

Portfolio Holder Children's Services – Councillor Elson

Safe, happy and learning well

I wanted to begin this, my first report to Council by recognising the significant contribution made by those of you working with and on behalf of the children and families of Walsall. As the new Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, I passionately believe that all children deserve to be safe, happy and learning well and that this is the most important role that our council performs. Over the last 12 months the service has shown great determination, commitment and resilience in our continued quest to support and safeguard the most vulnerable children in Walsall. The multi-faceted impact of COVID 19 on Children's Services and on our children and young people has added pressure on top of the existing challenges facing the sector nationally, in particular on the mental health of many of our young people. Here in Walsall, it has highlighted the resilience and innovation of our front line staff and managers, who have driven significant improvements and been the catalyst for the formation of better, more powerful partnerships locally.

Thanks

So before I move on to set out the achievements and priorities for Children's Services, I want to start with some thanks.

First and foremost I want to formally recognise the Children's Services workforce; I cannot thank those working across Children's Services enough for their hard work and the dedication shown, for being so adept at managing risk and responding to the prevailing circumstances so that our children and families continue to receive the help and support they need. That goes for those colleagues working in support services too, whose contribution is so crucial to the work we do support.

I also want to commend Sally Rowe and her leadership team for their dedication to the delivery of our WR4C transformation programme, the dividends of which are evident in my achievements section of this report.

Next, I would like to recognise our partners, statutory and voluntary, for their continued commitment and contribution to working in partnership to improve the lives and life chances of children and young people this last 12 months. Working collaboratively to ensure the children of Walsall have the best possible start in life, are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well is a necessity not a choice. By working effectively together we can better safeguard children and young people.

And of course, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Leader, the Chief Executive, Cabinet and my fellow elected members, here in the council chamber, for the strong corporate commitment and investment you have shown and for the relentless focus on prioritising services to improve outcomes for children and young people, from which we are now seeing tangible progress and benefits for children, families and the workforce. Specific mention must go to Councillor Wilson, the former portfolio holder for Children's Services, Councillor Statham, my fellow Portfolio Holder for Education & Skills, to Councillor Hicken chair of Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee and to the members of those respective Boards as well as the Corporate Parenting Board for their continued support of Children's Services.

Finally, before I set out Children's Services achievements over the preceding 12 months and our priorities for the coming year, I would like to pay tribute to the many children, young people, parents, carers and advocates, including some of our most vulnerable children, those looked after, those who have left care, those with special educational needs and disabilities and those who find themselves in the criminal justice system.

Our achievements

Despite the challenging environment in which we deliver services, we have continued to implement our vision and improve outcomes for children, young people and families in Walsall.

Our continuous improvement validated by inspections

In October 2021 Walsall Children's Services was inspected by Ofsted under the Inspecting Local Authorities Children's services (ILACS) framework. Arguably our most notable achievement last year was the outcome of that inspection which saw Walsall Children's Services move out of a 'requires improvement' rating to an **overall 'good' rating**. Since this time we have been focused on implementing an Ofsted Action Plan in response to the four ILAC recommendations.

In October 2022, we were notified that Ofsted, CQC and HMICFRS were to undertake a joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) in Walsall. This inspection considered the multi-agency identification of risk and need. At the time of writing this report the outcome letter is not yet available but verbal feedback to the partnership was very positive, with a small number of areas for development identified. I will look forward to sharing this letter with you in the New Year.

Strengthened our Strategic Partnership

We have established **Walsall Children and Young People Strategic Alliance** driven by a "Children First" vision recognising that "today's children are upstream adults". The Alliance creates a collaborative space critical to developing new systematic ways of thinking and working to improve lived experience and outcomes for children growing up in Walsall. The Alliance two key areas of focus: giving children the best start in life and creating a system of belonging.

Locality working

We have continued to develop our **four locality hubs** seeking opportunities to co-locate teams, connect practitioners with each other, with community resources and families have enabled easier access to integrated services giving the right help and the right time.

The impact of this work was again recognised by the JTAI inspection published report (January 2022); "Children are supported by a comprehensive multi-agency early help offer which helps them access a range of support and services, when they need it. Regular locality partnership meetings and co-location of early help multidisciplinary teams, including family support workers, health visitors and school nurses, help promote communication and information-sharing about children's needs. There is strong engagement by school staff as lead professionals completing early help assessments. Opportunities for networking through the 'time for talk' initiative is well received by many school leaders, with engagement particularly strong in the primary phase."

Building on the success of our Holiday Activity and Food programme we strengthened our locality model through building relationships with key voluntary and community sector partners to ensure we connect families to community support and secure sustainable change and support for families who stop needing Children Services interventions. We did this by creating access to a network of community 'spokes' providing opportunity through their work with families to connect them with community resources.

Lived experience of children and young people driving through change

We know that knife crime and violence disproportionality impacts boys from ethnic minority backgrounds. Through our Youth Justice work we have sought funding from the PCC through the Safer Walsall Partnership to deliver services to respond to this disproportionality issue. The Open Lens Programme provide a mentoring and engagement intervention for these boys.

Our young people are currently making a film, learning practical skills along the way, exploring their experiences of the justice system and discrimination. The film will be launched in March 2023 and will be calling the partnership to action.

The YJS was successful in securing funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), through the Safer Walsall Partnership (SWP), to work with St-Giles and provide a mentor for our young people involved in serious violence and criminal exploitation. Through this partnership we have also delivered staff training and group work programmes for young people and parents. We have had positive outcomes for young people and as such we have committed to providing lived experienced mentors for the next 3 years.

Workforce investment

We have continued to invest in our workforce by developing and embedding our Workforce and Wellbeing Strategy, which was informed by feedback from staff through our annual health check. We have revised our social work career progression pathway; invested in senior social worker posts, introduced clinical supervision and planned our annual staff conference in February 2023 (delayed slightly due to the Joint targeted Area Inspection).

Practice Improvement

We have continued to focus on practice improvement by implementing our revised five practice priorities focussing on embedding restorative practice, planning and review, supervision, language that cares and understanding the child's lived experience. In June 2023 we held our first face to face Social Work Practice Week to provide a dedicated focus on quality of our practice. We have continued to strengthen our quality assurance framework to understand the impact of demand and quality of practice and continue to roll out Power BI dashboards to front line managers, giving them access to up to date performance and management information at the touch of a button. The Early Help Practice Week is taking place in January 2023.

Reviewed and strengthened our Early Help offer

We worked with the Department Levelling Up Housing and Communities, consulted far and wide across the partnership which has led to a new and improved process, including a refreshed Early Help Assessment, Team around the Family Plan, Review and Outcome Framework. As a result we have:

- Support our families better with easier and timely support services.
- Provide our families with family friendly and easy to read assessments, support plans and updates.
- Support our partners working as School and Health Lead professionals better in the role of 'Lead Professional'.
- Support our staff through training and ongoing support of new process.

Support our Social Work colleagues in Step down and ensuring families get support when they are at the end of statutory social work support and interventions.

We are one of 75 LA to secure £ 3.7M over three financial years to deliver Family Hubs/Best Start in Life programme. We will be using this opportunity to enhance our locality working and develop a system-wide model of providing high-quality, joined-up, whole-family support services. Hubs deliver these services from conception, through a child's early years until they reach the age of 19 (or 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities).

We have embedded the **Early Help Volunteer Service**, recruiting 15 volunteers to provide low level support to families and deliver group work as part of our development of 'community scaffolding' to build community resilience and are using the delivery of our Holiday Activity and Food Programme to build capacity in the voluntary sector.

In collaboration with young carers, their families, key partners the Walsall Young Carers Support service has been refreshed and relaunched. As a result we have implemented a bespoke young carer's website, established Young carers Champions within various organisations including schools, hospital, School health, Beacon, Walsall Housing group, etc. In partnership with leisure services we have secured free leisure passes for all of our young carers which gives them free access to gym facilities and swimming, promoting emotional health and wellbeing along with physical fitness, the passes also enable their family members to access the facilities at a reduced rate.

Preventing children coming into care

We have continued to develop **Turning Point**, our service that works with families to prevent family breakdown that can result in adolescents becoming looked after. Over the past 12 months, Turning Point has worked with 84 children with only 7 coming into the care of the local authority.

We have implemented the **Family Safeguarding Model**, as part of the DfE' Strengthening Families Protecting Children programme, working with children and their families to deliver a whole-system change via children and adult specialists working in a unified team providing whole family support to tackle the impact of the 'trio of vulnerabilities' (domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental ill-health) on children's lives.

In 2020-21 the number of children becoming subject of a CP Plan reduced by 30.7% compared with 2019-20. In 2021-22, there was a reduction of 26.8% compared with 2019-20. Over the two years, this equates to a reduction of 272 children becoming subject of a child protection plan. Although there have been some increases in recent months of children becoming subject of a child protection plan, linked to larger sibling groups and increasing pressures within families due to the cost of living crisis and ongoing post-covid long term mental health issues, in the 12 months to the end of September 2022 the number of children becoming subject of a plan is still 13.8% lower than in 2019-20.

There has also been a significant decrease in the proportion of children ceasing child protection plans and becoming looked after. In 2021-22, 25.9% of children entered care after being subject of a plan. This has reduced to 14.5% so far in 2022-23.

Throughout 2020-21 and 2021-22 the number of children entering care has reduced by around 12%, however, for children aged 0-12 the reduction is higher at 14%. This equates to a reduction of around 38 children aged 0-12 entering care and an overall reduction of 49 children.

Where children are entering care, they are being supported to return home more quickly. In 2019-20, 17.4% of children who entered care left care within nine months. This increased to 21.1% in 2020-21 and 27.4% in 2021-22. For children who have come into care so far in 2022, 27% have returned home within nine months

We have undertaken a review of the **MASH**, to consider the impact of Early Help joining the front door and effectiveness of our partnerships within the MASH, to drive improvements to pathways, support and local partnership working. We will implement the recommendations from this review, which will be overseen by the MASH Management Group.

Over the course of the year we have established a pilot case holding **Exploitation Pod** comprising of 1 consultant social worker and 2 social workers that works alongside our current exploitation team and they will work with 20 young people at risk of either criminal or sexual exploitation. The work of the team will be trauma informed and will focus on the use of motivational interviewing as a way of disrupting the pattern of exploitation. This pilot will run

for 12 months and started in September this year. We have devised a set of KPI's and have developed our own toolkit in order to break the cycle of exploitation based on those deemed to be at medium risk. These children are identified through our daily triage and are offered a pack of support tailored to their needs. This is part of a controlled trial so for every child worked within the pilot, a further 20 will be identified as a comparable and measure as part of the 'business as usual' approach. Once all of the children in both the pilot and the controlled group are audited, we will be able to evaluate whether a case holding service is more impactful in our future service delivery

In addition to the pilot, we tendered a bid to the DfE as part of their innovation fund for **Community Activities Reducing Exploitation**. Our bid focussed on low level exploitation risk for those children with additional learning needs, with a view to offering community support and mentoring for up to 70 children and young people. We were successful and year 1 round of funding was secured and runs up to March 2023. So far, over 40 children have been supported via this project across Walsall.

In December 2022 Walsall Council was accredited by the national Fostering Network as being a **Foster Friendly employer**. As a part of the scheme, Walsall Council has implemented a fostering friendly HR policy to support and protect employees who foster. The purpose of the fostering friendly policy is to recognise and value the contribution that foster carers make to the lives of children and young people in care. And to provide the flexibility needed in order that employees who foster can meet the needs of their fostered child or young person.

Priorities going forward

Turning to our priorities for the coming 12 months and beyond, our 5 strategic priorities enabling us to realise our vision, improve outcomes and life chances of children and young people remain steadfast and unchanged. These are:

Reducing demand

We will be maximising the development of Family Hubs/Best Start in Life programme to provide easy access to help and support, deliver effective prevention and early intervention services and creating community resilience, reducing the need for local authority children services to support families.

We will manage demand for young people who need care by increasing placement sufficiency, reducing placement breakdown and children moving to higher cost placements, reducing number of children in residential care, increasing community support to meet need in locally and commissioning support and placements differently. We are in the process of increasing our residential provision by 2 new homes, as well as undertaking a review of our residential provision to ensure that it meets our needs as set out within our revised children in care analysis.

Developing a highly skilled/stable workforce by developing our profile as an employer making the job do-able and enabling our workforce to do the right thing; supporting our staff with an effective workforce and wellbeing strategy; developing a clear career pathway and succession planning and having a clear recruitment and retention strategy.

Co-ordinating and influencing the establishment of a mature WR4C partnership platform to drive the delivery of the WR4C vision in order to reduce demand for council services and prevent children and families from needing costly statutory interventions approach. Connecting transformation across Walsall in the interest children and families will be key including integrating services around our children and families where this makes sense for them, strategies, processes, adopting the same thresholds, removing duplication between partners and co-producing with families and the community.

Continue to strengthen the partnership through the facilitation of the Children and Young People Alliance and joining the dots with key other strategic partnerships by champion “Children First” agenda based on understanding of need and lived experience of children and young people growing up in the Borough

Continue our improvement plan especially around the areas identified in recent Ofsted inspections with a particular focus on strengthening our Help and Protection offer, our local Offer and Education health and Care plans

Responding to National change programmes

Over the last 12 months we have had big National change agenda’s which will impact on the way we deliver Children’s Services locally, this includes, investment in Youth Justice prevention, Education Investment area, Levelling up School White paper, the Short Break innovation investment and The Care Review.

We will seek opportunities through these big national agendas to enhance the WR4C offer further across Children Services and with partners to secure even better outcomes for children growing up in Walsall.

Our focus over the next 12 months includes:

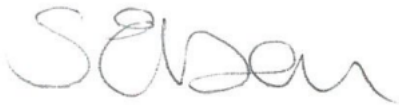
- Lead on the development of a Children and Young People partnership strategy as part of the Alliance work to ensure “Children First” continues to be a focus across the partnership.
- Addressing the JTAI areas of development, alongside continued implementation of the Ofsted Action Plan.
- Improving placement sufficiency, in particular foster carer sufficiency.
- Continuing to develop partnership recording systems and to strengthen or recording through our MOSAIC health check and linking information across social care and youth justice systems.
- Continuing to implement and embed our locality model with the opening of further locality buildings implementing Family Hubs and rolling out the Family Safeguarding model to all children open to social care.
- Continuing our drive to improve outcomes for children and families with a focus on quality of practice, staff well-being and equipping our social workers to deliver outstanding services, making Walsall a place where workers want to come and stay.
- Continuing to develop our service offer to effectively respond to the needs of vulnerable adolescents including reduce the vulnerabilities of getting involved in exploitation or youth violence.
- Continuing to focus on working ‘with’ families to bring about change so that children and families can stay together where it is safe to do so, including embedding the Family Safeguarding model so that it is sustainable.
- Opening of two new Children’s Homes. One two bedded home for high need young people and a second home for up to three young people that will offer a period of assessment, with a view to children either returning home or stepping down to a foster placement.
- Responding to the findings of the Independent Care Review of Children’s Social Care, which was led by Josh McAlister. The government’s response to the review are expected in January 2023.

Conclusion

My report has highlighted some of our many achievements on our journey of improvement as well as our future priorities. Those priorities will undoubtedly keep us busy over the next 12 months and beyond, but I wanted to conclude by acknowledging the significant progress that has been made, that we have all made, that has been endorsed once again by Ofsted, and

by reiterating my thanks, gratitude and praise to every one of you who played a part in our improvement journey to date.

As a Council we continue to put children first. I have every confidence that will use the collective spirit and commitment we have amassed and channelled over the last 12 months to drive further change that will benefit the children and young people of Walsall now and in the future.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Stacie Elson'.

Councillor Stacie Elson
Portfolio Holder Children's Services