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CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 27 November 2024

Present: Councillor S Bennett (Chair)

Councillors P Jobson I Lewis
G Cooper C Baldwin
L Luxon-Kewley A Onwuemene
T Murphy (for P J Grier
Basnett) H Raymond (for C
V Wilson Carubia)

63 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting as well as those watching the webcast and reminded them that a copy of the webcast would be retained on the Council's Website for two years.

64 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Paula Basnett and Chris Carubia. Councillors Tony Murphy and Helen Raymond attended as substitutes.

65 MEMBERS CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

Councillor Amanda Onwuemene declared a personal interest as a close family member was a foster carer.

Councillor Helen Raymond declared a personal interest as a family member was a teacher and another was going through the Education, Health, and Care Plan process.

66 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2024 be approved as a correct record.

67 **PUBLIC AND MEMBERS QUESTIONS**

No questions, statements or petitions from the public or Councillors had been received.

68 **PUPIL PLACE PLANNING PHASE 3 - WALLASEY**

The Assistant Director for Education presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report outlined the recommendations that arose from phase 3 of the pupil place planning review.

In March 2021, the Committee endorsed the Pupil Place Planning Strategy 2021 -2026. This Strategy set out a planned framework for the review of school places in both primary and secondary mainstream schools over the next 5 years.

Phase 3 of the primary phase of the review commenced in October 2023 looking at small planning areas in and around Wallasey, specifically: North Wallasey and South Wallasey. A detailed review framework and process had been undertaken and had included information gathering, stakeholder discussion. This culminated in the recommendations presented within the report.

Recommendations relating to schools controlled under the auspices of both the Diocese of Chester – Church of England, and the Diocese of Shrewsbury – Roman Catholic, had been presented, discussed, and approved as well as proposals relating to Academy Trusts. This demonstrated the strength in partnership working and collaboration across the education sector which would be harnessed as the parties progressed as a local education partnership.

Members asked for clarification on how religious schools balanced the number of students between those of the associated faith and those children that were not.

The Assistant Director for Education explained that the admissions policies were the responsibility of the religious schools, places would be allocated to them based on their policy.

Members queried whether the reduction in Published Admission Number (PAN) for the schools within the report would have an impact on the teaching staff at these schools.

The Assistant Director for Education explained that the majority of these schools were already running below PAN. He also noted that the consultations would not be taking place until the following year and the

changes wouldn't come into effect until 2027 which would give the schools plenty of time to plan.

Members asked whether reducing the PAN would cause any problems if there was an emergency influx of children as was caused by the war in Ukraine.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that there was still additional capacity within Wirral with 6% in North Wallasey and 15% in South Wallasey. There was also the possibility of increasing the PAN on these schools in future if needed.

Members discussed the government's launch of free breakfast clubs for schools and asked whether schools would receive additional resources by applying for this.

The Assistant Director for Education said that there was a clear expectation that every school should have a breakfast club and that this was welcome news for the community. He noted that Wirral would support any schools that wished to apply for a funding for a breakfast club.

The Chair queried what the take-up for the breakfast clubs had been from Wirral schools.

The Assistant Director for Education offered to provide this information to Members in writing.

Resolved – That the following be approved:

- 1. Mount Primary School consults on having a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 45, reducing from 50;**
- 2. Ss Peter & Paul RC Primary School consults on having a PAN of 30, reducing from 45;**
- 3. St Alban's RC Primary School consults on having a PAN of 45, reducing from 60;**
- 4. Somerville Primary School consults on having a (Published Admission Number) PAN of 60, reducing from 90; and**
- 5. Egremont Primary consults on having a PAN of 45, reducing from 57.**

The Head of Finance - People presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report set out the financial monitoring information, revenue and capital position for the Children, Families and Education Committee as at Quarter 2 (30 September) of 2024/25. The report provided Members with an overview of budget performance, including progress on the delivery of the 2024/25 saving programme and a summary of reserves and balances, enabling the Committee to take ownership of the budgets and provide robust challenge and scrutiny to Officers. Regular Member engagement, which the report formed part of, was considered essential in delivering effective governance and financial oversight.

At the end of Quarter 2, there was a forecast adverse position of £9.996m on the revenue budget of Children, Families and Education revised net revenue budget of £95.816m

The Council faced a severe financial challenge that demanded immediate action. To achieve a balanced budget by the end of the financial year it was imperative to implement all possible measures to curtail spending and generate substantial cost savings. Without substantial action being taken, the Council would not be in a position to provide a balanced budget by financial year end. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) had been made aware of the Council's financial position.

The source of the overspend reflected a further deterioration of the outturn position from 2023/24 for which an action plan had been developed and implemented. This action plan was designed to address the main issues generating the adverse position. However, the majority of this overspend was a consequence of increased demand and costs for social care services and would not be easily resolved.

Members discussed the figures in the report and queried how additional resource need for EHCP assessments was calculated, with the estimated increase in cost of 15% for 2024-25, in particular whether the figure was based on just new children coming into the system or if it included those that were already in the system and on a waiting list.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion responded that the figures were based on cases that Wirral had received the need assessments for and the service was working to an assumption that this was a consistent metric to follow.

The Chair asked why the graph shown under paragraph 3.10 in the report showed the assumed foster placements within the budget was consistently set higher than the active placements over that time.

The Head of Finance – People did not have the information to hand and offered to provide that information to Members in writing.

Resolved – That

- 1. The forecast adverse position of £9.996m presented at Quarter 2 and the urgent need to examine all available options to address the position be noted.**
- 2. The Director of Finance has contacted the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) to make them aware of the Council's overall financial position be noted.**
- 3. The progress on delivery of the 2024/25 savings programme at Quarter 2 be noted.**
- 4. The forecast level of reserves and balances at Quarter 2 be noted.**
- 5. The capital position at the end of Quarter 2 be noted.**

70 FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report provided an overview to the Committee of the Fostering Service Annual Report for the period of 1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024 for consideration and scrutiny. The Fostering Annual Report provided an overview of the fostering service in terms of:

- Key performance over the period
- Analysis of current practice
- Key issues and risks
- Focus areas for the next 12 months.

The monitoring of the Fostering Service was required under the Care Standards Act 2000 and Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. The Local Authority provided foster placements for children looked after whom the Local Authority acted as Corporate Parent for.

The report gave the opportunity to the committee to evaluate the extent to which Wirral Council had fulfilled its responsibilities as a Fostering Service providing placements for Children Looked After by Wirral Council.

Members discussed the reasons for foster parents choosing to foster through agencies rather than the Local Authority.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead explained that fostering agencies generally paid more than local authorities could, but that they also were able to advertise more heavily as well. She noted that by collaborating with other authorities, Wirral would be able to compete on a more equal level.

Members suggested that including marketing information for the fostering service with the yearly Council Tax letters that went out to all residents might increase take-up.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead responded that the service was in discussion with the communications team about just such a campaign.

Members queried whether Wirral children were being fostered outside of the area.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead said that there were no children outside of area through Wirral's fostering service, but that some looked after children were outside the area, however they were still checked and reviewed by Wirral in the same way that those within the borough were.

Members asked whether Wirral was seeing any tangible benefits from the Foster4 regional collaboration across Cheshire and Merseyside.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead noted that the scheme was still at a very early stage and that they were expecting to see increases in take-up soon.

Members discussed the level of enquiries from the public about the fostering service, noting that enquiries were lower than in previous years and asking whether the figures showing that 46 initial enquiries had been made, but 21 of those did not wish to progress with a visit or did not respond to contact, was normal.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead responded that it was common for people to make an enquiry online but weren't ready to progress. She noted that for those that stated they were interested, but not ready, their details were kept for future contact.

Members asked how many fostering resignations were due to kinship.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead responded that Wirral had a high level of kinship that resign because of special guardianship. She also noted that some of the resignations were related to contingency carers for cases that may be going through a court process and would be a back-up plan for the child if they were not returned to their families.

Members discussed the importance of foster care and stated that if Wirral could match the amount paid to foster carers by agencies, it would save money in the long term as foster care was much cheaper than residential care.

Members discussed the role of social media in the lives of young people and raised the concept of a cliff edge in terms of care.

The Head of Permanence Service noted that there was a good level of care for fostered children beyond the age of 18, with a lot of them staying with their foster carers up until 21 and that support was offered up until the age of 25. He also noted that social media was a factor that was now having to be considered, and foster carers were being trained to discuss this with the children in their care and to raise taking screen breaks and to manage their time on social media.

Members raised a service priority regarding working with local businesses and community groups and asked for further detail.

The Fostering and Adoption Operation Lead explained that Wirral Council had a fostering friendly policy which aimed to promote foster care with local businesses to encourage uptake of foster carers by showing that it was possible to work and still be a carer.

Resolved – That the report be noted and that the Annual Fostering Report 2023-24 as published be agreed.

71 **COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT QUARTER 2 2024-25 THEME EARLY HELP FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

The Director of Children, Families and Education presented their report which provided a quarterly performance report in relation to the Council Plan: Wirral Working Together 2023-27 for the Theme early help for children and families. The report provided a focus on updating on measures that had changed in the Quarter 2 period, June to September 2024.

Following the approval of the Council Plan, a performance management framework was developed through working group activity with members from all Policy Committees and Planning and Resources Committee between February and April 2024. A reporting approach was approved providing quarterly reporting on the measures identified in the framework. Each Policy Committee would receive a report related to their key theme, for Children, Young People and Education Committee this was the 'Early help for children and families' theme. In the reporting cycle once individual Policy Committees had reviewed their key theme reports they would then be referred up to Policy and Resources Committee to provide that committee with one complete performance report for all themes of the Council Plan The reporting provided

the most recent performance for the measures and included performance context and mitigations in place where underperformance was identified.

Members discussed the similarity in data between Quarters 1 and 2 and queried whether the reports should be twice yearly rather than quarterly.

The Director of Children, Families and Education noted that the information was useful to the service but that they would look at the metrics being reported with the intelligence team to supply a better spread of information for the indicators that would show more change on a quarterly basis.

Members asked if data on the impact of the breakfast club roll-out would be included in future.

The Director of Children, Families and Education noted that it could take a while until the impacts of the breakfast clubs would be seen but that they would feedback to the committee when there was more information.

Members asked what caused parents to take their children out of school to educate them at home.

The Director of Children, Families and Education responded that there were any number of reasons for parents to move to elective home education. All children were checked and children with EHCPs and Special Educational Needs were monitored closely to ensure they were receiving the support needed.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that Covid-19 had driven a rise in home education and that Wirral was working to make it as easy as possible for children to return to school.

Members asked whether work was happening to mitigate the rise in the number of 16-17 year olds that are not in education.

The Assistant Director for Education stated that this was a trend across the North West and the Permanence Service was working with local education providers to see what more could be offered, and to get feedback from young people regarding why they are leaving education early. He noted a report would be coming to the committee in January with further information on the subject.

Resolved – That the report be noted and referred to the Policy and Resources Committee

The Assistant Director for Education presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report provided members of the Committee with an overview of the current delivery model for home to school travel for Wirral children.

At the time of the committee meeting Wirral Council provided transport for 1853 children with a door to school service, this mainly supported young people who had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In addition, the Council provided school bus passes for 666 pupils, with an annual cost of approximately £145K. This was to support pupils whose mainstream school was beyond a certain distance and the local authority had the statutory responsibility to provide travel.

The cost to the council was £11.1 million for the financial year 2024-2025 at the time of reporting, this included a pressure for this period of £3.1 million. Based on projections in relation to increased EHCP's, it was expected the cost of this service would continue to grow into the next financial year and a pressure of £3.3 million was already built in. The challenge was not a purely financial one, the resources required were significant and the commissioned provision was under pressure due to the transport providers available.

The pressure faced by Wirral was in line with the national picture with the increased number of children with an EHCP, the dwindling number of providers and the increased costs due to inflation.

The current model was fully reliant on commissioned transport, of which the majority used combustion engine vehicles, this led to significant carbon emissions as part of the delivery model. As part of the activity to develop a delivery model for the future, development of a greener approach would be explored.

Members asked how soon the assessment for requiring transport would begin.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that in order to change the assessment, the policy needed to be changed. Consultation feedback would begin in December 2024 to gain an understanding of how the service was working and what it should look like in future, this would allow the service to refresh the policy which would be brought back to committee for approval in June 2025.

Members asked what the criteria was for whether an escort would be provided in a vehicle, and whether drivers had any training for dealing with children with special educational needs.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that this criteria was being looked at as part of the benchmarking work being undertaken with other local

authorities. Training was being made available to all staff via Flo. He noted that the priority was always the safety of the young people being transported.

Members queried if it would be looked into whether families were able to take their children to school themselves rather than using the service.

The Assistant Director for Education stated that capturing the views of parents, young people and carers would be fed into the policy.

Members asked whether there was any way to measure how many drivers had accessed the training that was available.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that this would be part of the process. He stated that it was more difficult with sessional employees such as drivers that did not have access to a laptop or a Wirral email account. He said that the target was for 95% completion of the relevant training modules by all Children's Services staff, and this included drivers.

Members raised the collaboration with other Local Authorities and asked how that was progressing.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that the Cheshire and Merseyside councils met on a monthly basis to share best practice and reported back to the Chief Executive's Group.

Members asked about the environmental impact of the Home to School service regarding vehicle emissions.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that the report did raise this and that currently all vehicle used were fossil fuel based. He stated that work was being done to encourage the use of electric and hybrid vehicles reduce emissions caused by the service.

Resolved – That

- 1. The development of a new Assisted Travel for Young People Policy and for this to be approved at a future Children, Young People and Education Committee be approved.**
- 2. Development of the strategies as outlined in the report to embed a more effective service delivery model be approved.**

73 **CARE PROGRAMME PROGRESS UPDATE**

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The

report provided an update of the care programme endorsed by committee on 23rd September 2024.

The aim of the Care programme was to safely reduce the Council's reliance on residential care placements by, wherever possible, enabling children and young people to be raised by their families, within their family network, or in a family environment. The Care Programme sought to align good quality care with proactive transformation work to mitigate against significant budget pressures in Children's Services.

The report noted the following milestones since the commencement of the programme on 23rd September 2024:

- The establishment of a care programme board, with clear terms of reference linking to other forums, projects and programmes of work.
- Activity, actions and timescales established across the four strands of the programme. 20 of the 45 actions were complete as of 11th November 2024.
- Briefing of staff teams, managers and leadership across the directorate.
- Engagement sessions with universal and targeted youth workers to generate ideas, understanding and wrap around offers in support of the transformation programme.
- Identification of a dedicated youth work team leader to plan approach and oversee wrap around offers.
- Selection of an operational social work lead, specific to the transformation work.
- Set up of an operational group to oversee edge of care support cohorts and plan appropriate exits from residential care settings, where possible.

Members asked whether support for those in foster dropped off once they turned 18.

The Head of Permanence Service responded that once a young person turned 18, they would no longer have a social record, however they would have a personal advisor who would manage a pathway plan for them. They have to see the young person at least every 56 days to ensure that they are supported in terms of education and employment.

Members asked whether the council provided bank accounts for looked after children.

The Head of Permanence Service stated that all young people were encouraged to open a bank account and to hold savings. When they reached 18, they were supported to ensure they had a bank account and a national insurance number to help them into employment.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

74 **SEND IMPROVEMENT**

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report provided an update on the improvement programme for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) for the Local Area in Wirral. The Local Authority, Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board, education settings, parent carer forum, and other relevant stakeholders are considered members of the Local Area.

The report included the Written Statement of Action Impact Group Tracker which monitored progress against the areas identified for improvement in the Local Area SEND Inspection and Improvement Notice.

Members discussed the lack of available educational psychologists (EP's) and that money had been budgeted for recruitment, they asked whether the money for recruitment could be utilised elsewhere until sufficient EP's were available.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that in order to complete an Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) an EP was a legal requirement. He noted that diverting the budget would be difficult as a lot of it was being used to fund associate EP's that were commissioned through an organisation called Reeds. Schools that had EP's directly employed were reimbursed for their use in completing EHCP's.

Members noted that the current number of EHCP's being met within the 20 week target was just 15% and asked how the service would manage new cases to reduce the amount of time taken to complete them.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion explained that their priority would be to focus on the average time taken to complete an EHCP and reduce that over time. He noted that this would not see an immediate improvement in cases being met within 20 weeks but over time, all cases would be dealt with faster.

Members asked about the complaints procedure and what the timescale for responding to complaint was.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion responded that complaints regarding EHCP's were dealt with inline with the corporate complaints procedure, with a target completion time of 15 days.

Members asked for an update on the ongoing industrial action from the SEND team.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion stated that the current strike action was due to end on Friday 29 November 2024, he said that management was in negotiation with the union and that they were not aware of further strikes being planned.

Resolved – That the report be noted and the SEND improvement work delivered through the Local Area SEND Partnership Board be endorsed.

75 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Head of Legal Service presented the report on behalf of the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. The report reminded members that the Children, Young People and Education Committee was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual committee work programme. This work programme was to align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which were the remit of the Committee.

The Assistant Director for Education notified members that the Outcomes report that was normally brought to committee in January was likely to not be ready in time and would have to be deferred to March 2025.

Resolved – That the work programme be noted.

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