

Council – 26 February 2015

Portfolio Holder Report of Councillor B Cassidy, Children’s Services and education

Background and Context

During 2014/15 the comprehensive programme of improvement and change across Children’s Services has continued to enable the service to deliver more efficient and effective services. The approach has been driven by an absolute focus and commitment to secure the best possible provision and outcomes for Walsall children and young people in very challenging financial conditions.

The work of Children’s Services continues to be informed by some significant challenges. These include:

- An intensive focus on sustaining progress already made and embedding the quality of safeguarding and child protection practice.
- Tackling a notable overall increase in the numbers of children and young people looked after by the local authority, with associated cost pressures.
- Reducing safely the need to make provision for as many children outside of the Borough so that more children can live and learn closer to their family and friends.
- Building the social work workforce, reducing agency staff (currently about one-third of the workforce) and recruiting and retaining more of our own staff.
- Delivering sustained improvements in children’s outcomes at school and narrowing gaps in attainment and achievement for some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Following Ofsted’s judgment in July 2013 that Safeguarding services had improved from “inadequate” to “adequate”, the Government lifted its Improvement Notice in July 2014. Subsequent reports, such as the one to the Children’s Services Scrutiny Panel in November 2014, have described and demonstrated how service improvement has continued on an upward trajectory and has been sustained.

During 2014/15 a new senior management team has been appointed and taken up post, with the new Executive Director of Children’s Service starting in September. A comprehensive transition plan is being implemented to ensure the smooth succession to a permanent and stable leadership team. A restructure at senior level of the social care and safeguarding service was also implemented in September and is strengthening service delivery. A subsequent restructure at team manager level has been consulted on and will be fully operational from April 2015. The role of practice manager has been introduced to increase the level of management oversight and guidance to social workers.

The Local Authority’s school improvement services were inspected in June 2014 and judged to be inadequate. In response a comprehensive improvement plan has been put in place in consultation with Headteachers and Governors. The implementation of the plan is

being monitored by an independently chaired Education Challenge Board. The key priorities of the plan are being delivered successfully and the impact is now starting to be seen. Partnership with schools is now strengthening to reflect the changing role of the Local Authority in driving forward school improvement through a sustainable and impactful school to school improvement model.

The Local Authority had responsibility to deliver the National Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms from September 2014. This is a significant piece of work across education, health and social care. A DfE monitoring visit in January 2015 concluded that our work was 'very impressive' and demonstrated good commitment and progress against expectations. The implementation of the reforms will continue over the next 18 months. This provides a real opportunity to continue to review our delivery of services to some of most vulnerable children and their families.

During 2014/15 Children's Services has had to take some very hard financial decisions in order to contribute to the Council's overall budget savings. Proposals are in place to make savings of £4.386m in 2015/16 and £2.028m in 2016/17. Integrated commissioning, with a primary focus on improved outcomes, early help and preventative intervention to reduce the demand for more resource-intensive support is now having an impact.

Key priorities to continually improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Children's Services in 2015/16 include:

- Undertake a comprehensive self-evaluation and peer review of the Service and implement a revised strategic improvement plan at all levels that delivers against key priorities and improved outcomes for children. .
- Strengthen performance management and quality assurance, underpinned by robust and reliable data at both a strategic and operational level. This will inform analysis of impact and will drive decisions on how to make the most effective use of resources.
- Revise and implement the workforce development strategy to improve the stability of operational staffing and the quality of frontline practice. There will be a specific focus on building a strong permanent workforce and reducing the reliance on agency staff – impacting on cost and efficiency.
- Strengthen the governance, partnership and assurance arrangements between the a Children and Young People's Partnership Board, Local Children's and Adults Safeguarding Boards and Health and Well-Being Board, with good alignment to Scrutiny, Corporate Parenting and the Police and Crime Board.
- Deliver the outcomes of the Education Improvement Plan to increase the number of children and young people attending a good or outstanding school and improve their academic outcomes, particularly for those that are vulnerable and at risk of underachievement.
- A programme management approach to tackling key resource pressures.

Key Developments within the Three Service Areas

Access and Achievement Service

What have we done?

- Focused our support and challenge on schools in inverse proportion to success.
- Compiled a comprehensive School Improvement Strategy Action Plan to address the following priorities:
 - Ensuring strong leadership in Walsall schools
 - Ensuring the School Improvement Strategy is fit for purpose
 - Ensuring the LA maintains an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the performance of all schools
 - Ensuring a robust and unambiguous to school categorisation, intervention and support
 - Ensuring high quality school improvement across all sectors
 - Ensuring effective school to school support across the LA
- Recruited experienced additional capacity to lead actions within the above plan
- Set up an Education Challenge Board with an independent Chair, to monitor impact of actions within the plan.
- Recruited to two key posts - a Headteacher to the Virtual School and a manager to drive the early years and school ready agenda.
- Developed new ways of working to develop the school to school support model.
- Regular engagement with officials from the Department for Education and Ofsted, so that they are aware of our work.
- Met with Academy sponsors to discuss underperformance and the need for agreed protocols of engagement.
- Supported governing bodies across the Borough through the ongoing process of re-constitution, in line with national requirements and worked in partnership with the emerging Association for governors in Walsall.
- Two primary schools have been removed from special measures and have now been deemed to be 'good' by Ofsted.
- Interim Executive Boards have replaced governing bodies in three primary schools in special measures so that support and challenge can be more closely targeted and leaders held to account.
- Considerable progress on some aspects of the action plan, including a more rigorous system for categorising schools according to need.
- All schools in special measures now deemed to be making at least reasonable progress.
- Two more Walsall Headteachers appointed by the National College as National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and one more Chair of governors appointed as a National Leader of Governance (NLG).
- Walsall's Youth Justice Service has been recognised as one of the top 20 performing teams nationally by the National Youth Justice Board.
- The quality of assessment and interventions delivered by both the Youth Justice Service and Targeted Youth Support is of a high standard and this is evidenced by the continued upward trajectory of our key performance indicators of reducing first time

entrants, reducing reoffending and reducing the numbers of young people in custody and on remand.

- During the school holidays in 2014-15, including half term, a total of over 500 youth work activity sessions attracted over 6000 attendances from young people aged 10-19. 95% of young people surveyed said they were likely to come again next year.
- Under the Teenage Pregnancy prevention programme, a total of 141 'at risk' young people have completed the full Youth Development Programme, of those that have completed only three became pregnant.
- We are currently engaged in an exciting Safeguarding project with Anglia Ruskin University which has a multi-national dimension. Young people will be engaging in activity on this project with peers in Greece and Cyprus.
- The Quarter 3 NEET figure has been reduced to 4.4% (433 young people) while the In Learning percentage is 84%. This performance is consistently among the best in the West Midlands Region and is in the top quartile of the Statistical Neighbour tables.
- In the 2015 primary and secondary admission rounds we have implemented phase 1 of the transition to a paperless admissions process by requiring all on time applications to be submitted online. Indications are that for at least the primary admission round there has been a reduction in the number of late applications submitted.
- The statutory process to expand Christ Church CE JMI School, Fibbersley Park Primary School and King Charles Primary to meet an increase in demand for Reception places has been completed and all three schools will expand from September 2015.

What do we plan to do next?

Our key priorities are to deliver on the action plan for the benefit of the pupils of Walsall. In particular:

- To see all schools removed from special measures, reduce the number causing concern and improve the number of children attending a good or outstanding Walsall school by at least 10% to meet the national average.
- To finalise the Walsall Directory of Good Practice to enable effective brokerage of high quality support.
- To add further rigour to internal systems so that underperformance at every level can be effectively challenged at an early stage.
- To make permanent appointments to the senior team leading school improvement.
- In Targeted Youth Support and the Youth Justice Service we are managing young people with an evidenced greater than ever level of risk of harm to others and vulnerability to themselves; in a climate of reducing resources across the partnership this presents a real challenges.

- The integration of the Police custody suites to the new 'super custody block' in Oldbury and the amalgamation of the Youth Court bench across the black country increases the need for cross boundary working to prevent and reduce young.

Early Help, Workforce Development and Commissioning

What have we done?

We have worked in partnership with Local Policing, Probation, Social Landlords, Job Centre, Education, Fire Service to secure better outcomes for 795 'Troubled Families' in Walsall, making Walsall the best performing Council in the West Midlands. Walsall has agreed to be an 'early starter' for the expanded Troubled family programme and will use this opportunity to further enhance our integrated partnership working.

Since the launch of the Early Help Strategy In November 2013 we have further developed systems and policies to ensure we deliver our Early Help pledges to children and their families in Walsall. Successful developments include:

- Implementation of a robust Multi-agency Screening Team (MAST)/Early Help pathway including central brokering of the Lead Professional role. As a result most Early Help cases have an allocated lead professional within 48 hours of referral.
- The development of support for Lead Professionals includes training, peer support workshops, review of the multi-agency Early Help & Resource panel and the publication of an Early Help Guide for Lead Professionals. This has clarified the offer of Early Help in Walsall and built confidence and capacity of Lead Professionals beyond Children's services resources.
- Integration of 'Outcome Star' (a tool used to identify the wishes and feelings of children and young people and to track progress) as part of the Early Help Assessments and planning has strengthened the voice of the child/young person across Early Help.
- The quality assurance of Early Help assessments and plans have been improved through the establishment of a Quality assurance Framework that includes use of case file auditing, reflective supervision and management oversight.
- The delivery of strengthened evidence based interventions such as Family Group Conferencing, parenting mediation and restorative practice to some of our most vulnerable children, following the redesign of Intensive Family Support, has enabled more children on child protection plans and Looked After, to return home.
- Improved 'Step up Step Down' arrangements ,have been implemented across Early Help, Initial Response, Safeguarding Family Support and Children with Disabilities to support some of our most vulnerable children and their families to make sustained improvements to their lives and reduce the need for more specialist services.

- Designed and rolled out risk proportionate contract management for 200 contracts that ensures robust tracking and timely decisions on the commissioning and decommissioning of services and ultimately the delivery of more efficient and effective services.
- Completed the Youth of Walsall (YOW) survey in 6 secondary schools which has provided a wealth of intelligence about what young people think about their lives and will be used to inform future service design.
- Sought parents and carers views on the commissioned short breaks service which will be used in the design of the new outcome specification for future services.
- Developed the Newly Qualified Social Work Programme which has seen 22 successfully complete in 2014/5 and 14 on the way to completion.
- Facilitated the development of the Evidence Informed Practice Strategy and the Early Professional Development (EDP) programme for social workers, jointly launched in July 2014 and offered Practice Educator training which has enabled social workers to confidently lead practice development and support learning.
- Facilitated the Social Worker 'health check', a large web-based staff survey that will help inform policy, process and practice.
- Shortlisted finalist for the National Social Worker of the Year (Employee of the Year) award.

What do we plan to do next?

- Improve the quality and use of data to strengthen oversight and shape service delivery, so that there is the systematic collection and analysis of Early Help data electronically.
- Strengthen the understanding and engagement of Health in the development and delivery of Early Help.
- Better develop our understanding of demand for Early Help so that we can tackle demand and capacity issues within the Early Help offer and broaden integration of Early Help services in multi -agency, multi- disciplinary Early Help locality hub.
- Implement a new model of delivery for Children's Centre services strengthening universal and targeted Early Help support for children aged 0-5 years through the development of an integrated pathway between Children's Centre, Health Visiting and Early Years settings.
- Development of an Early Years (0-5 years) strategy, integral to the wider Early Help (0-19 years) strategy to help us strengthen our vision of 'Early Help Early On' and use the financial contribution identified by Schools Forum to further strengthen our local Early Help offer in partnership with schools.

- The establishment of a LAC Challenge to Care project and dedicated resource, to ensure the right children are looked after for the right length of time.
- Establish workforce development as a fully traded service, sustained through income generation. The focus therefore for the coming year will be setting out a plan for a sustainable traded workforce development service – a plan that identifies our statutory obligations and priorities linked to:
 - Multi agency Early Years Development
 - Multi agency safeguarding Training
 - Development for foster carers
 - Student placements and development/assessment of newly qualified social workers

Specialist Services for Social Care and Safeguarding

What have we done?

- With very few exceptions our performance indicators have shown steady improvement to the point where most are good. For example, the timeliness of assessment is much improved and many more children are being found permanent families through being adopted.
- A programme of regular auditing of case files has been established to ensure that the required improvement is reflected in the recording of individual cases. In November 2014 Walsall took part in a West Midlands peer review of auditing processes and procedures. There was a good level of assurance provided to the processes and outcomes in Walsall. There is an on-going challenge for social work staff to review their practice and embed the learning from audits in their future work.
- We have continued the work to introduce Mosaic safely (the replacement social care case management system) to ensure that we will exploit its potential for better supporting high quality social work. This is complex system change with a planned implementation date from April 2015. A programme of staff training and development runs in parallel with the introduction of the new system.
- The number of Looked After Children (LAC) remains high, though it has fallen for each of the last four months (October to January). Over a similar period the number of agency social workers in the service has also significantly reduced. These demonstrate the impact of a variety of initiatives, through dedicated and focused work streams, in respect of those issues that contribute most to financial pressures.
- The work of the Corporate Parenting Board has been strengthened by the establishment of working groups, each tasked with taking forward a section of Walsall's LAC Strategy. Each working group has an accountable lead and a child or young person advocate.
- The Children's Services Scrutiny Panel established a "task and finish" group to look at the quality and outcomes of work with young people who are in transition to adulthood and about to leave the Council's care. This was a highly effective piece of work, which

was strongly informed by the views and voices of young people themselves. The service has responded promptly and comprehensively to the group's recommendations as part of our strategy to improve support to Care Leavers.

- Each of the previous two paragraphs provides an example of our continuing emphasis on the importance of the "voice of the child". There are numerous other examples of this – both in individual case planning and in collective commentary on service development. Walsall's Children in Care Council, known as C4K plays a big part in this, and the successful delivery of the New Belongings programme has added further strength.
- Our arrangements for responding to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Missing Children have been strengthened and are viewed positively across the region. There are good working relationships with all partner organisations, particularly the Police, and a set of assurance processes in place, with reports to Children's Services Scrutiny Panel, to the Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder. A CSE co-ordinator post has been appointed from March 2015.
- All residential children's homes are judged to be "Good" or "Outstanding" by Ofsted.

What do we plan to do next?

- The routing of all contacts through the MAST (Multi Agency Screening Team) has been beneficial, but the quantity and nature of many of these contacts indicates that more work is needed across partners to understand and embed thresholds for the involvement of Early Help and Social Work services. Work is under way to redevelop the threshold criteria, obtain the commitment of partners to them, and to support better processing of new referrals through the creation of a Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
- Although children and young people come into our care only when necessary, we believe we can work in different and more intensive ways to prevent it happening. From April 2015 we will have a new "Edge of Care" team. It will use a range of proven techniques and work very closely with families, especially those with young teenagers for whom the outcomes of becoming Looked After are often poor.
- We will continue to strive to provide placements for Looked After Children that are either in Walsall or close to home. In doing so we will pay attention to learning from Serious Case Reviews and Ofsted inspection outcomes, so as to minimise the use of residential care units outside of our area. Some children who would otherwise be placed in such establishments could be successfully cared for by specialist foster carers. Finding such carers will form part of our increasing efforts to recruit foster carers and adopters.
- We will take action to drive up the quality of social work practice. Our quality assurance system – including audits of cases by managers and inputs from Independent Reviewing Officers – is now enabling us to identify strengths and weaknesses in social work practice. Addressing those issues requires a variety of actions, with the intention of being able to see improvement in future case audits.

- In common with many Councils in this region we have a significant number of social work posts covered by agency staff, especially in the Initial Response Service. The number of agency workers is declining, though not quickly enough. Therefore, we are planning to introduce targeted incentives to improve our ability to recruit and retain staff, especially experienced workers.

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