

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 19th November, 2013 at 6.00 pm at the
Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Marrey (Chair)
Councillor Boleyn (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Arshad, Mrs Billingham, Bills, Casey, Islam, Perks, Mrs Simms,
Vickers and Mrs Walker; Reverend Wickens; Mr Lynch, Ms Sinden and Mrs
Verdegem

Also in attendance:

Councillor Crumpton (Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong
Learning) attended at the invitation of the Committee

OFFICERS

Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Housing
Management) – Lead Officer to the Committee, the Director of Children's
Services, Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families),
Director of Children's Services (Quality and Partnership), the Treasurer and Mr
Sanders (both Directorate of Corporate Resources)

7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillor
Hill, Mrs Coulter and Mr Ridley.

8. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was reported that Councillor Mrs Billingham was serving in place of
Councillor Hill for this meeting of the Committee only.

9. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of non-pecuniary interest was made by Councillor Vickers in
respect of Items 6 and 7 on the Agenda (Revenue Budget Strategy 2014/15
and Scrutiny of Children's Centres – Feedback, respectively) in view of his
office as Chair of the Management Committee of Tenterfields Children's
Centre.

10. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23rd September, 2013 be approved as a correct record and signed.

11. PUBLIC FORUM

No issues were raised under this item.

12. BUDGET STRATEGY 2014/15

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Marrey declared a non pecuniary interest in view of his son being in respite care and Councillor Mrs Walker declared a non pecuniary interest in view of her daughter's employment in Special Educational Needs. The declarations were made in respect of both this item and the following item on the agenda (Scrutiny of Children's Centres – Feedback)).

A report of the Chief Executive, Treasurer and Director of Children's Services was submitted on the proposed Revenue Budget Strategy for 2014/15 and the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

In presenting the reports submitted, the Treasurer referred to Appendix C of the report submitted, outlining the proposed savings in line with the terms of reference of the Committee.

In his presentation, the Treasurer reported on questions asked by members at the meeting of the Adult, Community and Housing Services Scrutiny Committee held on 11th November, 2013 on the risk to Children and associated matters which might arise from the proposed budget savings for Children's Services, to which the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) responded.

In respect of funding for Looked After Children, the Director was satisfied that, although a high demand across the whole of Children's Family Services was being experienced, the additional expenditure of £3million provided for should be sufficient to meet demands. In the event of the budget for looked after children being exceeded, however, whereas, in the past, it had been possible to vire monies within Children's Services from other budget heads to meet requirements, that facility was no longer an option owing to the reductions in allocations elsewhere.

The Assistant Director (Children and Families) confirmed that numbers of looked after children had risen steadily over the previous five years and that, although the numbers of new children going into care had now plateaued, children were tending to stay in the system longer. External placements were necessary for the more challenging children due to capacity because of increasing demand and this factor increased the pressure on the budget for looked after children.

Regarding risk, the Assistant Director indicated that there had been an increase in Adoption and Special Guardianship Orders, and the Council was achieving completion of care proceedings on an average of 22 weeks against the government target of 26 weeks. The Director of Children's Services confirmed that monitoring of Looked after Children was rigorous and was reviewed quarterly by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning and herself, as Director. The aim was to ensure that the system was properly supported.

Questions were asked in relation to the percentage of the Budget spent on respite provision and on the level of replacement for the Willows, to which the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director (Children and Families) responded. Regarding the Willows, it was confirmed that equivalent provision was being made.

In response to the question asked at the Adult, Community and Housing Services Scrutiny Committee regarding the number of full time equivalent posts would be lost, should the budget proposals proceed, it was indicated this would equate to some 112 full time equivalent posts for 2014/15.

In response to the Council's responsibilities as corporate parent, further to the question asked at the Adult, Community and Housing Services Scrutiny Committee on risk to children, The Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director (Children and Families) confirmed that they were confident that the Council would be able to continue to act in this capacity appropriately notwithstanding the proposed budget reductions.

On the issue of children potentially at risk, the Director and the Assistant Director were satisfied that delivery could be maintained at the moment but the point was made by the Director that the unintended consequences of other agencies' financial savings could impact on the Council. Discussions with other agencies were therefore continuing and the overall situation was being monitored by the Assistant Director. The Director cautioned, however, that because of a rising number of complex referrals, further to some recent child care cases in other authorities, the increasing need to safeguard or take early interventionary measures would cause pressure and could result in a tipping point being reached.

In response to a question in relation to the High Needs Block, the Director of Children's Services indicated that discussions were ongoing on special educational needs requirements and the Plan was being monitored as implementation approached. The Board monitored where children had been placed and this influenced decision making. Children's needs were being scoped and a lot of work had been undertaken in this regard within the Directorate and with providers.

Further to reference being made to parental concerns about the continuation of such issues as home to school transport and special breaks for special educational needs pupils at the same level, the Treasurer advised that on current predictions it was likely that the Council would be limited to delivering at best the level of its statutory duties within the next three years. The issue of home to school transport was raised again later in the meeting, regarding which the Director of Children's Services indicated that alternative provision to that currently made could be feasible but that changes would be likely to require consultation and perhaps legal advice before being made.

Further to a request from a Member for the information from other authorities, as referred to in paragraph 10 of the report, to be circulated when available and analysed, the Director of Children's Services referred further to the issue of looked after children and advocated prudence in assumptions on numbers in view of the impact of the current economic situation on families in the Black Country. In relation to early intervention, the Director referred to the redesign now the subject of consultation and which, if approved, would bring to Children's Centres further involvement of partner agencies.

Reference was made to the numbers of children with Care Orders whom were placed at home and the support provided by Children's Centres with regard to those children was explained by the Assistant Director (Children and Families). The point was also made by the Assistant Director that, in appropriate circumstances, external provision was better for some children. Since children subject to Care Orders were considered on a case by case basis, predictions regarding the category of care needed were difficult.

In response to a question by the Chair in respect of paragraph 12 of the report, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that provision for looked after children, including placements, was monitored vigorously with a view to looking at more affordable options if they were available but that it had to be remembered that for some children their Local Authority placement was their home. In relation to paragraph 12, the Treasurer indicated that the injection of £3 million had been proposed to meet current demand regarding looked after children but the risk was that numbers of such children could rise further.

In reply to a question, the Treasurer indicated that an increase in Council Tax of around 40% over three years would be necessary to avoid the need for any further savings beyond the £26million budget reduction already proposed.

Further to a question on any additional grant aid that might be available to supplement the directorate's finances, the Director of Children's Services indicated that the only grants available were the Troubled Families Grant and the Dedicated Schools Grant, the latter being allocated by the Schools Forum, rather than the Council. Grants were available to the voluntary sector, however, and therefore the Directorate was seeking to support the voluntary sector in making applications as appropriate.

Further to a comment by a Member that Children's Centres be supported and their budget allocation not significantly reduced, the Treasurer responded that, although current delivery models for all Council services needed to be considered to effect the further £32million required to be saved by 2016/17, decisions taken were not within the province of officers to determine and could not be predicted by them without direction.

Further to the consideration of the report and to the discussion it was

RESOLVED:

That the budget proposals, as set out in the report now submitted be noted and that the Cabinet be asked to consider fully the priority needs of Children and Vulnerable Adults and that they consider further the reduction by £2.3 million for Children's Centres and the impact this will have at putting children at risk.

13. CHILDREN'S CENTRES - FEEDBACK

Consideration was given to the report of the Chair circulated by him to Members of the Committee and included on the Committee Management Information System as a supplementary document, in respect of which it was RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning be recommended:

That the report of the Chair be approved as the report of the Committee on the scrutiny of Children's Centres and that:

1. Local Partners, during the consultation period, work together to develop alternative proposals that support the future development of integrated services in relation to early intervention. This should include proposals for 5 hubs rather than the 4 currently proposed.
2. Local Partners should explore opportunities for Children's Centres to become Community Hubs for health, social care and other services such as Credit Unions, Citizen's Advice Surgeries and be the meeting place of choice for community groups.

3. Anecdotal evidence gathered during visits to Children's Centres by Committee Members highlighted the importance of Health Workers introducing families to Children's Centres and that the Committee believes that there are untapped opportunities to improve the reach of Children's Centres particularly in relation to Health Workers sign posting prospective families to Children's Centre Services and that work should be done to build on this over the next 12 months.
4. Services provided from Children's Centres should continue to give regard to evidence based practice.

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JANE PORTER

This being the last meeting of the Committee attended by Ms Porter prior to her impending retirement from the Council's service, the Chair and other Members paid tribute to Ms Porter's outstanding service to the authority, during which she had continued unstintingly to represent the voice of the Borough's children in an unprecedented time of change and challenge. Ms Porter, in turn, thanked the Committee for their support during her period of office.

RESOLVED

That the Committee place on record its appreciation of Ms Porter's service to the Council and the children of the Borough during her period of office.

The meeting ended at 8.00 pm

CHAIR