

**Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Conference Room 2, Walsall Council House**

Monday 30th January 2023 at 6.00 p.m.

Committee Members Present

Councillor A. Hicken (Chair)
Councillor T. Jukes (Vice Chair)
Councillor L. Harrison
Councillor C. Horton
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor S. Nasreen
Councillor F. Mazhar
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor V. Waters

Portfolio Holder

Councillor S. Elson - Children's Services

Officers Present

Colleen Male - Director (Childrens Social Work)
Isabelle Vanderheeren - Director (Early Help)
Tanya Collier - Lead Accountant
Rita Holmer - Head of Safeguarding and Localities
Nikki Gough - Democratic Services Officer

41/22 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Rattigan and Councillor Garcha.

42/22 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

43/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations and no party whip of interest.

44/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to be considered in private session.

Minutes

45/22 The minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2022 were considered by the committee.

Resolved

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8 December be approved as a true and accurate record.

46/22 Corporate Financial Performance 2022/23 – 7 month position ended 31 October 2022

The Lead Accountant presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Committee were informed of the updated forecasted financial position for 2022/23 based on the position to October 2022, as reported to Cabinet on 14 December 2022, to allow the scrutiny of the financial performance of the council, and specifically for services within the committee's remit.

Further detail was provided on the movement in financial position (table 3), Members were informed that the total allocated reserves for 2022/23 for services under the remit of this committee were £6.15m, of which £3.3m had been used or committed to date and £0.35m would be transferred to reserves at the year-end, ring-fenced for expected spend in 2023/24. The Lead Accountant stated that included within the budget for 2022/23 for services within the remit of the Committee was £5.46m of approved savings. The capital forecast programme for services under the remit of the committee was £1.34m and it was expected that this would be fully spent in the financial year – with the list of schemes included in table 8.

The Portfolio Holder stated that the budget overspend needed to continue to be managed, with action taken to rectify this which would have an impact in the future and would reduce the overspend in time.

The Director (Children's Services) informed the Committee that a range of mitigating actions had been put in place, with the biggest risk being placement sufficiency with the average weekly cost being significantly higher. The residential market is complicated, with children being placed in both registered and unregistered settings. A drive to increase the number of foster carers would mean better outcomes for young people and it would be more cost effective for the Council.

A discussion was held on the proposal for two new residential children's homes and the benefits were acknowledged. The Director confirmed this and stated that when a child was in crisis, placements were often high cost and children were placed at a distance away from Walsall. If beds were available in our own residential homes, then intensive work could be done with the family to return the child home or time could be taken to identify a suitable placement.

In response to a Member question relating to fostering, the Director explained that there would be a range of publicity, webinars, and information on the council website.

In response to challenge relating to the financial overspend, the Director stated that there had been unprecedented circumstances, the increase in costs to the council was significant and if complex children were taken into care in the future, this could have an impact on the councils financial situation.

The Committee questioned what action was being taken to reduce the number of agency staff (which were higher cost). Officers confirmed that the reliance on agency staff had been significantly reduced which was against the national and regional trend. The Authority was successful at attracting new social workers but found it more challenging to recruit experienced social workers. Therefore, there was a focus on staff retention – but there was a continued need for agency social workers. The Director stated that a new model was being developed which introduced a Consultant Social Worker to provide additional capacity and support to newer members of staff. In response to questions, Officers confirmed that local universities provided the majority of student placements.

A discussion was held on the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC), the Committee further explained that this project worked with parents to bring about change, to keep families together and achieve permanence more quickly. The project had been extended for a year, and work was taking place on a model of sustainability alongside Dudley and Sandwell.

The Committee noted their thanks to staff for their hard work.

Resolved

That the Corporate Financial Performance 2022/23 – 7 month position ended 31 October 2022 report be noted.

47/22 Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme 2023/24 – 2026/27

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services introduced the report. She highlighted investments, cost pressures, saving proposals, and the proposed draft capital programme spending. The Chair invited the Lead Accountant (Children's Services) to present the report, who outlined the attached appendices.

Members discussed the overspend position and were assured that this had been taken into account within the budget proposals.

Further detail was sought by the Committee in response to reference 38 – additional Looked after Children demand/cost pressures. The Committee was informed that the investment figure for 2023/24 was higher than that of future years, in order to account/adjust for the current financial position, however this would be reviewed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process to ensure the level of investment continues to reflect the changes in cost and demand.

It was concluded by the Committee that the programmes developed by children's services such as locality hubs, the family safeguarding model, the family drug and alcohol court, and the Daisy project were all aimed at improving outcomes for children and families and reducing costs to the authority.

The Committee Resolved:

That the Committee noted the draft revenue budget proposals and draft revenue capital scheme.

48/22 Locality Working and Family Hubs

The Director (Early Help) introduced the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Committee was informed that the report provided an overview of the progress to date and on-going planning for the blended 'hybrid' model of delivery for the co-location of Children's Social Care, Early Help and key locality partners within the North, West, Central South, and East Locality. The report provided an overview on the alignment to the Family Hub model and implementation.

The benefits of delivering a community based model of working were described, included the reducing the chances of poor outcomes for children, young people and their families through access to a range of local services and support networks, increased community capacity, and resilience.

The Committee considered further information on the areas for development as detailed within the report. In response to questions from the Committee, Officers stated that a hybrid way of working was being developed to allow some colocation whilst challenges were experienced with space. It was confirmed that this had not impacted outcomes of the service. In response to questions, it was also confirmed that translators were used when needed by families.

A discussion was held in relation to the models, and it was stressed that this was a relationship strength based model. The biggest challenge was capacity and demand – resource was allocated according to demand. Officers explained that dependent on needs of the locality, Social Workers developed specialisms in each locality.

Resolved

That

1. The direction of travel to date to be supported.
2. That the report be noted.

49/22

Family Hubs

The Director (Early Help) introduced the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed) providing an overview of the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care Family Hubs and Start for Life programme which aimed to provide families with the integrated support they need to care for their children. Information was provided on how the programme would be delivered in Walsall and the progress made to date.

Family hubs were described as:

- Locality based.
- Support for families.

- A universal front door for families.
- Accessible services through a building, outreach or virtual means.
- Aimed at improving access and connections to services.

The Committee was informed that Government funding was made available to 75 local authorities, of which Walsall was included, for the Family hub and Start for Life programme funding package for the period 2022-2025. There were specific areas of action – which local authorities were required to commit to implementing.

The governance structure of the programme was described, and it was noted that it aligned with the local health and wellbeing strategy and its three priority areas, with the Board receiving annual assurances on the delivery of the programme. It was confirmed that the council remained the accountable body for the overall funding and delivery of the programme.

In response to questions from Members, Officers confirmed that regular surveys would be carried out to analyse feedback on the programme. Members were informed that although similar to the SureStart programme there were differences such as the whole family working and that family hubs were not just centred around ‘buildings’.

Officers stressed that early family help would be strengthened in order to meet need. The report provided detail on lots of different strands of work and national reviews to provide an indication of the direction of travel. Members asked further questions on training provided, and Officers confirmed that practitioners received mandatory training which was expanded on in the programme. Members stated that it was important to gain families confidence and trust.

Resolved

1. The direction of travel for the implementation of the Family Hub & Start for Life Programme was supported
2. The implantation plan and partnership in driving forward the model and embedding across the borough was supported.

50/22

Recommendation Tracker

The Committee considered the recommendation tracker.

Resolved

1. That the recommendation tracker be noted.
2. That the recommendation relating to the visit to the Mayors parlour be removed from the tracker.

51/22

Areas of Focus 2022/23

Resolved

That the areas of focus for the municipal year 2022/23 be noted

Date of next meeting

52/22

The date of the next meeting was noted as 13 March 2022 at 6:00 p.m.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7:52 p.m.

Signed:

Date:

