

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 22 March 2018

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	T Usher (Chair)	
	Councillors	M McLaughlin B Berry A Brighthouse W Clements T Jones B Kenny C Meaden	J Stapleton A Sykes W Ward G Wood KJ Williams S Williams
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillor	B Mooney	
<u>Apologies</u>	Councillors	T Anderson P Hayes	C Povall
	Co-Opted Member	J Johnson	

47 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST / PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement. The following declarations were made –

Councillor Chris Meaden made a declaration of personal interest in respect of the agenda generally by virtue of her daughter's employment in the Children and Young People's Department.

A general declaration of personal interest on behalf of the Members of the Committee was made by virtue of the holding of positions of School Governor at various schools.

Councillor Warren Ward declared a personal interest in agenda item 8 'Improving Life Chances Strategy – Pledge Update' by virtue of his employment with the Department for Work and Pensions.

48 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 January 2018 be approved as a correct record.

49 **2017/18 QUARTER 3 WIRRAL PLAN PERFORMANCE**

The Committee received a report presenting the 2017/18 Quarter 3 (October - December 2017) performance report for the Wirral Plan Pledges under the remit of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The performance report, which was included as an Appendix to the submitted report, provided a description of progress in Quarter 3 as well as providing available data in relation to a range of outcome indicators and supporting measures.

The performance report contained details of the progress made, and overviews of that progress from the Lead Cabinet Member, in respect of individual measures being pursued with regard to the following Wirral Plan Pledges pertinent to the Committee -

- Children are Ready for School;
- Children are Ready for Work and Adulthood;
- Vulnerable Children Reach their Full Potential;
- Reducing Child and Family Poverty (Improving Life Chances);
- People with Disabilities live Independent Lives; and
- Zero Tolerance to Domestic Violence.

Paul Boyce, Director for Children presented the performance report and invited comment from Members on the content contained therein –

Councillor Moira McLaughlin noted the reduction in performance related to pregnancy scans and, while pleased to see improved performance in respect of development checks of infants by the time they were 8 weeks old, noted declining performance for health visitor reviews at 12 months and at 2–2 ½ years. The Director undertook to respond to the query.

The Chair queried the roles and functions of the Panels referenced against the 'rate of looked after children' indicator. The Deputy Director – Children's Services advised that the Planning for Children Panel focussed predominantly on children in the care system with a care package or placement in place, or on children who received a costly care package: this Panel brought together all aspects of health, education and social care. The Edge of Care Panel

focussed on children at risk of becoming looked after and through a multi-agency approach considered what could be put in place for such children.

The Chair noted a reported decline in the number of child protection plans and queried whether this was necessarily a positive. The Deputy Director – Children’s Services advised that when the Pledge was written the number of such plans was very high and so a reduction would have been seen as a positive at that time. Over time, following a levelling off of the numbers of children coming into care and the inspection report, the ratio was now in line with other local authorities. The situation would continue to be monitored as a continuing downward trend might be a matter of concern.

The reported reduction of 40% in the number of young people presenting to A&E following self-harm or attempted suicide was noted, and it was queried whether that could be attributed to the recently introduced advice line. The Director indicated that while that was unlikely to be what the data suggested, take up of the advice line was positive, particularly with regard to parents seeking support. There was a need to further interrogate the data to understand what was happening.

Councillor Moira McLaughlin referenced work in relation to the Improving Life Chances pledge, noting the lack of performance data and the resultant ability to judge progress. In a similar vein, Councillor Steve Williams noted the delay on data being provided in respect of the reduction of medication for ADHD.

Councillor Alan Brighouse noted the work being done for children coming out of care and queried the work undertaken by the Council to support the NEET (not in employment, education or training). The Committee was advised that the 14-19 Team worked hard to try and ensure that young people were in employment, education or training. Benchmarking on this issue had recently changed and it would now require 12 months data to comment definitively on progress. Overall, it was thought that performance in the 16-17 years age group was good, but that there were issues about sustainability at the ages of 18-19 years. Further to this issue, it was noted that a number of asylum seekers placed in the Borough had never been to school, and approaches as to how to engage with this group were under consideration.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

50 **FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT QUARTER 3 2017/18**

Andrew Roberts, Senior Manager – Financial Management, introduced his report presenting financial monitoring information for Children and Families as at close of the third quarter of the 2017/18 financial year that gave a consideration of performance against the revenue budget, including savings,

income and debt, and a commentary on performance against the capital budget. The report was supported by a presentation addressing issues highlighted within the report and considering the anticipated financial position for the following financial year.

The Committee was advised of a predicted current year £3.9 million overspend after the allocation of £5 million from Contingency linked primarily to the costs of care and of agency staffing. Agency costs were impacting the budget due to a number of vacant posts and a further number requiring sickness / maternity cover. The numbers of looked after children continued to rise, and in certain key areas there had been significant increases in placement costs. The identified savings for Children and Families had proved difficult to progress given the increasing demand in the service.

The funding for the Improvement Plan taking advantage of capital flexibilities introduced the previous year was considered. These flexibilities had provided funding for 166 additional posts, 80% of which were within Social Care / Safeguarding and for which recruitment was in progress. However, the capital flexibilities required such investment to transform delivery and to either reduce costs of or demand for services going forward. Funding was focussed towards the needs of those leaving care, strengthening the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Safeguarding teams, addressing high caseloads, improving information within the department, and enhancing Early Help and Prevention services.

Councillor Alan Brighouse queried the rules applying to the use of capital receipts in the transformation budget and whether transformation had to be demonstrated. It was confirmed that it was required to demonstrate how the investment would reduce costs. The initial period to demonstrate the return had initially been two years, though this had now been extended in recognition that some results might take time to work through the system.

The comparative figures for the Children and Families 2017/18 (as revised) and 2018/19 budgets were considered. While the net figures were comparable, the Committee was advised that the savings target should not be underestimated as there was an inflationary impact to note, that the increased numbers in care had had a part year only effect in 2017/18, and that a number of significant one-offs had assisted in achieving the current year budget.

RESOLVED – That

- (1) the quarter 3 revenue forecast overspend of £3.9 million be noted;**
- (2) the performance of the capital projects be noted.**

51 IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY - UPDATE

Mr Paul Boyce, the Director for Children introduced a presentation providing Members with an update on the Council's Improvement Plan and a number of actions that had been taken since the previous report to the Committee in January 2018. These included a summary of progress to date and work underway to create the right conditions for improvement, together with an update on an Ofsted Monitoring Visit that had taken place on 14-15 March 2018.

The Improvement Plan sought to provide a clear direction with purpose and pace; develop strong and visible leadership at all levels; to wrap the Council around the service and find solutions; to secure a permanent and motivated workforce; and to focus on the child and the child's journey. In all this work, the focus was to be on getting the basics right. To deliver the Improvement Plan, five key performance areas have been identified –

- Create a clear vision and engage staff and partners
- Recruitment, retention and professional pathways
- Lines of accountability and proactive decision making
- Effective Integrated Front Door
- Is practice improving and are children better off?

With reference to the key performance areas, Mr Boyce highlighted a number of particular matters. A staff engagement session held on 6 March 2018 that had produced a range of views in feedback. Indicative of changing culture within the service, he reported on the new working arrangements being introduced, with all social work teams being based at Cheshire Lines and staff being provided with mobile technology to enable remote working while maintaining managerial and team contacts. With the relocation of staff and the roll out of new technology, service structures were being reviewed to reduce unnecessary tiers of management. Both caseloads and workflows coming in were stabilizing, and this provided an opportunity for people to do good practice. While there was evidence to suggest practice was improving, there was still much work to do.

Mr Boyce reported on the Ofsted Monitoring Visit of 14-15 March 2018 that had reviewed the Integrated Front Door or those arrangements to make sure that children got access to the right services as soon as possible. Feedback indicated a number of key areas were being addressed, including information gathering being coherent, a multi-agency approach to engage with families, safeguarding making timely interventions etc. Overall, the view was that things had improved, but that there still remained work to do. Issues identified included some evidence of delay and that some follow up responses might not be as consistent as they could be. However, it was considered to be the most positive visit to date, and a further Visit would be held on 29 May 2018.

The Chair queried how previously reported software issues were being addressed. The Committee was advised that the system used by the Council was in use across the north west of England, and was to be reviewed: previous implementations or uses of the software might have had impacts on functionality. With regard to the roll out of mobile technology, it was noted that this appeared to have run, to date, without a hitch. In response to a query from Councillor Adam Sykes concerning security, it was confirmed that all devices were fully encrypted and the Council was aware of enhanced data protection requirements from May 2018.

With regard to the location of all social work teams at Cheshire Lines, Councillor Chris Meaden queried car parking provision. In response, it was noted that while this would be the base for approximately 450 staff, it would only have a limited number of staff either permanently located there or working on the duty system: it was anticipated that desk occupancy would be below 50% at any one time. If car parking became a big issue there would be a need for consideration.

With regard to current social work buildings, it was advised that many would now not be needed and that some were generally not fit for purpose. This applied to the Rock Ferry office, but the Pensby office would remain, albeit with management moving to Cheshire Lines.

Councillor Alan Brighthouse referred to previous presentations that stressed the need to focus on addressing issues raised by Ofsted as opposed to undertaking departmental restructuring, noting that restructuring was now report in the Director's presentation as being progressed. Mr Boyce confirmed that the authority could not re-organise itself out of the problem, but there was a need for some modification and realignment of the social care structure.

With regard to the number of cases held by individual social workers, it was confirmed that a number held more than 20 cases. However, the throughput and closing of cases was thought to be a factor, and this would be further looked into.

RESOLVED -

That the Director for Children be thanked for his presentation to the Committee.

52 LEARNING FROM AUDIT

Kerry Mehta, Head of Children's Safeguarding, introduced her report that provided an update on the use of audits in social work practice and how these are then used to improve practice. Audits were considered to be key tools for looking at the quality of practice, allowing an opportunity to understand the

impact of services provided on an individual child and their family, and also identify any training gaps. Case auditing is also used by Ofsted as a key part of the inspection and monitoring process.

The Committee was advised that the audit approach sought to consider the impacts of service inputs and then make any changes. Audits undertaken since October 2017 had been a mixture of 'deep dive' audits where case reviews included social workers and social work managers, and a number of 'dip samples' where cases were reviewed against outcomes. The conclusions or outcomes from audits, the submitted report containing identified strengths and areas for development identified recently, were reported to individuals, teams and the Improvement Board, enabling learning from good practice and the highlighting of concerns. The audits also provided an overview to assess where the organisation was at, and a tool for managers to reflect on. In response to a query from Councillor Adam Sykes regarding the wider dissemination of learning when audits were undertaken at the individual worker level, the Committee was advised that learning was circulated in the form of key messages, and was not made personal to a named worker.

Councillor Alan Brighouse queried the response of Social Workers and Team Managers to the presence or input of the Audit Team and any effect this might have on team building, and how the quality of audits undertaken were assured. In reply it was noted that the success of an audit team would be to not have one as a result of having embedded good practice into Teams. The approach of the audit team was to work alongside practitioners, rather than to be seen as adversarial. With regard to audit quality, the Committee was advised that these were moderated within the audit group and by managers.

Councillor Wendy Clements asked whether individual audits were returned to for consideration of any improvement. It was confirmed that within the cycle of audits there was opportunity to revisit and to measure changes resulting. The Director for Children, reflecting on Members' questions, suggested that the word 'audits' as a descriptor did not do justice to the process, and that it might be best to regard them as a case review process or a reflection – at the beginning a practitioner might be challenged, but through the process you improve and go through the cycle again.

Councillor Tony Jones asked whether the Council had picked on any exemplars for audits, rather than solely developing its own. Simone White, Deputy Director for Children's Care Services advised that the audits were a developing, rather than a static, process. Initially focused on compliance, they were now moving towards quality issues: it was considered that in time they would be focused solely on quality as compliance became embedded in the organisation.

Members noted the need to have an assurance as to the audit process and that learning points were being identified and carried through. To this end it

was suggested that Members give further consideration to the audit tool and its use, and review a six month cycle of audits, including their outcomes and how they feeds into training.

RESOLVED – That

- (1) The report be noted; and**
- (2) The Committee give further consideration to the undertaking of audits and the audit tool, and undertake a review of a six month cycle of audits, including their outcomes and how they feeds into training, this consideration and review to be in the form of spotlight session.**

53 **REALITY CHECK VISIT - PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD - FEEDBACK REPORT**

The Chair introduced a report advising of the Reality Check Visit undertaken to review the Performance Dashboard that took place on 19 February 2018 at Hamilton Building. Councillors Tom Usher (Chair), Alan Brighthouse, Chris Meaden and Jean Stapleton had taken part in the visit, hosted by Simone White (Deputy Director) and accompanied by a number of managers and staff who either supported the development of the Dashboard or interrogated the data held within it.

Members had been provided with a demonstration of the on-line dashboard used to monitor performance within children’s social care and which provides a strategic overview. The dashboard is updated daily with data from the primary system used by social workers. While the dashboard had been operational for five months and was to undergo further development, an assessment of alternative systems was also due to take place. Members were also given an opportunity to review a hardcopy of the Data Tracker which provides a snapshot of data on a monthly basis and is used to provide a regular update to the Improvement Board, focussing on key performance indicators.

The conclusions of Members arising from the review of the performance Dashboard were presented within the submitted report, which included the submission of a report on audits (as considered at this meeting) and an agreement that regular reporting of information from the Data Tracker to this Committee would strengthen Members’ ability to scrutinise the ongoing improvement of the service; this would be of particular importance in the future when the Improvement Board was no longer in place. At that time the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would need to feel confident that the framework was in place to enable Members to provide appropriate scrutiny and oversight of children’s services.

RESOLVED -

That the report and conclusions of the Reality Check Visit in respect of the Performance Dashboard be noted and supported.

54 IMPROVING LIFE CHANCES STRATEGY - PLEDGE UPDATE

The Committee received a report presented by Bev Morgan, Chief Executive Officer of Home Start Wirral and Chair of the Improving Life Chances Steering Group, providing details of progress in respect of the Improving Life Chances pledge and the identified five priority action areas –

- Overarching actions
- Supporting parents into sustainable employment
- Improve life chances for children and young people
- Supporting families to become financially resilient
- Tackling the immediate effects of poverty.

The multi-agency Improving Life Chances Steering Group work to a strategy looking at opportunities to tackle child and family poverty in Wirral communities and break the cycle of disadvantage as a means of delivering the Improving Life Chances pledge. The Steering Group has specific leads for each of the five priority action areas who work in partnership with appropriate agencies to deliver the identified actions. The submitted report provided an overview of activity and outcomes for 2017-18 in respect of the five priority areas, and a quarter 3 report for 2017-18 was appended to the submitted report.

The focus of work had been on establishing community pilots in Seacombe, Bidston and St James and Beechwood to target action and evaluate the impact of this effort. A further appendix to the submitted report presented a review of actions undertaken and their impacts.

The Committee was advised that while the evidence pointed to positive effects of the work undertaken into improving the situation with regard to the immediate effects of poverty, there was no evidence of lifting people out of poverty. It was considered that in order to strengthen the commitment to lifting children and families out of poverty, the Pledge could not stand alone but needed to be core and central. The Improving Life Chances Pledge needed to be embedded within other strategies, examples provided included children's strategies and how to get the best start in life and housing strategies to mitigate the effects of poverty on living conditions etc.

Councillor Moira McLaughlan, in echoing the comments of the Steering Group Chair with regard to the good work on the ground to support people but with little evidence of demonstrable overall improvement in a wider sense, welcomed the intention to work in different ways. Councillor Jean Stapleton likewise welcomed the intention to work with other Strategy Groups to

strengthen the visibility of the Pledge and work towards ensuring a child poverty theme in each Strategy, and noted that action plans for all strategies were being reviewed currently, so it was important to have early discussions with each Strategy Group to ensure recognition of child poverty issues before new action plans were launched in the new Municipal Year.

Councillor Wendy Clements queried who would scrutinise the Pledge actions and progress should the Pledge be reflected in other strategies, and commented on the need to ensure that the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees were aware of what issues to look for. Bev Morgan advised that the Improving Life Chances Steering Group would continue to meet and monitor the Pledge, and could report on progress to this Committee.

Councillor Alan Brighthouse queried the statistic used to determine the proportion of children in low income families. The Committee was advised that the figure used was a national measure and that the delay in publishing figures was frustrating. Other sources that might enable alternate relevant data to be obtained in a more timely fashion to allow the identification of families in poverty were under consideration.

RESOLVED – That

- (1) The report be noted; and**
- (2) The intention to embed a child poverty theme into other Strategy action plans be welcomed and supported, and the Improving Life Chances Steering Group continue to monitor progress towards delivery of the Improving Life Chances Pledge and to report to this Committee on progress made.**

55 PUPIL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS IN WIRRAL SCHOOLS

Sue Talbot, Lead School Commissioner, presented a report considering issues of pupil absence and attendance and school exclusions prepared in response to Members' concerns regarding the level of school exclusions in the Borough. The submitted report also provided an evaluation of this issue as they impacted on the Wirral Plan Pledges - Children are Ready for School; Young People are Ready for Work and Adulthood; and Vulnerable Children Reach their Full Potential.

The Committee was advised that absence was an acknowledged issue, and that authorised absence within the Borough's schools was high when compared with elsewhere. Work would continue with Head Teachers to improve attendance, particularly with regard to persistent absence which, if flagged up in Ofsted reports, meant that it was difficult to achieve a 'good' rating. It was intended to review support and launch a new initiative in

September that would wrap round services in support of attendance a lot earlier.

With regard to school exclusions, the Committee was advised that the national trend was for exclusions to rise as schools transferred to academy status, but that work was being undertaken locally with Head Teachers to talk through issues and cases and to look to wrap around services to address issues. The results were promising, with exclusions over the spring term showing a marked decrease over a similar period last year.

The Chair referred to concerns expressed previously by the Committee regarding home schooling, including the numbers being home schooled and how the quality of this schooling was checked. The Committee were informed that there were 148 electively home schooled children in the Borough, of whom 13 had never regularly attended school; 135 children had started in school provision but had been removed subsequently, a number of whom had contact with the children and mental health service; and of the 148 children, 106 had no form of special educational need. The Committee was advised that the Education Act 1996 placed the duty to ensure a child's education on the parent. Should a parent write to a Head Teacher to electively home school, a referral was made to the Education Welfare Service to seek a home visit to assist the parent in considering how to home school and to signpost to resources. There was also an annual visit which the parent could refuse.

It was advised that home schooling was an area of vulnerability that the Department was concerned about. Members noted the concern, but stressed that the Committee was interested in all reasons for withdrawal from the school system and that these concerns needed to be presented in a manner that did not suggest a particular implication on parents exercising their right to home school. Councillor Moira McLaughlin presented, as a safeguarding issue, a suggestion that some schools were encouraging home schooling as a means to prevent exclusion. It was confirmed that the Department were aware of such suggestions, and the Education Welfare Officers were tasked with challenging parents where such indications were given to ascertain the position.

Councillor Warren Ward noted the provided figures regarding permanent and fixed term exclusions, but queried the use by schools of internal exclusions which had no particular limits attached. Noting that schools have their own approaches and tolerances, he asked whether it would be possible to see how many such exclusions there were, suggesting that internal exclusions led to permanent and fixed term exclusions and that they might reflect a particular demographic. It was agreed that the information might prove useful, but noted that Academies were not obliged to provide such information.

RESOLVED – That

- (1) the Absence / Attendance and Exclusions Report 2018, appended to the submitted report, be noted; and**
- (2) a further report be submitted to this Committee considering issues related to home schooling, including the geographic spread of home schooling across the Borough and, where home schooled children had previously been in a school setting, which school(s) they had attended.**

56 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Chair introduced his report advising that this Committee, in co-operation with the other three Overview and Scrutiny Committees, was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual scrutiny work programme. The work programme should align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the Wirral Plan pledges which were within the remit of the Committee.

The Chair's report provided an update regarding progress made since the Committee meeting held on 25 January 2018, and the current work programme made up of a combination of scrutiny reviews, workshops, standing items and requested Officer reports was appended.

RESOLVED -

That the updated Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme 2017/18 be approved.