

## **EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 13 OCTOBER, 2015 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE**

<b>Committee Members Present</b>	Councillor R. Burley (Chair) Councillor E. Hazell (Vice Chair) Councillor A. Ditta Councillor K. Ferguson Councillor T. Jukes Councillor A. Kudhail Councillor G. Perry Councillor D. Shires Councillor S. Wade
<b>Portfolio Holders Present</b>	Councillor M. Bird (Leader) Councillor C. Towe (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships)
<b>Non elected non voting Members present</b>	R. Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative) P. Welter (Secondary Teacher Representative)
<b>Officers Present</b>	David Haley - Director (Children's Services) Lynda Poole – Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) Tony Griffin - Interim Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) Alan Michell - Head of Youth Support Services Neil Picken – Senior Committee Business and Governance Manager
<b>Also Present</b>	Robert Lake Retired Independent Chair of Walsall Safeguarding Children Board

### **521/15 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors M. Follows and T. Wilson.

522/15     **SUBSTITUTIONS**

None.

523/15     **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

524/15     **LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)**

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

525/15     **MINUTES**

Members considered the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September, 2015.

**Resolved:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 September, 2015, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

526/15     **COMMISSIONED YOUTH FUNDING - PETITION**

The Committee considered a report [annexed] which set out a response to a petition organised by Bloxwich Community Partnership (BCP) relating to funding arrangements for Youth Services.

The Portfolio Holder (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships) addressed the committee highlighting that the Scrutiny Committee had previously considered the options and recommended that resource allocation model B (distribution £267k by ward (50%)/£266k (50%) by youth population and 70% by need) should be adopted by Cabinet as this would ensure that funding was shared fairly and equitably.

The Head of Youth Support Services advised that there had been a full review of all resource allocation models and confirmed that a consultation process had been carried out, including seeking the views of children and young people.

A representative of the BCP advised that the revised resource allocation model could result in the closure of the centre and loss of jobs. She believed outreach work which targeted anti social behaviour would also cease. Whilst the Council may look to fill this void, the Community Partnership had well established links and relationships with young people. She suggested that this would also be lost.

The Portfolio Holder (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships) explained that all areas of the Borough experienced ASB and it was important to spend the budget fairly to address this. The model would ensure that where there were more children and young people, there would be more money.

A Member commented that the proposals did recognise the local need and provided opportunity for Area Panels to ensure local needs were met. This view was not supported by another member of the Committee who expressed concern that the resource allocation model was not fair. Further, they feared that ASB would increase should provision from the centre diminish or cease.

The Chair thanked the public for attending and providing their views to the Committee. It was re-iterated that the Committee had considered the matter on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2015 when the findings of the Youth Services Working Group were reported. Option B of the resource allocation model had been accepted and recommended for adoption by Cabinet. That said, it was highlighted that the Council's resource will be focussed on areas of need, prioritising the most vulnerable, with a focus on preventing anti-social behaviour and encouraging community cohesion.

In closing, the Chair advised the public that the matter would be considered at Cabinet on 28 October, 2015 and invited them to attend the meeting to hear proceedings.

## **527/15 2014/15 WALSALL SAFEGUARDING CHILDRENS BOARD – ANNUAL REPORT**

The Committee considered the annual report of the 2014-2015 Walsall Safeguarding Children Board [annexed].

Mr Lake advised that it was a requirement to produce an annual report on the effectiveness of child safeguarding and the promotion of the welfare of children in the local area.

Referring to page 27 of the report, a Member asked how effective the role of the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Coordinator had been and sought clarity on the activities of the role. Mr Lake advised that CSE was a complex area involving a number of various agencies in managing prevention and response. The CSE Coordinator was required to coordinate the activities of all agencies to ensure that every effort was being made to identify and protect individuals from harm.

Mr Lake drew Members attention to the conclusion within the report within which he stated that it is of some concern that, at a strategic level, since the lifting of the Improvement Notice, in some of the safeguarding agencies in Walsall, a degree of complacency could now set in. He continued, stating that some agencies attend the meetings and participate but did not carry out work in-between. He highlighted that the Council had retained its focus and continued to be strong and committed to tackling CSE.

The Chair expressed concern that all Partners may be less focussed and committed to the issue of CSE. She advised that the matter would be scrutinised further at a future meeting.

These comments were endorsed by a number of Members on the Committee. It was commented that a great deal of work had been undertaken to date and it was important that Partners did not become complacent. It was also emphasised that Scrutiny should support the work undertaken by the Board.

In response to a question regarding the role of schools and the level of involvement with CSE, Mr Lake advised that whilst schools were members of the Board there had been inconsistencies with attendance at the Board. The Council employed an officer that did a very good job building relationships between schools and the Council in regard to safeguarding children. This was now much better than in previous years. Within schools, safeguarding was taken seriously by staff at all levels.

A Member asked what could be done to encourage other agencies to improve and increase their commitment. Mr Lake advised that he had stepped down as Independent Chair of the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board and suggested this was perhaps a question best asked of the new Independent Chair. He re-iterated that Walsall Council was committed, however, it was not receiving the support required.

The Chair thanked Mr Lake for his work during his time as Independent Chair on the Board and wished him well. The Chair also advised that the Mr Alan Critchley had been appointed Independent Chair of both the Safeguarding Children Board and Safeguarding Adult Board.

**Resolved:**

That the issue of Child Sexual Exploitation be further scrutinised and considered at a future meeting.

**528/15 WALSALL SELF ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE AND SAFEGUARDING**

The Committee considered a report [annexed] which provided key performance information about the Children's Social Work and Safeguarding service.

In presenting the report, the interim Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that the rates of referrals to children's social care had reduced. This demonstrated that work with other agencies, such as workshops, to better understand thresholds, manage referrals and carry low level risks had been effective. Only cases which required further intervention and assessment were now being referred.

It was also reported that the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub which consisted of staff from the council and agencies such as the Police, was now operational.

In terms of Early Help, it was reported that whilst it appeared that there had been a significant reduction in assessments, it was believed that this was linked to the way in which data was recorded. That said, officers would monitor the situation.

With regard to the number of Looked After Children, it was made clear that all children currently in care were there because it was the safest and most appropriate place for them to be. There had been investment in early help to try to reduce the number of future LAC by intervening when issues arise and providing support which could prevent matter escalating to the point whereby the child would become looked after by the council.

In terms of staffing, the Committee were advised that there had been a slight improvement, with a reduction in the number of vacant posts and agency staff. A new initiative was being explored with recruitment agencies which provide temporary staff, to locate and recruit permanent staff. Whilst there would be a fee to pay for the service it would be more cost effective in the long term.

The Leader of the Council advised that he had made a commitment to ensure that the budget for looked after children was appropriate and realistic in future.

A Member of the Committee challenged the Leader on the issue of Social Workers stating that many agency staff remained who were happy to continue as an agency worker. It was asked how staff with the perceptions of agency staff could be changed to encourage agency staff to become permanent.

The Leader advised that the Council needed to look at its existing staff, levels of experience and revisit the recruitment processes. Social work was a challenging area and the Council were committed to taking recruitment seriously. The Interim Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that recruitment agencies had been approached to look for permanent social workers for the Council. Should the process work, the Council would pay the agency £3,000.00 per successful appointment. In another initiative, efforts were also being made to attract candidates from overseas. A qualified social worker from Australia had recently been appointed.

Members of the Committee queried how much was spent with private agencies to source foster placements. It was also asked how many 'Staying Put' arrangements were in place. The Interim Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) advised that there was a number of placements sourced through private fostering agencies and confirmed that this was a higher cost than those sourced internally. In terms of Staying Put arrangements, there had been a small number and it was expected that this number would increase. The Committee were advised that 'Staying Put' arrangements did impact on foster placements as the carers would have reduced capacity to take on additional foster placements whilst a young person was placed with them under 'Staying Put' arrangements.

The Chair sought assurance that management continued to monitor and challenge performance throughout the service, despite the Improvement Notice being lifted. The Interim Assistant Director (Children's Social Care) provided assurance stating that the report before Members contained a small part of a much wider set of

performance data. He confirmed that this was regularly reviewed and challenges made to ensure that services were continually monitored and improvements made.

In closing, the Chair advised the Committee that progress on the Fostering and Adoption Working Groups recommendations would be considered at the next meeting. This would provide further opportunity for members to drill down into matters such as 'Staying Put' and Foster Care placements.

## **Resolved**

That the Fostering and Adoption Working Group final report be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

## **529/15 RESULTS OVERVIEW (KEY STAGES 1 – 4 & 16-18 PROVISION)**

The Portfolio Holder (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships) gave a presentation [annexed] which set out a summary of 2015 provisional results.

It was highlighted that a further 8 primary and secondary schools needed to achieve a rating of good or better in an Ofsted inspection for the Council to meet the national standard. He made it clear that education was taken very seriously and confirmed that a lot of work was being undertaken to improve outcomes for young people. This was driven by effective senior leaders in the Local Authority and Schools.

A Member acknowledged that progress was being made, noting that it was clear that Walsall was trying to improve. A big challenge for Walsall was addressing the lack of aspiration and so it was encouraging to see the good work being carried out to address this. The role of parents in their children's education was very important and they should be encouraged to enter contracts with schools. In closing, it was made clear that the role of public relations in raising attainment and getting parents on board should not be overlooked.

The Chair endorsed the points raised and added concern that some school buildings did little to inspire pupils.

A Member asked if there was a particular element that had been effective in raising attainment. In response, the Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) advised that there was no panacea for improvement. There were many areas of work that, collectively, had a beneficial effect on attainment. These included:-

- Having clear systems, structures, accountability and frameworks;
- The importance of an effective and challenging Education Challenge Board which works through expectations systematically;
- Early help and enabling children to be 'school ready';
- Effective leadership, Management and Governance;
- A robust Action Plan based on the 6 improvement themes;
- Sector led improvement and school to school support;
- Holding conferences to inspire Headteachers.

The Portfolio Holder (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships) advised that headteachers do care and are passionate about educating the children of Walsall. He also confirmed that all schools should receive support including those which are high achieving.

A Committee Member congratulated the Council and staff involved for the positive improvement but registered concern that:-

- The curriculum change was very different and devalued the skills children have;
- Some sponsored academies were complete failures and yet schools were still being converted;

A further Member stated that the wellbeing of school teachers should not be overlooked as many teachers were leaving their positions due to the pressure they were being put under. It was suggested that Headteachers should take responsibility to promote the wellbeing of their staff.

The Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) made it clear that whilst progress was positive there was a need to be realistic. Walsall remains one of the lowest performing Local Authorities in terms of rank order and so further significant improvements were required. That said the direction of travel was positive. In terms of staff and wellbeing, the Committee were advised that recruitment and retention was fairly stable. It was agreed that effective leadership and governance arrangements were integral to promoting health and wellbeing amongst staff.

Reference was made to improving the use of volunteers within schools. A Member stated that if volunteers were encouraged to assist schools they should be treated fairly as some volunteers of the past were replaced with Teaching Assistants.

## **Resolved**

That the Portfolio Holder (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships) and Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) take note of the comments raised during debate.

## **530/15 FOCUSED DEBATE ON PRIORITIES 3 & 4 OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN**

The Portfolio Holder (Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships) presented a report [annexed] which provided an overview of the actions taken on priorities 3 and 4 of the school improvement action plan.

The accountability of Academies was discussed and the Portfolio Holder advised that he was unsure as to how effective the Regional Schools Commissioner was in ensuring improvements in Academies. The Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) advised that senior managers had met with the Department for Education to discuss the role of the Commissioner and progress of Academies. In terms of sponsored Academies, where there were performance issues, discussions

were held directly with Sponsors. The Director (Children's Services) and Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) also met with Academies across the Borough and had worked hard to improve relations.

A Member queried the level of challenge to schools and Academies. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that challenge was provided every half term. In terms of Academies, the information following the meetings was sent to Ministers. Overall, there was a much better relationship between Academy Sponsors, the Department for Education and the Council.

The Chair stated that children in the Borough had been sold short by Academies. The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised that a lot of secondary schools had been converted early in the process which had resulted in strict contractual arrangements which were difficult to be released from. Academies converting in more recent times were very different contractually and included clauses to enable sponsors to change more readily and quickly.

A committee Member stated that it was important to recognise that Academies had committed staff, many of which would have had little choice other than to continue to work for an Academy when schools converted. Many of the failures were linked to structural issues which, despite the hard work and determination of staff, had led to failure.

### **Resolved**

That the update be noted.

### **531/15 AREAS OF FOCUS AND FORWARD PLANS**

Members considered the Areas of Focus and Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee.

The Senior Committee Business and Governance Manager advised that the Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee had recently established a Working Group on Welfare Reform and were seeking a nomination from the Education and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Nominations were sought and it was:-

### **Resolved:**

1. That Councillor T. Jukes be appointed to the Welfare Reform Group
2. That the work programme and forward plans be noted.

### **532/15 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting was noted as 24 November, 2015.



The meeting terminated at 8.10 p.m.

Chair: .....

Date:.....