

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 2 November 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 Horton
Councillor Nasreen
Councillor Rattigan
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor Whitehouse

Portfolio Holder

Councillor S. Elson

Officers present:

Rita Homer	Director, Children's Social Work
Tanya Collier	Finance Manager
Nikki Gough	Democratic Services Officer

18 Apologies

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

19 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

20 Declarations of interest and party whip

No declarations of interest or party whip were received.

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

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

22 Minutes

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2023 was submitted.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2023, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

23 **Corporate Financial Performance – Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2023/24**

The Finance Manager presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report summarised the forecast revenue and capital financial position for 2023/24, based on the position to September 2023, for services within the remit of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as reported to Cabinet on 18 October 2023. The total forecast position was an overspend of £3.28m for Children's Services directorate as of 30 September 2023.

The Committee was informed that on-going placement sufficiency issues continued to be the biggest challenge for the service, which has been further compromised by changes in legislation. In addition to this, there has been further cost pressures throughout 2023/24 mainly caused by a larger portion of adolescents entering care with complex needs and vulnerabilities including exploitation, mental health difficulties and emotional dysregulation, some of whom required deprivation of liberty safeguards.

In response to a question, Officers described different strands of work that was aimed at improving placement sufficiency, such as work with the private market and the development of new residential homes. It was also noted that Walsall did well in terms of staff retention however the use of agency workers was still necessary to ensure service needs were met. Savings of £120k had been unattainable as agency staff needed to be employed for longer than had been expected.

Challenge was provided in relation to the rise in complex cases post covid. The Director explained that some children had not been seen by services during the covid lockdown with needs remaining unmet and some did not return to school. Work was underway to develop a multi-disciplinary team to reintroduce children back into school.

The Committee questioned how children's social workers were recruited and retained. The Director explained that there was a good career pathway and good quality clinical supervision to ensure that staff were supported. The Service was also considering apprenticeships to increase social work staff and allow progression into qualified social workers.

A discussion ensued on the mitigations that were in place to reduce the financial overspend, it was stressed that difficulty recruiting foster carers was a national issue, however the Council was being as creative as possible to increase numbers. This included a council tax exemption for Walsall foster carers. Detail was provided on the 'foster friendly status' of the Council.

In response to a question relating to children classed as looked after but in the care of their parents, officers provided detail on the safeguarding model in place to support parent and conclude supervision orders.

In response to challenge around the ability to achieve savings and the risks of not doing so, the Director stated that the service was considering how work could be done more effectively to achieve savings.

The Portfolio Holder responded to a question to state that as a demand led service, children in need of care would be supported.

Resolved.

That the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year end 2023/24 for the services under the remit of the committee.

24 Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme 2024/25 – 2027/28

The Finance Manager presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). Members considered the budget proposals presented and sought further information and assurances on a number of the proposals contained within the draft revenue budget and draft capital programme 2024/25 – 2027/28.

During a period of questioning, detail was provided to the Committee on the reasons for an increased demand for services, which had led to increasing cost pressures. The Committee was informed that this included a serious incident resulting in the arrest of several children within the Borough. Officers informed Members that there has been an increase in large sibling groups and teenagers accessing services – although Walsall was comparable to neighbouring authorities. It was noted that there had been an increase in serious youth violence in Walsall and adolescents presenting with complex needs. This alongside the cost-of-living crisis, the covid-19 pandemic and a change in legislation had impacted on demand and cost to Council services. A discussion ensued on the rise in more complex cases, with societal issues as a driving factor in this, it was stressed that as such issues emerged social work adapted to respond to the need presenting.

Challenge was provided by the Committee in relation to the mitigation of risks and levels of inflation, it was acknowledged that the increase in foster carers fees and allowances set by the Department of Education had been significant, finance officers were only able to make an assumption however it was expected that this would not continue to rise at the elevated rate. Members challenged the savings outlined in appendix 2, and the level of confidence in the Council's ability to deliver them.

Members were assured that if a child needed to receive care support would always be provided. The Portfolio Holder stressed that children and young people would always be protected.

The capital investment and development of residential children's homes was welcomed as an investment which would produce savings, and most importantly, better outcomes for children and young people.

The Committee Resolved:

- 1. The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee request that the investments in children's services continue to receive Cabinet**

support, as they are considered essential to delivering future savings within this service area.

- 2. The work to recruit foster carers in the Borough was noted as positive and the Children's Services Overview Scrutiny Committee hopes to see continued success in this area.**

25 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.

26 Areas of Focus

Resolved that:

The Areas of Focus be noted.

27 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be 7 December 2023

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7:05pm.

Signed:

Date: