

## **Council – 16 November 2015**

### **Portfolio Holder Care and Safeguarding**

#### **Children's Social Care – Achievements and Challenges since May 2015**

Over the last 6 months the great majority of the service's key performance indicators continue to show that the service is performing well and similar conclusions have been drawn from other evidence. For example, at a regional Peer Challenge event in October, the self-assessment that Walsall presented was held up as an example of good practice. At around the same time we received the findings of an external review of parts of the service. It was commented that Children's Services is a "learning organisation that knows itself and acts decisively to continue to improve its performance."

Over the same period there have been positive developments. The introduction of Practice Managers has served to increase and improve the amount and quality of managerial oversight, support and challenge to social workers. The management team, which came together in a restructure, implemented in September 2014, is showing increased signs of maturity and effective 'grip' on the service and its challenge.

The recent establishment of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (the MASH), in which social workers operate in close liaison with the Police and other agencies is providing a safe and decisive initial response service for referrals about children at risk of harm. Their work is being assisted by the results of a sequence of multi-agency social care thresholds workshops that have improved the shared understanding of the situations that require a social care response, leading to fewer unnecessary contacts therefore improving the effectiveness of the system.

The rate of referral to the social care "front door" has almost halved from its peak during 2013-14. The service has instituted a number of changes aimed at reducing the number of children who are referred for a second time within a year; for example by strengthening the communication links between the social work and early help services. These changes are having a positive impact, though the total number of cases requiring social work attention and intervention has not reduced and social work caseloads are a little higher than we would prefer.

In April 2015 the Initial Response Service introduced the Single Assessment in line with Government guidance. This replaced the previous two-stage (initial and core) assessment process. The benefit of this is that, if the case needs to be transferred to the Safeguarding and Family Support service, it does so with a much more complete analysis of what is needed for the child and family. It is also heartening to report that, 98% such assessments are completed within the stipulated timescale.

Our adoption service continues to increase the number and speed of children finding permanent, loving homes. We hope that this will be further assisted by proposed moves to regionalise this area of work in collaboration with five other Local Authorities.

The key challenges to the service remain largely unchanged from those at the time I became portfolio holder. The total forecast overspend for 2015/16 in Children Services, before any mitigating action plan, is now estimated at £5.98m, driven in the main by the financial pressure on the number and mix of Looked After Children (LAC), circa £3.6m, and the number and cost of agency workers covering social care posts, circa £2m. For the current financial year, one off mitigating actions have been put forward by the Children's Directorate to offset some of this pressure, whilst one-off earmarked reserves held corporately have been drawn upon to offset the remaining overspend position. This was agreed by Cabinet on the 28 October 2015.

Going forward from 2016/17, there continue to be some significant demand pressures within Childrens Social Care which are expected to continue and therefore require investment within the 2016/17 – 2019/20 draft budget. Prior to Cabinet recommending the final budget to Council in February 2016, an allocation of additional resources will be made available which will, if approved, increase the cash limit over the period. This allocation remains under review. Childrens Social Care will however contribute to reducing the Cash limit requirement, by looking to deliver realistic, considered and achievable savings over the next two financial years with proposals of £2.5m included in the draft budget position.

The number of Looked After Children (LAC) reduced from 629 in April 2014 to 608 by the April 2015, but it has now risen to 630. Officers have action plans that aim to safely reduce this number, with a particular focus on our reliance on more expensive provision external to the Council's own resources. It is possible to conclude that the number of LAC in Walsall is about right; officers and Members remember that the action that caused the number to be much smaller in 2012 led directly to Ofsted judging the Council's service as inadequate. I have therefore cautioned officers against chasing unrealistic targets that could lead to a repeat of that situation or to children being left in unsafe homes. However, we must not allow that to stop us from providing effective Early Help services that can often prevent the need for children to be removed from their families and taken into care. We must also enable any children who can return home safely to do so.

The other major source of overspend in the service is the number of posts that cannot be filled by employed staff and therefore have to be covered by agency workers. This is especially the case in the Initial Response Service (IRS) where over 50% of social workers are with us on an interim basis. This is not a matter of quality (as they are some of our most experienced and – in some cases – long-standing staff) but of cost and stability. Officers have been proactive in attempts to recruit and retain staff, which has led to some reduction in the number of agency workers over the last six months. A key part of this has taken the form of a market supplement to be paid to social work staff in IRS.

There have been a number of positive developments in Early Help in response to the detailed work we have done to develop our understanding of the demand for Early Help and how well the system meets the needs of children, young people and their families.

We have continued to strengthen our Early Help offer in response to our top demands, specifically our response to families needing help because of a combination of domestic abuse, parental mental ill health and parental substance misuse- 'toxic trio'. We have hosted a market engagement event with providers to inform them of our proposed investment of £860,000 in the creation of practical hands-on voluntary sector capacity, the upskilling of the partnership workforce, the adoption of more joined up and integrated approaches and the commissioning of specialist services to meet identified gaps. This work will reduce the demand for statutory intervention and the significant costs associated with that demand, as well as improving the lives and life chances of children.

Work to strengthen relationships and improve service integration has continued as part of our quest to make 'Early Help' everyone's business and improve its effectiveness and impact. With investment from Schools Forum we have developed school led, 0-19 years whole family locality working arrangements, phase 1 of which is well underway in the Darlaston School Partnership and which will be rolled out across the other partnerships in early 2016.

The multi-disciplinary Edge of Care Team that went live in April 2015 is working well to prevent escalation, avoid admittance to care and support children and young people to stay home or return home. Following the recent establishment of the MASH, work is progressing to strengthen capacity and the help available from the Early Help hub for families and professionals.

The Council commissioned a new client record system last year for both Children and Adult Social Care. This has been a major investment of £2.5m in a "state of the art" system used by nearly half of all Local Authorities. A cross Directorate Programme Board has been working with the supplier to redesign our internal processes, deal with over a million records, and train the staff. It will significantly improve the efficiency of staff and managers, and provide realtime access to information that will improve the quality service and safety to vulnerable and disabled children and adults. The new system goes live on 23 November 2015.

We are looking creatively to find new ways of working which makes ever more efficient use of resources. For example locality working where local agencies, including children's services, schools, health, housing, and the voluntary sector are integrating their approaches and resources and developing new, more effective ways of delivering early help to those children, young people and families that we are most worried about in our communities. In the midst of some unprecedented challenges driven by population growth, austerity and greater awareness of children's harm and neglect we are engaged in some responsive partnership working. For example, the strength of our relationship with West Midlands Police is undoubtedly a key factor in our work on CSE being viewed positively across the region. Other issues demonstrate similar strong relationships, such as that with our Health colleagues that has helped with respect to the issue of mandatory reporting requirements.

There is a genuine and welcome determination across the service to achieve constant improvement to a service that is working well.

### **Adult Social Care Achievements since May 2015**

The Cabinet agreed in June a change to the revised Charging policy for non residential care to remove all charges for community alarms. This is a valued preventative service to over 5000 mainly older or disabled people. There have been some “teething” problems with aspects of the implementation which need resolution. However the feedback from most users and carers has been it is easier to understand, and more straightforward having a single integrated approach to the charging of social care services. A review of this policy is anticipated in the New Year to gauge impact, seek improvements, and align consultation on any changes to the budget proposals.

The Council has supported the Walsall Healthcare Trust and the Walsall Clinical Commissioning Group over the last 2 years in managing the pressures on the Manor Hospital especially urgent care, through social care support to older people needing support on discharge. The hospital achieved the 4 hour wait targets consistently over the summer for the first time in 2 years – though we cannot be complacent given the surges in demand on the hospital that have returned this autumn.

Adult social care has been under sustained financial pressure due to rising demand and costs of the services. The Cabinet has agreed to my suggestion that we use reserves to correct the position in the short term this year. We also want to take a deep review of the use of resources and our workforce in adult social care prior to finalising budget proposals for the next four years. A Peer Challenge, arranged by the LGA and ADASS, has been undertaken by people from Shropshire and Stoke Councils. I look forward to receiving their report and using its content to assist with budget and service planning.

The Care Act has led to us undertaking the implementation of new statutory duties for adult social care since April 2015. We have had a cross Council board preparing, training staff and introducing new innovative ways to help people meet their needs. The highlights include:

- A new web portal from April 2015 that provides information, advice, self-assessment and access to a wide ranging community directory of up-to-date services and events.
- Enhanced carers support through the Carers Hub – a local independent charity
- The revised Safeguarding Adults Board is now a statutory body led by a newly appointed independent chair ( joint with the Local Children’s Safeguarding Board) supporting our efforts to protect vulnerable people

**Councillor Eddie Hughes**  
**Cabinet Member Care and Safeguarding**  
**November 2015**