

EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 OCTOBER 2017 AT 6.00 PM AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Committee Members present	Councillor C. Towe (Chair) Councillor T. Jukes (Vice-Chair) Councillor D. Barker Councillor A. Ditta Councillor J. Fitzpatrick Councillor E. Hazell Councillor D. James Councillor A. Kudhail Councillor T. Wilson
Portfolio Holders present	Councillor A. Nawaz - Children's Services and Education
Non-elected voting Members Present	Mrs T. Tunnell (Parent Governor)
Non-elected non-voting Members present	Mr R. Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative)
Officers present	Ms E. Ioannides - Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) Ms D. Carter - Assistant Director (Children's Services) Mrs L. Poole - Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) Ms A. Potts - Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development) Dr P. Fantom - Democratic Services Officer
In attendance	Ms C. Burgess - LGA Children's Improvement Adviser (West Midlands and South West Regions) Mr A. Critchley - Independent Chair of the Walsall Safeguarding Children and Adult Board

74/17 EVENT FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The Vice-Chair informed the Committee that a successful evening for the looked after children in Walsall had been held on 13 October 2017, and this view was endorsed by other Members of the Committee who had attended the event.

The Committee expressed its appreciation to Ms L. Thompson for her hard work in setting up and organising the event.

75/17 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor M. Follows and Mrs P. Welter.

76/17 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

77/17 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

78/17 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)

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

79/17 MINUTES

It was noted that Councillor E. Hazell's name had been omitted from the list of Committee Members present at the last meeting and that this should be amended.

It was requested by a Member that the fifth paragraph of Minute 65/17 be amended to read: 'Mr Moran explained that an additional £300,000 of funding had been proposed for investment in a package of support for the Academy which included appropriate external support for teaching and allowing three days' continuing personal development (CPD).'

The Chair requested that the seventh paragraph of Minute 65/17 be amended to read: 'The Chair thanked Mr Moran for engaging with the Council and stressed that any disconnection with the Local Authority was disadvantageous.'

Further to the sixteenth paragraph of Minute 65/17, a Member noted that in addition to accepting an invitation to attend the meeting on 27 March 2018, Mr Moran had also indicated that he was happy to be contacted directly by Committee Members.

It was requested by a Member that the fourth paragraph of Minute 66/17 be amended to read: 'Members highlighted the need for the RSC to be transparent and open to scrutiny to fulfil their role of effectively challenging academies, and that the RSC be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee.'

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 September 2017, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

80/17 **OFSTED INSPECTION OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN IN NEED OF HELP AND PROTECTION, CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND CARE LEAVERS**

The Committee received a report [annexed] on the outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and review of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board. The full Ofsted inspection report having been circulated to Members previously, an executive summary of the Ofsted report was appended to the report.

The Chair introduced this item by stating that in view of the limitations of time, it was proposed that discussion should be in general terms rather than on individual issues, which could be considered via the formation of a working group. The Committee supported this approach.

An overview of the report was provided by the Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development), outlining the approach being taken in dealing with the twelve recommendations contained in the Ofsted inspection report and noting that a number of areas of improvement were on-going. An action plan was to be provided to Ofsted within seventy days, and it was proposed that the existing improvement plan would be revised and used as the basis for this. It was further suggested that an update on the achievement of improvements could be provided to the Committee on a quarterly basis.

Further to a question from a Member, enquiring whether there was one of the twelve Ofsted recommendations that should be highlighted in particular, the Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development) pointed out that achievement of all twelve recommendations represented identified improvement areas crucial to improving the outcomes and life chances of children in Walsall.

The Assistant Director (Children's Services) gave an update on the stability and training of the workforce, noting that the improvement and up-skilling of staff took time to achieve. Moreover, it was noted that all of the West Midlands local authorities encountered difficulties in attracting and retaining social work staff.

In response to a question from a Member on how long the existing improvement plan had been in place, it was confirmed that whilst the action plan had been produced in 2016, there had been further improvement in the ensuing period. Nevertheless, work was still in progress, for example on restorative practice to ensure that children were seen regularly, with it being emphasised that it took time for social workers to develop working relationships with the young people in their care.

The sharing of good practice with other local authorities was discussed following a question from the Committee, with it being noted by the Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development) that at their regional forum local authorities worked as a group to challenge each other in terms of their practice via peer reviews. The Assistant Director (Children's Services) indicated that the Council also worked with authorities from North Yorkshire in this regard. Furthermore, she added that in judging whether the infrastructure and processes were correct, and given that some parts of the process were easier to change than others, it was essential to consider the results and the impact on service users.

A Member asked whether the existing improvement plan had been given to Ofsted and it was confirmed that it had been provided, together with other documentation. As stated in section 4 of the report, the Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development) related that for the areas of improvement identified, the recommendations and required improvement actions would be incorporated within the existing single strategic improvement plan.

The Chair having sought clarification regarding the term 'Graded Care Profile' (GCP), the Assistant Director (Children's Services) informed the Committee that this was an assessment tool used across a number of disciplines and which helped to assess the domains when a child was at risk of neglect. By providing a baseline, this tool helped to focus interventions on those areas where they were needed, thereby focusing resources and focusing on good impact. Training on this for front line staff was being conducted by the NSPCC, and had been initiated before the Ofsted inspection, but it was advised that it was important to recognise the time taken for staff to become skilled in its use. The Independent Chair of the Walsall Safeguarding Children and Adult Board informed the Committee that GCP was more effective when delivered on a multi-agency basis and that a workshop for this was being arranged. Any Members who were interested in this were invited to attend the workshop.

With reference to four staff engagement sessions that had occurred since the publication of the Ofsted inspection report, the Interim Executive Director reported that three sessions had been planned but, due to high demand, a fourth session was arranged. These well-attended events were an opportunity for staff to contribute to the action plan for improving services and it was noted that all four sessions had been attended by the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and Education.

A Member noted that Wolverhampton City Council had recently received a good rating in its Ofsted inspection and enquired about the types of issues being faced by other, comparable, local authorities. The Assistant Director (Children's Services) confirmed that officers from Children's Services had met with their Wolverhampton counterparts. She also stressed that there had been significant investment in restorative practice and a commitment to making Walsall an attractive and safe place for prospective employees by creating development opportunities and relieving casework pressures. On the latter point, and further to a question from the Chair, it was reported that the 'front door' caseloads had been reduced to 25 cases and that for the corporate parenting service, the target of 15 cases had been achieved. In the Safeguarding and Family Support Service, newly qualified social workers were currently dealing with 15 cases whereas more experienced workers had a workload of 29 cases; the intention being to reduce this to 15 cases. In terms of the timeline for achieving this by December 2017, it was noted that the Service was still continuing to recruit new members of staff. Members expressed concern that in some areas the caseload was still twice that of the target and sought reassurance that the steps being taken did not constitute a temporary fix to the problem. In response, the Assistant Director (Children's Services) emphasised the challenges faced when recruiting agency staff.

Further to officers' attendance at regional fora, a Member requested information regarding the possible formation of a regional college for social workers, which had previously been mooted but had not come to fruition. The Assistant Director (Children's Services) advised the Committee that a regional bid had been made for a

future social project to deliver funding for a social work training academy for newly qualified social workers and Assessed Year in Employment (ASYE) placements.

The Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development), in responding to a question from the Chair on the embedding of Early Help, as related to point 5 of the Executive Summary document, highlighted the improvements being made and the positive impact of Early Help. Effective targeting of the Early Help offer was helping to ensure that very young children did not have to be brought into the social care system. The difference being made by this targeted approach nationally had been the subject of a key position paper from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). In terms of the Chair's question regarding the impact on children and families, it was noted that a brief was being prepared for the new Chief Executive and that this included information on and projections for the future demand for social care. This indicated that whilst Early Help was having a positive effect, socio-economic considerations meant that there were still significant numbers of children and families in Walsall in need of help from the social care system.

Further clarification was sought from Members on a number of the acronyms in the Executive Summary document. It was confirmed that these were: Initial Response Service (IRS), Safeguarding and Family Support Service (SFS), Child in Need (CiN) and Child Protection Plan (CPP). Members requested that in future reports, such terms should be shown in full at the outset and acronyms thereafter. Furthermore, it was recalled by some Members that they had previously requested a list of key terms be provided to assist them in this regard, and reiterated that this should be provided.

In relation to point 5 of the Executive Summary, which noted the positive impact of Early Help but observed that there had not been a reduction in the number of referrals to Children's Social Care, the Committee sought further clarification. The Assistant Director (Children's Services) advised that in a meeting specifically concerned with this matter, officers had challenged Ofsted and she reiterated that it would take time for improvements to be translated into such a reduction in referrals being achieved.

Further to questions from the Committee in relation to point 6 of the Executive Summary, and to Ofsted Recommendation 3, the Assistant Director (Children's Services) informed Members that a dedicated worker had been employed to liaise with schools and the West Midlands Police on child sexual exploitation and to achieve greater consistency, for instance in the chairing of Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) meetings. Whilst Ofsted had recognised the importance of this, it had noted that this was a recent appointment and that further work was required in relation to the robustness of the management tier and by commissioning further specialist training.

The perceived weakness of the management tier and the consequences of this for services were raised by Members as a matter of concern. The Assistant Director (Children's Services) underlined the work currently being done with team managers and the investment in first-line managers through their completion of a national development programme. Having regard to a question from a Member on staffing, it was pointed out that Ofsted acknowledged that considerable action had been taken to improve but there had not been sufficient time for the steps to be fully embedded. Consequently, Ofsted had maintained that it was necessary to demonstrate over a longer period of time that these improvements were having a positive impact.

In responding to a question from a Member, the Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development) informed the Committee of her involvement with the homelessness project initiated by the Mayor of the West Midlands and the potential opportunities that could arise from this. This was echoed by the Chair, who highlighted the Mayor's interests in housing, skills and transport.

At this point in the proceedings, there was a question from a member of the public. The Chair determined that as the matter in question did not directly relate to the item on the agenda and, furthermore, that it was currently under discussion with the Council's officers, that it should not be addressed by the Committee. This was supported by all other Members of the Committee. In view of certain allegations voiced by another member of the public, the Chair advised him that these should be addressed to the Chief Executive. All members of the public then left the meeting.

In returning to a discussion of the Ofsted inspection, the Interim Executive Director noted that the report had represented a significant improvement on previous reports, indicating evidence of positive movement. She added that the steps being taken to prioritise and reduce caseloads would make a significant contribution to future improvement and noted that the problems being experienced in recruiting social workers were not unique to Walsall.

In concluding the Committee's discussion of this item, the Chair referred to his disappointment that at the conclusion of the Ofsted inspection, the inspectors had not provided him with any feedback and that he felt that this would have been beneficial to the Committee for them to have done so.

Resolved:

1. That in relation to the findings of the Ofsted inspection, the actions being taken in response to Ofsted's recommendations, as set out in the Executive Summary (Appendix 1 to the report), be noted;
2. That the action plan being prepared, and which was to be submitted to the meeting of the Cabinet to be held on 13 December 2017, be noted;
3. That the Committee should receive a quarterly update on Ofsted improvements and the monitoring of progress against key areas of performance;
4. That a list of key acronyms used in the Education and Children's Services service areas be prepared and circulated to Members.

81/17 'MAKING A DIFFERENCE' PRESENTATION

The Committee received a presentation on improving scrutiny, which was delivered by Ms Claire Burgess of the Local Government Association. This had been arranged to assist the Committee in addressing recommendation 99 of the Ofsted inspection report, which stated that:

'The scrutiny committee, while challenging of process and compliance, does not sufficiently understand and challenge the quality of services for children effectively. For example, scrutiny of early help focuses on service provision rather than quality and outcomes for children.'

The presentation featured PowerPoint slides relating to:

- Aims
- Function of effective overview and scrutiny
- Ofsted's perspective on good governance - good scrutiny
- Making a difference
- What does this mean in practice?
- Qualitative evidence - scrutiny of the quality of services
- Methods for gathering intelligence
- Areas of focus to provide assurance of impact and quality of service
- The benefits of robust overview and scrutiny to children's services
- What can get in the way and what support will help you?
- Support the LGA can offer

In opening the discussion, the Chair gave a summary of what had been done to prepare for the Ofsted inspection and stressed that it was important to understand this. He therefore requested clarification on what should be done by the Committee in future which had not been done before, and he sought an assurance that this would be appropriate and would make a difference.

It was considered by the Chair and Members that at previous meetings of the Committee, the agenda had carried a high number of items and that many of these were very substantial reports. As a consequence of this, it was recognised that due to time constraints it had not always been possible to give each agenda item the fullest attention it merited. Furthermore, the Committee's work programme was also viewed by a number of Members as being too large and that it required revision.

Ms Burgess suggested that activities performed outside of formal committee meetings, such as task-and-finish groups, were important to Ofsted's view of what constituted a successful scrutiny committee. By focusing on the areas in the improvement plan, a small number of areas, for example workforce development could be pursued and that the work programme could be aligned to priorities. Members challenged this by referring to the Committee's current and past work programmes, and the use of various task-and-finish groups in this way, together with visits to children's homes and other activities. The Chair also reminded the Committee that the establishment of more task-and-finish groups would necessarily be constrained by limited resources.

The importance of making a difference for the benefit of children was emphasised by Members. There was a reference to the 'young inspectors' initiative, when young children had talked to their peers about their experiences of care, but it was reported that this had fallen into abeyance due to the young inspectors becoming too old and not being replaced by other young people willing to become involved in the initiative.

Having regard to further questions from Members on the work programme, the Chair expressed the view that the Committee had too much work to undertake satisfactorily and, therefore, it would be beneficial to split it into two separate scrutiny committees. One committee could deal with matters concerning the Education service area and the other, the Children's Services area. However, during the course of debate, it was noted that in an independent assessment undertaken two years' earlier, it had been recommended that given the overlap between the two services there should be a continuation of the current arrangement of having a committee that provided overview and scrutiny for both areas. Members expressed reservations that the continuation of this arrangement could lead to issues of interest to the Committee being overlooked or marginalised and that criticism could be incurred at a future date.

The Chair sought the views of Committee Members, with there being general support for the proposition that two new committees for the scrutiny and overview of Education and Children's Services should be formed to replace the current Committee. The majority view of Members was that with two areas of such importance and sizeable agendas, it would be beneficial to change the current arrangement. Furthermore, whilst it was appropriate that elected Members should take a proactive role to engage with issues of concern that arose outside of the formal meetings, it was recognised that this might impose further demands on resources and front line staff in the respective service areas. There was an appreciation by Members that they had this responsibility although, due to the extent of their commitments, some had more time to have this degree of involvement than others. The suggestion that sub-groups of the Committee could be set up to deal with particular issues and to then report back was considered, but it was felt that this would generate bureaucracy and complication without offering a solution to address the Ofsted inspection recommendation. Contrary views were expressed by two Members, who highlighted such factors as the cost to be incurred and the possibility for duplication or the lack of a sufficient overview of the larger issues involved in the service areas of Education and Children's Services. In response to these points, other Members indicated that despite the current financial constraints, it would be preferable to incur the cost of changing the arrangement rather than missing any out issues of importance. For example, it had been noted that there had been difficulties in ensuring compliance with the statutory duties in relation to fostering and that this area of concern had to be addressed as a matter of priority.

In the course of this discussion, Members referred to the forthcoming inspection of SENDI, indicating that this should be a agenda item for the Committee's next meeting.

In responding to questions from the Committee regarding the allocation of Cabinet responsibilities, the Portfolio Holder for Education and Children's Services stated that it was probable that the arrangement of both service areas being overseen by one portfolio holder was likely to continue.

Ms Burgess emphasised the importance of improvement plans in providing baselines for the setting of agenda and priorities so that they could make a difference, with there being a balance required between quantitative and qualitative approaches that should be reflected appropriately in the governance arrangements for the Committee. She also reminded the Committee of the range of assistance and support that could be offered by the Local Government Association, and it was confirmed that the Council's membership of the LGA enabled access to this resource.

The Chair drew the discussion to its conclusion by reiterating that it was a matter for the Committee to set its own agenda. He acknowledged that the last year had been one in which there had been particular pressures faced due to the Ofsted inspection, and that despite complying with the approaches to preparing for this which had been recommended, the Committee had still incurred some criticism from Ofsted.

Resolved:

That a recommendation be made to the Council that the Constitution and structure of the Council be amended in order that the Education and Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee be replaced by an Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee and a Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

82/17 WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLANS

Members considered the work programme and forward plans.

With reference to the Committee’s work programme, and a discussion of the items for inclusion therein, it was proposed by Members that the next meeting of the Committee should be focused on the SENDI inspection and that representatives of partner agencies or organisations should be invited to attend. Items for future meetings would be discussed at the November meeting of the Committee and the work programme revised accordingly.

Resolved:

1. That the forward plans be noted;
2. That the principal item to be considered at the meeting of the Committee to be held on 21 November 2017 to be a report on the SENDI inspection.

83/17 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was 21 November 2017.

The meeting terminated at 8.20 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....