

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale, on Wednesday, 8th October 2014 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor (Mrs) M E Davies – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

W J David	C Davies	S Evans
S Lloyd	I Pearce	(Mrs) S Rees
(Mrs) J Rosser	R W Smith	B Stephens
L G Walker	(Mrs) J S Ward	

Officers:

Mr C B Jones – Service Director, Legal and Democratic Services
Mr R Gatis – Service Director, Adult Services
Mr A Gwynn – Service Director, Children's Services
Mr N Griffiths – Head of Financial Services (Community & Children's Services)
Mrs A Batley – Head of Prevention and Acting Head of Adoption and Fostering
Mrs A Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

17. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors A S Fox, (Mrs) S Jones, D Weeks and D H Williams.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made in relation to the agenda at this juncture.

(NB: A declaration of interest was made later in the agenda (Minute No.22)).

19. MINUTES

RESOLVED to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting of the Community and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 10th September 2014.

REPORTS OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

20. EXCEPTION REPORT – COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT – 30 JUNE 2014 (QUARTER 1)

The Head of Financial Services presented Members with the Exception Report which outlined the financial and performance management information for the

Community & Children's Services Group for the period to 30th June 2014. He reported on the variances within the revenue budget which had led to an overall overspend of £158k pointing out that a key issue was the Looked After Children service commenting that an unfavourable shift in the commissioning mix had led to the overspend. He outlined the key issues and measures which have been put in place providing Members with a summary of the progress being made with regard to the Looked After Children Action Plan which is detailed within the main Cabinet report. He also advised that performance in relation to the Wales Programme for Improvement Action Plans within the remit of the Committee was attached for Members' consideration. The Head of Financial Services drew attention to the performance indicator results and highlighted the key 'Health Check' measures along with sickness absence trends pointing out that there had been a dip in performance in relation to sickness absence.

A Member drew attention to the overspend in relation to the Looked After Children's Service pointing out the consequences if this pattern were to continue to the end of the year. He referred to the table within the report which provided information in respect of the type of placement and numbers and proposed that the Committee should undertake an investigation to compare the in house provision with the costs and services provided by 'out of county' independent sector placements.

The Service Director advised that there was a need to be clear about any terms of reference for such a working group pointing out that there was a wide range of providers offering different specialist provision.

Officers responded to questions in relation to the Council's three residential children's homes explaining that the average cost of each in-house placement was approximately £2200 per week plus the additional costs linked to running the three homes. The average cost for a placement in the independent sector was approximately £3000 per week but some could be as much as £5000 per week.

The Committee asked whether in some cases there was still tripartite agreements between Social Services/Education and Health and whether the South East Wales Consortium was effective. Also, given the Welsh Government's collaborative agenda, officers were asked whether they could foresee a time when the costs of the complex LAC placements would be taken over by the Health Board.

The Service Director, Children's Services explained that tripartite funding arrangements did take place whereby education needs were paid for by Education, Social care needs by Children's Services and in theory Health picking up health costs. However, as often there is a reluctance to 'label' young people by giving them an early diagnosis in mental health that could be a barrier to obtaining a contribution from Health-

The Service Director Adult Service reported that the intention was that the service should have a range of support to meet a range of needs and the Service Director Children's Services added that the introduction of the South

East Wales Commissioning Framework had resulted in a reduction in standard placement costs. However, the most expensive placements were often linked to children with complex needs requiring specialist placements.

A Member asked whether the under spend attributed to Fframwaith would be clawed back or used in other ways. The Head of Financial Services explained that the Council would be able to use the under spend to offset eligible core costs within the grant criteria.

In response to a query in relation to the Health Check Measures, the Service Director, Children's Services confirmed that where it referred to children on the Child Protection Register being allocated to a key worker, this refers to both qualified and unqualified staff. A Member questioned whether the increase in sickness absence was related to the ever increasing workload. He also referred to the exception highlighted on page 14, ie '% of initial assessment that took place during the year where there is evidence that the child has been seen by the social worker, and questioned the meaning of the statement within the explanation which said that more assessments were allocated to unqualified staff during the period.

The Committee was advised that these 'unqualified' staff were in fact assessment care managers who were trained and experienced in the work which they undertook. They were not unqualified but differently qualified and were supported in undertaking their training through the NVQ route. It was explained that this workforce was much more stable and usually remained with the Council for a considerable period of time. In addition, there was no difficulty in recruiting experienced staff to these posts.

The Member asked whether the numbers of staff were being increased to deal with the workload.

It was pointed out that in part the sickness absence related to the over spend as it was necessary to recruit agency staff to cover absences. The cost of agency staff itself was more expensive but when covering sickness/maternity absences the Council was in effect paying twice. Members were informed that sickness absence was monitored in line with the Council's policies and that staff were supported through a range of occupational health programmes. It was also pointed out that a large proportion of the absences were down to musculoskeletal problems related to the nature of their work.

A Member suggested that part of the reason that the Council had difficulty in retaining its qualified social workers was the 'single spine' salary whereupon a newly qualified social worker will earn the same as someone who may have a number of years experience.

The Service Director, Community Care reported that this was an area of work which had begun to be explored by the former Group Director and that the new Group Director had now taken this up.

A Member voiced concern that several of the indicators for children's services had been significantly missed for a number of years and she asked officers whether they felt that the measures they were currently taking were robust enough.

The Service Director Children's Services reported that there had been a huge increase in demand and there had also been some significant staffing difficulties. In the short term they had employed agency staff and seconded staff from less pressured areas. As these staff were unqualified this impacted on performance in relation to the definition of the performance indicator. Members were informed that there had been a number of rounds of recruitment and it was hoped to fill the remaining vacant posts shortly. It was also explained that whilst the Council did well in recruiting newly qualified staff, there was an issue with regard to retention. In the longer term a workforce review group had been established and there is a remodelling of Children's Services planned in order to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of suitably qualified and experienced staff to deliver safe and effective services.

In response to a query the Service Director, Adult Services reported on the Welsh Government's Intermediate Care Fund to support the integration agenda and pointed out that there was a significant risk to the Council in delivering the agenda in future years as this funding stream was for one year only.

Following consideration of the report it was **RESOLVED**:

- (i) to note the content of the report;
- (ii) that the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee establish a working group to scrutinise in greater depth the reasons for an overspend in the Looked After Children's Service by:
 - comparison of 'in-house' and 'out of county'; provision costs;
 - considering what services are provided by 'out of county' placements;
 - to advise the Executive on any measures required.

21. DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT 2013/14

The Service Director, Adult Services presented Members with the draft Director of Social Services Annual Report for 2013/14. The production of the report is a requirement set out under Welsh Assembly Guidance regarding the Duties and Accountabilities of Directors of Social Services in Wales. The Service Director explained that the report was the 5th such report published in Rhondda Cynon Taf and was subject to a formal consultation process ending on 13th October 2014 and it was intended that the final version would then go before the Cabinet for approval,

A Member referred to the performance of Children's Services in meeting its targets and the Service Director explained that those targets that were missed were mostly down to capacity issues as previously discussed. For example in relation to initial assessments if there were not sufficient staff to allocate them

straight away the PI would not be met and this would then have a knock on effect on other PI's.

A Member questioned whether prospective adoptive parents were encouraged to take sibling groups in cases where there was more than one child.

The Service Director, Children's Services explained that they always tried to keep sibling groups together and the service had been quite successful in this area. The Head of Prevention and Acting Head of Adoption and Fostering added that on occasion children were better placed separately if the particular needs of each child were very different and it was in their best interests.

A Member pointed out that the key critical improvement actions for 2014/15 reflected the concerns of the Committee and the Service Director, Adult Services agreed that broadly speaking this was correct and that in relation to the annual report they had tried to reflect the key elements of the WPI action plans.

Given the increase in the number of Looked After Children a Member queried whether the department was able to meet the 26 week deadline for care proceedings. The Service Director, Children's Services reported that at the moment they were coping with this and the measure is being met.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the draft Annual Report of the Director of Social Services for 2013/14.

22. DEVELOPMENT OF THE VALE, VALLEYS AND CARDIFF REGIONAL ADOPTION COLLABORATION

(**Note:** County Borough Councillor (Mrs) S Rees declared a personal and non prejudicial interest during the discussion relating to this agenda item – "I am a member of the Adoption Panel".)

The Service Director, Children's Services reported on the progress in developing a Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Regional Adoption Collaborative which will form part of the National Adoption Service in Wales. The Service Director reported that the Vale of Glamorgan Council was leading this project for the region whilst Cardiff Council would host the National Adoption service. He reported that the preferred model of delivery which had been developed was outlined at Appendix 1 and the functional regional model was set out at Appendix 1a which was hoped would be based at Ty Pennant. He advised that Cabinet had approved the regional structure in July 2014 but that a further report would need to go forward with regard to the implementation of the model later in the year.

A Member questioned whether there would be a loss of social workers as a result of the change and was informed that there would actually be a small increase in numbers.

A Member pointed out that the staff from each authority could be on different pay scales and asked how their terms and conditions would be harmonised.

The Committee was informed that the authorities were bound by TUPE arrangements and Members highlighted their concern that it would not be good for the morale of the new team having staff undertaking the same work but receiving different salaries.

A Member questioned how often the new Adoption Panel would meet and it was explained that there would be one panel which would meet weekly and that the location would alternate between the north and south of the region.

A Member questioned how the contribution from each authority would be agreed and the Head of Financial Services explained that a task and finish group, of which he was a member, had been formed to consider the issue which had resulted in a complex formula based on a number of different strands. He pointed out that it was mainly staff costs and those would be based on current arrangements.

RESOLVED to note the content of the report.

23. FOSTERING SERVICE ACTION PLAN

Further to a request made at the meeting of the Committee held on 2nd July 2014, Members were provided with a report which included an action plan drawn up in response to the recommendations made in the report of the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales during their inspection of Rhondda Cynon Taf Fostering Services on the 19th-21st February 2014. The Service Director, Children's Services reported that they were currently in the process of restructuring the Foster Care Team to keep pace with the increasing demand for foster placements and the requirements of the PLO process.

A Member asked whether there was a national database for foster carers whereby if someone was deregulated by one authority this could be picked up in other areas. The Head of Prevention and Acting Head of Adoption and Fostering explained that there was no national database but information was shared. She also explained that the application process for new foster carers was very rigorous and references are asked for and at a local level they did compile a list of people who they would not wish to use again. She also informed Members that in these circumstances they would be written to and an explanation given.

RESOLVED to note the content of the report and attached action plan.

(Mrs) M E Davies
Chairman

The meeting closed at 6.16 pm