

Cabinet Member Briefing – Children Early Help, Social Care and Youth Justice portfolio



Introduction

'Our Council Plan' – Priorities

As Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, my report details those activities within Early Help, Social Care and Youth Justice we are most proud of, the challenges we face and the areas upon which we are focussing attention to ensure better outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people in the Borough.

In Walsall, we have worked hard over the last 18 months to develop a strong Children and Young People's Alliance, to explore more effective strategic partnership collaborations and long-term decision making, in improving outcomes for all children, young people and their families.

On the 23rd of June 2023, the Alliance held its first 'Children First' Summit, bringing together 55 leaders from across Walsall to collaborate on developing a meaningful Children and Young Persons 2040 Strategy - recognising that children born today will be adults in 2040. The strategy will contribute to our Walsall 2040 vision to create a compassionate, healthy, economically strong, and successful place that has children and young people at its heart.

This aligns to our corporate aim to reduce inequalities and make the most of potential, by enabling our children to fulfil their potential and thrive. It supports our key area of focus that our children should: have the best possible start, be safe from harm and be happy, healthy and learning well.

We want to ensure services are there now and, in the future, to support children and families and that they can access a range of activities to have fun, grow, learn, and thrive locally. Resilient children and thriving families are key to ensure Walsall's children can achieve their potential become successful adults from 2040 and beyond.

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Our Service Delivery

Family Hubs

In February 2023 the DfE confirmed that Walsall was successful in their application as one of the 75 Local Authorities who would receive the Family Hubs Start for Life funding of £3,869m from 2022-2025.

This provided an opportunity to build on the strong foundations of our locality model to develop our Walsall Family Hub programme. Our 4 locality hubs were transformed into Walsall's 4 Locality Family Hub, launched in July 2023. They aim to provide a welcoming space where children, young people aged 0-19 and up to 25 for those young people with additional needs and their families can go to get advice and support when they need it. Our Family Hubs are in the heart of vulnerable local communities where services have come together providing one 'front door' access to get help and to talk to someone in a safe space about sensitive things that maybe worrying them. Our Family Hubs are currently working towards becoming UNICEF Baby Friendly.

In addition to our 4 Locality family Hubs we deliver wider community-based support and services through 10 'Community Spokes' provided through our voluntary and community sector partners. Our 10 spokes will offer advice on a range of local community activities for families, children and young people, provide a space for local families to come together, for services to deliver group work or meet on a 121 basis with families, to provide sessions such as play and stay, baby weighing clinics, digital support services as well as providing foodbanks.

The introduction of Family Hubs is enabling us to be creative at removing barriers and destigmatising help and support including the offer of social care interventions. We have extended the opening times to weekends and evenings to allow greater engagement with working families including fathers.

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Early Help

Since the refresh and relaunch in November 2022 of the new priority needs and outcome framework, the Early Help Partnership has seen a significant increase in both families being referred, the complexity of families requiring help and support along with the length of time families need support to make positive and sustainable change, however the partnership continues to strengthen and together it continues to be creative within the resources to develop a range of interventions in order to meet the growing needs of children, young people, and their families. Over the past 12 months we have piloted several new approaches including:

Community Activities Reducing Exploitation (CARE) Pilot – a programme supporting children aged 10 plus with SEND (diagnosed or undiagnosed) who are showing early signs of potential vulnerabilities to exploitation but who were below Children’s Social Care or EHCP threshold, whilst also supporting young people through difficult transition time from primary to secondary education

Transition Pilot: In 2022/23 the partnership became concerned about the number of young people in year 7 who were at risk of being excluded from school and wanted to work together to see how, with early intervention this could be avoided.

The partnership in 2023 was recognised by the LGC and were successful in getting to the final of the LGC 2023 awards for the Children’s Services category, whilst we did not win the feedback from the judges recognised the positive work of the partnership.

Family Safeguarding

It has been three years since we first implemented the Family Safeguarding Model. A Family Safeguarding Celebration event was held in the Town Hall and was well attended by partners. This was an occasion to celebrate the successes as well as highlighting the future development of the model as we adapt to the ever-changing societal landscape.

Evidence of Impact



Significant reduction in the number of children becoming subject of a child protection plan and entering care. Where children are entering care, they are being supported to return home to their parents more quickly.

Children becoming subject of a plan



↓ 26.2%
since 2019/20

↓ 28.0%

For children aged 12 and under

396 fewer children subject of a plan,
372 under the age of 12

Children entering care following a period of CP Planning



↓ From 25.4% in 2019-20 to 17.9%

↓ From 27.7% in 2019-20 to 19.5%

For children aged 12 and under



232 fewer children entering care following a period of CP Planning, 202 under the age of 12

Children entering care



↓ 31.1%
since 2019/20

↓ 38.4%

For children aged 12 and under

214 fewer children entering care,
179 under the age of 12

"I wanted to write to let you know how great SC has been with supporting our children at DC. She is organised, efficient and lovely with the children. She also communicates with us, which is so vital when working with outside agencies.

We are really impressed with the work she is doing and the service BCWA offer is excellent so thank you."

A Walsall Head Teacher



Children leaving care within 9 months

↑ From 17.8% in 2019-20 to 27.9%

↑ From 11.9% in 2019-20 to 19.0%

For children aged 12 and under

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The Exploitation Team Pilot

This team was launched in September 2022 and sits alongside our existing Exploitation Hub. The pilot focuses on delivering bespoke support to individual children identified through our exploitation triage who are vulnerable to either child sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation. The team holds up to 20 children and work in an intensive, trauma informed way, that both meets the needs of the individual child alongside working with the police officers located alongside the hub to disrupt the exploitation of children. The mid-term review of the pilot has established that key performance indicators have begun to be met. Audit findings identified that there has been a decrease in vulnerability of risk which has included a reduction in criminal activity, improved school attendance and positive participation in the assessment, plans and intervention.

Profile of Our Children in Care:

Where we do have to place children in care, we have a **Placement Sufficiency Strategy** that focusses on developing our internal fostering and residential provision alongside working with the private market to ensure we are securing the right homes for children that afford value for money. We are constantly reviewing our marketing strategy to ensure that we reach the maximum number of Walsall residents who could be successfully assessed as carers to our children.

- We currently have 660 children in our care.
- The proportion of children from ethnic backgrounds other than white is increasing, largely within the Asian and other groups. This is more generally driven by the increasing number of separated migrant children. This number has risen sharply since January 2023.
- The number of boys entering care has increased by 16.9%, whereas the number of girls entering care has reduced by 31.9%. The increase in children in remand and separated migrant children contributes to this. Boys are more likely to move into residential care either as a first placement or as a placement move.

70% of our children live in foster home. There is an increase in the use of independent fostering providers. More children, coming into our care, have complex support needs, with high levels of need associated with exploitation, mental health difficulties, and have required Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards.

We have increased our **Mockingbird scheme**, this was first launched in Walsall in 2017. Our Mockingbird Hubs have a proven track record of providing stable homes for children, promote relationships between brothers and sisters and supports the retention of foster carers. We now have five constellations in Walsall, with a sixth being developed, this is the largest number of constellations other than Leeds. A recent visit from Mockingbird USA praised the work being undertaken in Walsall.

We have developed the **New Horizons Fostering Scheme** to help children who are currently living in Children's Homes to return to live in a family environment. This is a bespoke scheme for teenagers that provides foster carers with bespoke training and an increased financial offer that compensates for some of the demands of the scheme (one carer in the household needs to be home based). Our intention is to increase the scheme in order to avoid teenagers being placed in out of borough residential provision.

We are in the process of opening **two additional children's homes- Pine View** and a second children's home with a proposal for a third. This will enable more in house residential provision and continues our commitment to keep children local to Walsall and their families and community where it is possible to do so.

We **celebrated our children in care and care leavers** at Drayton Manor Park. This event was well attended and the children thoroughly enjoyed it.

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Youth Justice

At the start of June 2023, Walsall Youth Justice Partnership welcomed an HMIP joint thematic inspection of remanded children. A team of inspectors arrived in Walsall to evaluate practice for these children and considered their journey from the Police Station to Court and ultimately into the secure estate. We have seen an increase in the number of Walsall children sent to YOIs over the past 12 months and therefore the inspection presented us with an opportunity to learn and consider our practice for these children. Inspectors commended the work undertaken to address disproportionality and recognised that The Youth Justice team had responded well to the learning and recommendations within the HMIP thematic report that explored the experience of boys with black and mixed ethnicity.

Youth Justice launched '**Reformation 2 – the system**' in October 2023 - A powerful documentary on the disproportionality faced by black and mixed heritage boys in the Youth Justice System in Walsall and the solutions that are needed.

Together with our partners it is our vision to become a national leading example and beacon for change in tackling the issue of the overrepresentation of Black and Mixed Ethnicity children within the Statutory provision including Youth Justice ; contributing towards a more equitable society (aligned to our "We are Walsall 2040" strategy).

Our Strategies

Walsall Right for Children vision sets out our ambition of "to ensure that the right children are in the right place with the right support for as long as it's needed to ensure that they are safe from harm, happy and learning well".

Children's Services deliver the Walsall Right for Children vision through the development of strategies in line with our priorities:

- **The Early Help Strategy**- The strategy and associated action plans are ambitious, designed to transform the ways of working and the provision of early support to families in Walsall and in doing so, improve outcomes for vulnerable children, young people reducing the need for acute or specialist services. The partnership monitors the action plans and hold annual reviews of direction travelled.
- **The Youth Justice Strategic Plan**- this outlines the Youth Justice Board partners priorities to improve life outcomes for the children and families at risk of entering or in the youth justice system as well and to have fewer victims of youth crime and a safer Walsall.
- **Working with Father strategy** – recognising the importance of the role of male care givers this strategy is designed to improve the support to families by using a positive partnership approach to working with fathers/male carers, improving universal offers, improving awareness of the importance of fathering in the child rearing process amongst fathers and professionals and reducing harm to children and parents in child protection processes.
- **Child Neglect Strategy** - is aiming to offer an analysis of the Walsall context, the impact of neglect on children in Walsall, and what the Partnership is going to do to strategically improve practice and services to children and families.
- **Exploitation Strategy** – sets out our whole system multi-agency approach to identify and address the root causes and drivers and promote factors that protect individuals from becoming involved or at risk of violence and exploitation.

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Workforce Well Being

Crucially and critically, we continue to invest in maintaining the stability of our workforce. We are constantly applying innovative approaches to both the recruitment and retention of social workers. This has resulted in the development of a clear career pathway that includes the creation of the 'Senior Social Worker post' and the Consultant Social Worker Post'. This means that we can utilise our more local workforce and maximise on recruiting into the service workers who have existing experiences in related fields.

A total of 225 staff members completed the Annual Health Check this year. Most of the workforce noted being '*able to make a difference*' and their '*teams/colleagues*' made them feel positive about coming to work. Staff agreed they had access to the right training, induction and learning and development opportunities for their role and felt that management guidance was helpful. They felt supported to do their role and manage risk well and felt Senior Leadership are visible.

We held our third annual practice week. One of the key consistent messages that came across was the commitment of the social care workforce to getting things right for the children and families we work with. There was a clear thread throughout of the impact and value of the relational approach exhibited by our practitioners. There was lots of helpful and constructive learning and there is a directorate wide action plan to drive this forward, this included embedding writing to the child as a consistent approach to practice and considering how we can improve the way we support the scaffolding of family support at the earliest opportunity for families.

We continue to provide support and care to our valued practitioners across Early Help, Children's Social Work and Youth Justice.

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Future works

- **Response to complex Adolescents:** We are developing a comprehensive response to children who have multiple complex needs, including mental health problems, behavioural and emotional difficulties as well there being challenges in education. To prevent an escalation into care, children’s services are working collaboratively with health colleagues to provide a more bespoke response to meeting the needs of such children. We want to avoid these children and families being pushed from pillar to post as they attempt to access different systems that have different ways of working, criteria and different legal frameworks. We are translating the learning from our multi-disciplinary Family Safeguarding Teams and creating a multi-disciplinary offer to children with complex needs. This will complement our existing Turning Point Offer and will adopt the same approach to working with children and their families albeit with additional specialisms around autism, mental health and neuro diversity.
- **Strengthening our response to Care Leavers** by joining over 55 council who have introduced care experience as a protected characteristic. This will demonstrate our commitment as a Corporate Parent to ending the disparity and inequality faced by Care Experienced Young People.
- **Strengthen co productive activity with our 4th Partner-** we want to work more collaboratively with parents and children in order that we listen, act and collaborate on improving service delivery.
- **Response to wider transformation;** The government published their response to the review ‘Stable homes, Build on love’ in February 2023 setting out its plans to transform early help and children’s social care. We believe our locality model sets strong foundations to enable the transformation we anticipate in the final national guidance, but the scale of change will still be significant, and we will need to ensure we have the capacity to be able to respond to this. We have already started to think about what this change would mean.

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Thank you

I would like to thank all of those working with and on behalf of the children and families in Walsall. As the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, I am committed to ensuring that children in this borough are safe, happy and have a sense of belonging. The past 12 months has seen many achievements and many challenges. I would like to thank the Children's Services Workforces- the dedication and commitment of our practitioners across Early Help, Children Social Work and Youth Justice is truly remarkable.

I would also want to thank Colleen Male and her leadership team for their dedication to the delivery of the WR4C transformation programme. We do not and cannot work alone- I would like also to thank our statutory and voluntary partners for their continued commitment to improving the life chances of our children.

I would also like to thank the Children in Care Council for supporting me in my role, through your enthusiasm, honesty, and passion in holding us all to account.



Stacie

Councillor Stacie Elson
Portfolio Holder for Children's Services