

EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

15 FEBRUARY 2018 AT 6.00 PM AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Committee Members present Councillor C. Towe (Chair)
Councillor D. Barker
Councillor A. Ditta
Councillor J. Fitzpatrick
Councillor E. Hazell
Councillor T. Wilson

Portfolio Holders present Councillor A. Nawaz - Children's Services and Education

Non-elected non-voting Members present Mr R. Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative)

Officers present Ms D. Carter, Assistant Director (Children's Social Care)
Mr P. Gordon, Head of Business Change
Ms L. Harris, Principal Social Worker
Ms E. Hopkins, System Leader (Head of Service),
Money-Home-Job
Mrs L. Poole, Assistant Director (Access and
Achievement)
Dr P. Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

13/18 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors M. Follows, D. James, T. Jukes and A. Nazir, and from Mrs T. Tunnell.

14/18 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

15/18 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

16/18 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)

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

17/18 MINUTES

With reference to the Minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2018:

- Further to Minute 6/18, and the circulation of a breakdown on the estimated DfE allocation for Basic Need, a Member enquired why there had been a substantial reduction in the estimated DfE allocation, from £21,616,745 in 2018/19 to £4,000,000 in 2021/22. The Committee was advised by the Portfolio Holder that a further explanatory note would be circulated.
- Further to Minute 7/18, a Member reminded the Committee that it had also been noted that more should be done to capture any compliments and positive remarks, and that these should also be included in the benchmarking.
- Further to Minutes 8/18, it was noted by a Member that having regard to the additional information provided by Street Teams, of the 103 interviews not completed, there had been three cases where parents had refused to participate, and confirmation was requested that there had been escalation.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2018, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record, subject to the inclusion of Councillor A. Ditta to the list of apologies for absence received.

18/18 HOMELESSNESS IN WALSALL AND THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Committee received a report [annexed] on the scale and impact of the problem of homelessness on children and vulnerable young people living in Walsall.

In opening discussion, the Chair emphasised that the increase in homelessness was a widely recognised national issue receiving much media coverage. With reference to the Walsall Homelessness Strategy 2018-2022, he noted that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 would lead to further responsibilities being transferred to local authorities. Having enquired whether any additional resource would be available to the Council to assist with this, it was confirmed by the System Leader (Head of Service), Money-Home-Job that an additional £350,000 would be available over a period of three years.

A question was also raised by the Chair on the Government's national indicators for the levels of homelessness, and the impact these might have on the introduction of the new computerised monitoring system. In responding, the System Leader (Head of Service) stated that, through the panel responsible for designing the software, there was a dialogue between the Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government. She emphasised that given the fundamental changes being introduced by the new legislation, it was imperative that an effective monitoring system was put in place and that this would be trialled and staff training provided before the legislation came into effect in April 2018.

A Member, having expressed the view that the best outcome was for people to be safe and well, referred to the historical practice of estimated counts on the streets, and asked what the expected benefits of the new software would be. The System Leader (Head of Service) pointed out that the Council was still required to complete annual statutory returns and that the current system's limitations meant that an updated system was required. She added that the new system included an interactive portal that would also be beneficial to service users.

With reference to those children and young people placed out of the area, and the impact of this on educational attainment, a Member queried those instances where placements were made to take account of their home community when, for example, there was evidence of domestic violence. The System Leader (Head of Service) advised the Committee that temporary accommodation was concentrated in four locations in the Borough. However, this meant that it was possible that children and families might have to be located away from their home community which, unfortunately, could present problems in that children might have to move to another school or the journey to their current school be extended. It was noted that the Council's Homelessness Strategy's action plan included the objective of restructuring the current temporary accommodation portfolio, which might disperse the available provision across locality areas, but that this would be subject to an options appraisal.

The Chair asked a question relating to the objective in the action plan to modernise services for people who were homeless or likely to become homeless. The System Leader (Head of Service) confirmed that the effectiveness of this was being ascertained and would be incorporated into the steps being taken to introduce the new computerised monitoring system.

In responding to a question from the Committee on the use of temporary accommodation provided by private and social landlords, and its impact on the educational attainment of homeless children, the Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) referred to the school expansion scheme. She explained that in determining where need was greatest, different criteria applied and had been factored into school planning to provide enough places for primary and secondary education until 2025, adding that planning for 2025 to 2045 had now commenced. It was emphasised that the overriding aim was to keep children in their current school and, when this was not possible, the Fair Access Protocol ensured that children and young people had a place in a school. It was also recognised that when a child or young person moved to another school, this did not always have a detrimental effect on their educational attainment.

Further to a question from the Chair regarding the Council's responsibilities in relation to private rented accommodation, the System Leader (Head of Service) explained that its utilisation helped to offset the increased pressures on temporary accommodation and gave greater choice regarding the location and type of property for families to meet their circumstances. Whilst the Council did not currently discharge to the private sector, it did discharge to assured short hold tenancies of six months. Members also sought reassurance that such properties were fit for purpose and enquired about the inspections being undertaken. It was confirmed that inspections were carried out for all properties in Walsall, and that it would only be where a family moved a considerable distance out of area that this might not occur.

There having been a reference in the documentation to the 'right standard', it was confirmed for Members that this was the standard, as stipulated in Homelessness legislation, namely that a property was sufficiently heat retentive and had all appropriate electric and gas certification.

The System Leader (Head of Service) advised that the draft Homelessness strategy was currently out for consultation and feedback was being sought from stakeholders. It was intended that this would be considered by the Cabinet on 21 March 2018 and, if approved, the aforementioned options appraisal would then be undertaken.

The Chair noted that a study by Shelter had highlighted the emotional trauma of homelessness, especially where children were concerned, and they had to move to another school or their educational progress was impeded. Members also asked about the support being provided so that children did not have to move out of the area. The Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) reported that wrap-around funding was available in such cases, and not just in schools rated by Ofsted as being outstanding or good, and also support could be provided to assist with transport and the integration to a new school via peer mentoring. This would be contingent on the child's age and would be within the context of existing family or carer support.

In response to further questions from the Committee, it was noted that schools had access to hardship funding, which could help with the costs of school uniforms or activities. It was recorded that this was not a statutory responsibility on the part of schools and, therefore, was not regulated by the Council and hence budget and expenditure decisions regarding this were made by school governing bodies. The System Leader (Head of Service) added that there was a crisis scheme that could provide assistance to help parents maximise income and there was a specialist officer who worked with young people aged between 16 and 29 years of age. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that in accordance with the Southwark judgement, the Council was obliged to provide accommodation and support to homeless 16 and 17 years old young people and in such cases an assessment would be undertaken by Children's Social Care.

The Committee noted that a home address was required in order for a child to be placed with a school and Members sought clarification on the onus for notifying a school of a child's homelessness, i.e. was it the responsibility of the Council or of parents. The Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) commented that both parties might do so and reported that two lists were maintained by the Council, namely for 'children missing education' and 'children missing from education' that captured and tracked the details of any children in the Borough missing education.

The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that homelessness per se was not a criterion for social care involvement and, therefore, would not necessarily lead to an intervention unless there were other factors present, such as child abuse or domestic violence. However, in the case of younger children, assistance would be available via the Early Help service.

A Member having enquired about other sources of potential funding, the Committee was informed that applications could be made to the Rowntree Foundation, the Sutton Trust Foundation and other similar charities.

Further to a question on the numbers of children and young people who were currently homeless, and with whom the Council was in contact, the System Leader (Head of Service) noted that approximately 2,500 families had approached the Money-Help-Job service, with the majority being prevented from becoming homeless due to intervention and support across teams. It was reported that there were 377 homeless families, of which approximately 60 per cent had dependant children.

It being noted by the Committee that section 2.3 of the report indicated that there had been a 33 per cent increase in the number of people eligible for the main homelessness duty of assistance, and it was confirmed to the Committee by the System Leader (Head of Service) that this was a statutory responsibility.

It was also noted that section 2.4 of the report stated that women were more likely to experience homelessness than men. In responding to this point, the System Leader (Head of Service) confirmed that these people tended to be female single parents who were often victims of domestic violence or relationship breakdowns, but noted that further research needed to be commissioned in order to understand the BAME dimension of homelessness in Walsall. In terms of where the responsibility lay when there had been a move out of the Borough, it was confirmed that this was dependent upon the home address (even if temporary). Should a homeless Walsall family move out of the Borough and then return, then the responsibility for finding school places for children would return to Walsall Council.

The Chair sought clarification on the 'Housing First' model referred to in the draft Homelessness strategy document. The System Leader (Head of Service) explained to the Committee that this applied to situations involving children and young people with complex needs and to looked after children. The intention was to resolve their housing needs first and then build the support they required around them.

In regard to the homeless night shelter, it was confirmed that this was still open and that people were still being provided with temporary accommodation. It was also noted that a pilot project to provide accommodation for 10 individuals had been increased to 25 places due to the demand originating from users of the night shelter.

A Member referred to section 2.2 of the report, which indicated that when compared with England and the rest of the Black Country, the levels of homelessness acceptances in Walsall were more than 50 per cent higher than elsewhere. The System Leader (Head of Service) pointed out that through the work undertaken with Social Care, it was possible to give people a second chance and that the figures for Walsall had now reduced.

A Member also asked whether the additional £350,000 over three years would be sufficient for the activities to be undertaken by the Council. Due to the difficulties in anticipating the impact of these activities, it might be necessary therefore to seek additional resources, in which case representations to Members would be made.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

19/18 THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

The Committee received a report [annexed] on the recruitment and retention of social workers in the Children's Services Directorate.

In opening discussion, the Chair requested clarification regarding the market supplement; namely, whether this was a permanent addition to salary and if it was reflected in ongoing budgets. It was confirmed by the Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) that the market supplement was related to the social workers in MASH and the Referral and Assessment Service Team. In view of a number of permanent appointments made, support from the market supplement had been of assistance in this respect. However, whilst it had been in place for two years, it was not budgeted beyond that and a review was currently being undertaken. Also, the extension of the market supplement to other areas of Children's Services had been considered but was not pursued.

The report provided examples of some of the inducements being offered by other local authorities when recruiting social workers. It was noted that the Council faced competition from other authorities, and also from the two children's trusts that had been created in Birmingham and Sandwell. The Principal Social Worker outlined the relocation package, but emphasised that this was accessed by few staff owing to there being a distance requirement to qualify for it. However, a total rewards package had been put in place and this offered staff good continuous professional development (CPD), career progression and a supportive management structure.

In terms of social work caseloads, and further to a question from the Chair on whether there had been any movement since the production of the report, the Principal Social Worker confirmed that the data was current. She highlighted the efforts being made to reduce the number of cases being dealt with by social workers and to progress cases through the system; however, in such a challenging environment, it was to be expected that the numbers of referrals through the front door would be significant.

The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that the caseload promise for newly qualified social workers was for 15 cases and, for more experienced social workers, the intention was to reduce their caseload to between 15 and 18 cases. As all cases had to be allocated, this currently entailed a higher number of cases per social worker and a continued reliance on agency staff. In relation to this, a Member queried the use of the term 'manageable caseload' which, it was felt, might deter prospective employees when compared with the other local authorities, and sought clarification on the usage of this term. The Principal Social Worker noted that, subject to their experience and qualifications, many social workers appreciated undertaking a variety of work, and stated that this had been corroborated from her own findings that had been presented in her paper to the Principal Social Worker network. Moreover, it was important to recruit social workers who were not complacent but who valued the opportunity to take on more and varied responsibilities that would contribute to their development. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) informed the Committee that the recruitment and retention strategy was being reviewed in the light of this.

The Chair referred to the section 3.2 of the report, and the increased investment to £3.9m in 2018/19, which was supporting the creation of 14 senior practitioner roles. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that this was on-going.

A Member enquired about morale and the feedback being received from staff, and the Principal Social Worker affirmed that members of staff were well supported by good teams across the service. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) added that during the last year, services had been re-modelled to follow a 'Unit' model and a number of permanent team manager vacancies had been filled, which had also contributed to improvements to morale. It was stated by the Principal Social Worker that, as morale could vary over time, an annual social work health check was completed and anonymous feedback gathered. All social workers and managers should have an annual Employee Performance Review (EPR) interview that encouraged the identification of needs, with most social workers accessing CPD opportunities. In the case of staff on the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme, there would be access to early professional development which would be monitored. For all social workers, restorative practice was paramount and should there be any reduction in individual or team performance, this would be challenged.

The Chair commented that it was preferable to have permanent employees rather than temporary staff and that staff should access the available development opportunities. He asked whether, as was the case with other professions, social workers were required to complete a minimum number of hours of CPD. The Principal Social Worker pointed out that as part of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) requirements, there was an obligation to complete 15 hours every two years, and that there were many opportunities available but staff had to balance this with caseload commitments. It was noted that the Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) chaired a monthly sub-group on training that monitored the completion of training and development programmes.

In response to a question from a Member on the reputation enjoyed by Children's Services, whether this was improving and how this was ascertained, the Principal Social Worker stated that feedback from agency workers was that they preferred to work for Walsall because of the range of training and development available. Agency workers received training alongside permanent employees to ensure consistency in the social work service being delivered. In view of benefits of this nature, it was pointed out that a number of former agency workers had now become permanent members of staff. Through her involvement in the University of Birmingham's teaching partnership, the Principal Social Worker informed the Committee it was evident that the Council was well regarded and requests for placements in Walsall had been received from many students, some of whom lived further afield but who wanted to work in Walsall when qualified.

The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that in some areas, such as complex child protection court work, there continued to be difficulties in recruiting permanent staff and there remained a reliance on agency staff. However, as newly recruited staff gained in experience, it was expected that the reliance on agency staff would diminish and the Step Up to Social Work (SUTSW) initiative was assisting with this. Further to a question from the Chair, it was noted that in 2017 all five SUTSW students of cohort 4 had successfully completing the training and were now employed by the Council and were undertaking their ASYE programme. Six SUTSW students had been recruited for cohort 5, which had commenced in January 2018.

With reference to section 6.1 of the report, a Member requested an explanation of the categories of establishment and permanent, which had been given in the table. The Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) illustrated this using the example of the Safeguarding and Family Support (SFS) team, which had funding for an establishment of ten Team Managers, of which eight were permanent staff and three were agency staff. This exceeded the establishment, but the additional capacity was required and had received approval.

The Chair stated that he was encouraged by the operation of the recruitment microsite. The Principal Social Worker explained that this had worked well and had achieved efficiency in the processing of applications, as applicants were able to submit a CV which could be promptly screened and then progressed. Additionally, the microsite, which had been developed by the Council's HR and IT departments, in conjunction with the Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) and Principal Social Worker, provided beneficial market research information.

The Chair remarked upon the success of the 'Grow Your Own' scheme, which enabled current permanent employees to train to become social workers whilst remaining in paid employment. This scheme had generated considerable interest and whilst advantageous in many respects, including increasing the diversity of social workers within Children's Services, some caution had to be exercised to ensure that other service areas were not disadvantaged or subjected to additional pressures should any of their staff be accepted onto this scheme.

In conclusion, the positive developments highlighted by the report were noted by the Committee. Members indicated their willingness to be of assistance by attending any relevant social work events in which the Children's Services Directorate was involved.

Resolved:

1. That the progress to date in relation to the Recruitment and Retention Strategy be noted;
2. That the social work health check anonymous feedback information be provided for circulation to the Committee.

20/18 CHILDREN'S SERVICES OFSTED WORKING GROUP

The Committee received a report and initiation document [annexed] setting out the objectives and scope of the Working Group, the people that the Working Group wished to be involved in the review process, and the timetable and reporting schedule in order for a report to be presented to the meeting on 27 March 2018.

Resolved:

That the report and the initiation document of the Children's Services Ofsted Working Group be approved.

21/18 PROPOSED VISIT TO MARY ELLIOT SCHOOL, WALSALL

The Committee received a verbal report on a proposal to visit the Mary Elliot School.

A visit on either 8 or 9 March 2018 had been proposed by the School and it was agreed by Members that the visit should be on 9 March, commencing at 10.30 am.

Expressions of interest in attending this visit were received from Councillors Towe, Barker, Fitzpatrick, Hazell and Wilson, and from Mr Bragger. Councillor Ditta had also expressed an interest in attending but was unable to do so on 9 March.

Resolved:

That the arrangements be made for a visit to the School on 9 March 2018 by the Members of the Committee, as indicated above.

22/18 WORK PROGRAMME 2017/18 AND FORWARD PLANS

The Committee received a report [annexed] setting out suggestions for agenda items for the final meeting of the 2017/18 municipal year and endorsed the inclusion on the agenda of the following items of business:

- Willenhall E-ACT
- Educational attainment
- Ofsted Action Plan
- Children’s Services Ofsted Working Group

The Corporate Financial Performance Quarter 3 Financial Monitoring Position for 2017/18, having been circulated to the Committee via email, was received and noted.

Resolved:

1. That the Committee’s work programme for 2017/18 be noted;
2. That the Corporate Financial Performance Quarter 3 Financial Monitoring Position for 2017/18 be noted.

The meeting terminated at 7.44 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....