

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, CONFERENCE ROOM 2, WALSALL COUNCIL HOUSE

Tuesday 26th July 2022 at 6.00 p.m.

Committee Members Present:

Councillor A. Hicken (Chair)
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor F. Mazhar
Councillor A. Garcha
Councillor L. Harrison
Councillor C. Horton
Councillor S. Nasreen
Councillor V. Waters
Councillor K. Sears

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor T. Wilson – Children's Services

Officers Present

Colleen Male	-	Director, Children's Social Work
Sally Rowe	-	Executive Director, Children's Services
Isabel Vanderheeren	-	Director, Early Help and Commissioning & Early Help
Nikki Gough	-	Democratic Services Officer
Reena Farmah	-	Democratic Services Officer

1/22 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor T. Jukes, Councillor L. Rattigan and Councillor Kaur.

The Chair welcomed Members to the meeting and introductions were made.

2/22 Substitutions

Councillor K. Sears substituted on behalf of Councillor L. Rattigan for the duration of the meeting.

3/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations of interest for the duration of the meeting.

4/25 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to be considered in private session.

5/22 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 13th April, 2022 were considered by the Committee.

Resolved

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 13 April 2022 be approved as a true and accurate record.

6/22

Areas of focus 2022/23

The Director, Children's Social Work - Support and Protection, spoke to the presentation and outlined the senior structure for Children's Services including various departments within the services area (see annexed). The Director of Children's Early Help & Partnership provided an overview of Early Help highlighting key areas within early help; intervention services, partnerships, Safeguarding Business Unit and the Youth Justice Service (Annexed).

The Director, Children's Social Work - Support and Protection introduced the key areas within the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee remit and highlighted specific issues that the Committee may wish to consider scrutinising;

- Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
- Missing and Exploitation.
- Duty and Assessment.
- Family Safeguarding & Localities.
- Corporate Parenting, Transition & Leaving Care, Fostering.
- Children with Disabilities.
- Turning Point.
- Placement Team.
- Residential Services.
- Safeguarding & Review.
- Early Help and Locality Working.
- Youth Justice.
- Children's Commissioning.
- Walsall Right 4 Children Transformation.

The Director updated Members on the Walsall Right for Children agenda. There was a good understanding of the needs of children in the locality, this knowledge was used to drive forward work with key partners. The current structures had been developed to improve services following the 2017 Ofsted judgement that Children's Services required improvement. Members were informed that a transformation programme was developed to address the recommendations produced as a result of the Ofsted inspection to ensure children had the best possible start; were safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well. The five key principles that governed the improvement journey were getting the basic rights, listening to children and families and adjusting services. The voice of children, families and their lived experiences were very important and these helped shape services to improve outcomes.

Officers stated that creating a skilled and stable workforce was important to ensure quality services could be delivered alongside the development of a proud culture to improve quality, impact and outcomes.

The Committee were further informed that the Big Conversation programme was launched in 2018 and was ongoing (see annexed). The Authority worked in consultation with children, young people and parents to improve service delivery - this was a valuable part of decision making and transformation.

The Director addressed the Committee and provided details of the four strategic priorities 2022/23 :

- Reduce demand.
- Develop a highly skilled/stable workforce.
- Developing a mature strategic partnership platform.
- Respond to recommendations from inspections and National agenda's.

The Government had conducted a national care review report which had been published, the local authority were awaiting further guidance and recommendations which would be actioned accordingly.

Walsall Council was one of 75 local authorities that would be introducing family hubs to focus on the first 1000 days of a child's life. To provide support, advice and guidance, and promote better health. The programme would be led by the Local Authority alongside Partners from September, 2022.

The Portfolio Holder expressed his passion for Children Services and stated that engagement with young people was fundamental to service delivery which should be child focused. The main areas of focus were recommended for the 2022/23 municipal year were discussed:

- Locality Hubs across Walsall.
- Recruitment and retention (national shortage of social workers).
- Residential homes.
- Early Help Strategy.
- Youth Justice Priorities.
- Budget monitoring.

The Chair invited questions and comments from the Committee.

A Member requested an update following the 2017 Ofsted inspection.

The Executive Director, Children's Services responded that a follow up inspection took place in October 2021, the outcome was good overall, with areas for improvement.

A Member questioned the locations and selection criteria used for the locality hubs. The Director explained that the services were being delivered on a multi-level approach with a physical and virtual presence; buildings, outreach and virtual aspects depending upon the needs of families within the locations. There would be touch points with health colleagues.

A discussion took place regarding the data for teenage pregnancy rates and low birth weights, compared with West Midlands (2019 data). The Director explained that Public Health led on these issues with Children's Services supporting. There was a Teenage Pregnancy Strategy in place to consider prevention in partnership with schools and health colleagues. The Director explained that prevention was significant, and that not all issues were the responsibility of the local authority, however issues were connected and therefore a community partnership approach was required.

A discussion ensued regarding social workers caseloads. The Portfolio Holder clarified that caseloads influenced the number of social workers required and were monitored to ensure that social workers were not overloaded as managing workload was key for delivering quality work. The Executive Director, Children's Services reported that the current average caseload per social worker was 15.2, and from a national perspective this was good. However this number varied depending upon complexities of support required. The aim was to keep casework low; between 15/16 cases. Members were asked to note that there was a national shortage of social workers. Recruitment of newly qualified social workers had been positive and retention was a priority. Some Social workers were attracted to agency work due to higher salaries. It was stressed that staff turnover had improved, there was a workforce and wellbeing strategy in place which focused on retaining social workers, it was noted that there were some complex needs in Walsall.

The Chair requested summary data in relation to children in care, starters and leavers to be shared with the committee via e-mail.

A discussion took place regarding the management of residential homes. The Director explained that Walsall Council were not responsible for independent sector homes and explained that planning applications were managed by the planning department. Residential homes that the Authority had possession of were managed by Walsall Council. The Portfolio Holder commented further, that the homes were part of the planning process and would be managed by the planning department, the homes were regulated by Ofsted and any complaints were directed to them.

The Democratic Services Officer summarised the range of issues within this report (see annexed), and highlighted that the Scrutiny Overview Committee had recommended that the Children's Services Overview Scrutiny Committee to add the following items to their work programme for 2022/23:

- Children's Play strategy
- Children's Health

The following items were suggested to be added as focus areas; Exploitation and Youth Justice (serious violence and young people).

A Member questioned the difference between fostering and private fostering. The Director explained the definition of private fostering and fostering, stating the local authority had statutory responsibilities that allow them to assess and oversee children that were living with people who were not direct family.

A discussion took place regarding Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), the Director explained that Children's Services worked very closely with CAMHS, they were a key partner, and a working group had been established to further progress services.

The following areas of focus were agreed by the Committee for the 2022/23 municipal year:

- Budget consultation.
- Children's Services Locality Working

- Residential Homes
- Early Help Strategy - process
- Social Worker recruitment and retention
- Private Fostering.
- Youth Justice – serious violence and young people.
- Exploitation and Safeguarding
- Family hubs update and progress.
- Children's Services Performance and Benchmarking.

Resolved that:

1. **The areas of focus for 2022/23 were agreed.**
2. **A work programme for the municipal year be produced containing agreed areas of focus, for agreement by the Committee.**
3. **The glossary and a summary data in relation to children in care, starters and leavers to be shared with the committee via e-mail**

8/22 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was agreed as 27 September 2022, at 6:00.p.m.
The Chair thanked all present for attending.

9/22 Termination of Meeting

The meeting terminated at 7.04 p.m.