assisted in the recruitment of staff in children's services. I also had another opportunity, together with my colleague Councillor Towe, to hear about the achievements of our staff at our **Children's Services Staff Conference (attended by approximately 400 staff)** and to be inspired by their guest speaker from New Zealand, their former chief social worker, who began his contribution to the conference with a song.

I am also pleased to report we have been successful in our bid to the Department for Education's **Strengthening Families Protecting Children** programme to implement **the Family Safeguarding Model**. One of only 15 local authorities, our inclusion in this programme brings significant grant funding, as well as support and expertise that will accelerate the improvements in practice that are already being implemented. This programme will support our aim of providing support to families to enable them to look after their children and help to avoid the need for children to become looked after. We have also been successful in our bid for funding to establish a local **Family Drug and**

Alcohol Court (FDAC) project, in partnership with Sandwell and Dudley children's services, which we envisage, will complement the Family Safeguarding initiative.

We are never far away from an Ofsted call and our next **Ofsted inspection** in Children's Services, so it comes as no surprise that, on the day of finalising this report, we received 'the 5 day notice call' and Ofsted will be with us, once again on 29 October. This time, to carry out a focussed visit of our 'Front Door' service that receives contacts and referrals, where decisions are made about child protection enquiries, emergency action, child in need assessments and decisions to accommodate children.

Inspection of services for children and young people extends beyond Ofsted. HM Inspectorate of Probation's inspected Walsall's Youth Offending Services in June this year. They recognised many things that this partnership does well including the outstanding work to reduce re-offending, the low numbers of children in custody and the skilled and committed workforce. It also identified some aspects of the service that we need to develop and improve including our use of performance data, out of court disposal arrangements and our response to victims of crime – we have a robust action plan to do just that.

Much of this report is concerned with achievement, changes and plans for the future. I also want to also draw your attention to the day-to-day, 'business as usual' work that is undertaken by our staff. Children's Services continues to think big, think system wide and think prevention in our quest to deliver the **right help at the right time** to reduce the need for more intrusive and costly interventions in the lives of children. Current examples of the delivery of effective Early Help worthy of specific mention include:

- Our summer "**Keeping in Touch**" programme that helped and supported those children, young people and families needing additional support during the school summer holidays.
- Our focused **Children Missing Education programme** that engaged some of our most vulnerable children and young people excluded from school or at risk of exclusion in a range of activities including fishing, mountain bike maintenance and app writing and provided opportunities to learn new skills whilst being supported on a one to one basis with behavioural issues and anxiety.
- Our partnership work with the Department for Work and Pensions aimed at **reducing parental conflict** by training the wider workforce and community members.

Future system wide prevention plans include a 'local offer' to all schools aimed at promoting inclusion and reducing exclusion of children and young people from education – an offer that will include training for all schools, targeted support to those schools with the highest rates of exclusions and bespoke support to those children excluded or at risk of exclusion.

We continue to work hard, in challenging financial circumstances, to make sure children get the best start in life and to ensure those in most need are able to access support to reach their full potential and make a good transition to adulthood. Service provision has changed in recent years as has the financial landscape and many of the issues facing young people, which is why, in discussion with the Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture, Councillor Gary Perry, I have requested a **review of youth services**. The initial stages of the review have involved mapping provision, gaps and funding arrangements. It is clear from this initial work that a range of voluntary sector partners have stepped into the delivery of youth services and are making a valuable contribution to our youth offer, which I would like to formally recognise and thank.

The work will seek to identify opportunities that the council and its partners can work on together to sustain and strengthen youth provision. One such opportunity soon to come to fruition following a successful bid by Active Black Country to the DfE's opening school facilities fund is a project to support schools to open up their sports facilities. This will broaden the offer of extra-curricular and out of school sporting and physical activities available to pupils and the wider community.

Day to day, social workers and their managers support the most vulnerable children, young people and their families in Walsall. We employ 160 qualified social workers who work with those children and families dealing with 101 new referrals every week, providing support to 1501 children in need of whom 218 have a disability, 435 children who are the subject of a child protection plan, 640 children looked after and 204 care leavers. It is, of course, the children looked after and the care leavers for whom the council has particular statutory responsibility as a corporate parent, a responsibility that I take seriously through the **Corporate Parenting Board** together with colleagues from across the council. We do that through the receipt of reports on different aspects of the service provided which also covers support services such as fostering, our children's homes and the work of the independent reviewing officers that oversee the planning for children on protection plans and those in our care.

There has been an increase in the number of children looked after over the course of this year, which follows national trends. This has presented additional workload pressures as well as impacting on the budget and presented additional demands for suitable placements for those children within the local area and beyond.

Plans have also been developed for the creation of an **All Age Disability Service** which will bring together staff from across adult services, the children's disability service and special educational needs in a single service on a single site. This will avoid the difficulties that often impact on children and their families at the significant point of transition from children's to adult services.

Recruiting, retaining and supporting social workers is a priority for Walsall, as it is for many local authorities. We need to have a suitably qualified and experienced workforce to provide the quality and consistency of service that our families deserve. We help to train and develop new social workers (through national schemes such as

Frontline and Step-Up to Social Work as well as by offering placements to other student social workers), offer a range of training and development opportunities as well as some additional funding for those posts that are particularly difficult to recruit to. We have recently appointed a new **Principal Social Worker** who will join us early in the new-year; one of his priorities will be to ensure that we have a workforce that is able to provide the quality of services that our children and families deserve.

Over the course of the last year, we have closed one of our children's homes and reconfigured the residential respite service delivered at Bluebells. I have also been involved in advocating for the continuation of the service provided by the **Acorns Black Country Hospice**, a service much valued by the parents of children with life limiting health conditions. Whilst it is not a council service, it is a local service that deserves the support of the council to ensure that it can continue to support the children with whom they are working.

Our contact service for children looked after and their family and friends, **Family Time**, has been successfully established and staff are now being recruited for our new service designed to provide support to young people in their teenage years – they have chosen to call this new service “**Turning Point**”. When Turning Point opens its doors early in the New Year, it will be providing much needed support to young people experiencing a range of difficulties in their lives, either individually or in relation to their families.

At the beginning of this financial year, our adoption service became part of a **Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)**, “**Adoption @ Heart**”, together with the adoption services from Sandwell, Dudley and Wolverhampton (who are hosting the RAA). The regionalisation of adoption services is a government initiative intended to improve the efficiency of adoption services, increase the availability of adoptive families for children and choice for prospective adopters. I am looking forward to hearing about the development of the RAA when they come to present their first report to the Corporate Parenting Board in January 2020. Our **Fostering Service** has been the subject of an external review in order that they can plan better for the future with a particular focus on the recruitment and support of foster carers. The outcome of that review was reported to the Corporate Parenting Board together with the work that is being done to develop the service. The **Mockingbird Project** that I referred to in my last report is now providing support to three groups of foster carers who are benefitting from the additional support that this provides to them and their families. Work is also being undertaken on proposals for a regional approach to the provision of fostering services, building on the work already undertaken in the creation of the RAA.

Earlier in the autumn, the new multi-agency arrangements for safeguarding children came into effect. The **Safeguarding Children Partnership** has now replaced the Local Safeguarding Children Board, with much greater emphasis on the key relationships between the council, the police and the health service whilst retaining the active involvement of other partner agencies. Locally we have chosen to retain the service of our independent chair to ensure that the partnership is held to account in

the work that it does individually and collectively to safeguard children in Walsall. I am grateful to colleagues in our partner agencies for making the transition to the new arrangements so straight forward and look forward to the further development of the new partnership especially after the launch of the **new threshold guidance, “Right Help, Right Time”** in October.

Looking forward, I continue to be **resolute, determined and ambitious** for Walsall’s most vulnerable children, young people and families. The improvements we have made across Early Help, Social Care and Safeguarding and continue to make mean that keeping our children safe and well remains one of the most important roles that our council performs and a key priority for my Portfolio and the council’s refreshed Corporate Plan. Increasing numbers of children and families have found themselves in situations where they are seeking support from the council. Our transformation programme will ensure that they receive the **right help at the right time**.

I continue to be grateful for the collective commitment shown by **officers, members and partners** to improving the lives of vulnerable children and families. I am heartened by the shared determination to ensure children, young people and families get the best shot at living safe and happy lives as possible. This continues to be something we should all feel proud of.

Finally, I would like to repeat my thanks to **the many children, young people, parents, carers and advocates** themselves that I have spoken to, met and received e-mails from. Their stories of personal achievement, success, personal challenge and sadly sometimes trauma, together with their feedback on how we can improve services where we do not get things right are really valuable and insightful. Only by listening to, working with and helping children and young people to have their say in shaping services there to support them, can we make the biggest difference.

Councillor T. Wilson,
Portfolio holder, Children’s

25 October 2019