

**Minutes of the meeting of Children and young people scrutiny committee held at The Council Chamber - The Shire Hall, St. Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Thursday 29 November 2018 at 3.00 pm**

**Present:** Councillor FM Norman (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: CR Butler, ACR Chappell, Mr A James, AW Johnson, JF Johnson and A Seldon

**In attendance:** Councillors Shaw, Summers and Swinglehurst

**Officers:** Chris Baird, Director Children and Families (DCF), John Coleman, Statutory Scrutiny Officer, Liz Elgar, Assistant Director Safeguarding and Family Support (ADSFS), Lisa Fraser, Assistant Director Education Development and Skills and Andrew Lovegrove, Chief Finance Officer (CFO).

**39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Burbidge, Councillor CA Gandy and Councillor MT McEvilly.

**40. NAMED SUBSTITUTES**

Councillor AW Johnson acted as a substitute for Councillor CA Gandy.

**41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**42. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting of 12 November are agreed as a correct record.

**43. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

No questions were received from members of the public.

**44. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**

No questions were received from members of the Council.

**45. SCRUTINY WORKING GROUP UPDATE ON LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN COST REDUCTION**

The DCF introduced the report of the scrutiny working group (as appended to the agenda) which consisted of two members of the committee and received bi-monthly reports of work that was ongoing to reduce the costs associated with looked after children. During the period that the group was in operation up to 80 children and young

people had been identified who could be supported in different arrangements from care including by special guardianship order and return to parents. The number of looked after children (LAC) in Herefordshire was comparatively high in relation to other Local Authorities. Assessments were being made as to what was best in respect of each child and young person. The savings proposal for 2018/19 had been considered by the group and it was understood that the savings did not relate totally to the reduction in numbers of looked after children through this work alone but concerned broader aspects of service. The savings proposals would continue into 2019/20 and would focus on revising the financial approach to special guardianship.

Councillor Seldon spoke on the report as a member of the working group and thanked the DCF and the head of the service for Looked After Children for the work they had undertaken. The Group had challenged the savings outlined in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) during meetings with the DCF and the report was commended to the Executive.

The committee discussed the points below in the debate that followed:

- The committee acknowledged the challenges in recruitment of social workers to local authorities across the West Midlands. The continuing vacancies for social workers in Herefordshire were raised. *The DCF confirmed that recruitment had occurred over the year and that vacancies were now almost full, a number had been recruited through the West Midlands regional approach which was really welcome, but Herefordshire wanted to permanently recruit staff as well as retain the good staff that it has.*
- The committee welcomes those positive elements of the report including the care orders that had been revoked.
- The shortage of places locally for children requiring intensive support was raised which was consistent with a national shortage. *The DCF explained that there was a current initiative in the West Midlands which had seen local authorities join together, under a scheme originating from the Department of Education, to look at increasing local provision for intensive support.*
- The committee requested that future updates concerning performance against the savings proposal should be reported to the committee.

**RESOLVED: that future updates concerning performance against the LAC reduction savings proposal added to the committee's work programme.**

#### **46. SETTING THE 2019/20 BUDGET, CAPITAL INVESTMENT AND UPDATING THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY**

The CFO and DCF introduced the draft budget in relation to the children and families directorate, as appended to the agenda and outlined the presentation published as a supplement ahead of the meeting. The CFO explained the financial circumstances in which the draft budget had been developed and the changes to the income of the Council.

The DCF explained that the majority of spend in the children and families directorate related to placements costs. Spend on the high needs block was also highlighted which was a pressure that the service faced in meeting the cost of providing special educational needs support to children on Education and Health and Care Plans. The pressures on the high needs block had increased significantly for authorities across the country and Herefordshire Schools Forum would consider potential savings proposals. The Council was spending more than was planned for on looked after children placement budget and this was replicated nationally at other local authorities. Projects were being established to investigate alternative methods to meet needs more effectively

earlier to lessen the need for placements. The cabinet had made money available to support the retention and recruitment of social workers during the year which was welcome and had had a positive effect.

The DCF raised the investment that was planned in targeted prevention and ensuring that children make use of universal services and access local community based services where it would help. The investment would also develop proposals for early help and edge of care services and would support greater placement stability. Proposals would be completed and presented to the executive and the cabinet proposal was that other funding rather than base budget would be used to support this work.

The committee raised the points below in the debate that followed:

- The signs of safety practice model was raised and it was queried whether there was any provision in the budget to support the mental health of social workers. The decrease in the number of sick days of staff in the Children's and Families directorate was noted and it was suggested that changes which had produced this effect could be considered in other directorates across the Council. *The DCF explained that sessions had been offered to social workers over the summer but had only attracted a small turn out. Social workers had stated through surveys that they valued supervision and this was recognised that support through supervision was a central element of supporting social workers wellbeing. Increases in recruitment of social workers helped to lessen caseloads and pressure on social workers.*
- The committee queried how people were being signposted to early help services. *The DCF confirmed that the early help service was coordinating family network meetings throughout the county. These involved wider services including housing, police, and advice on accessing benefits. Early help assessments had been introduced and 820 had been carried out. The Assistant Director Education, Development and Skills explained the troubled families programme had been provided through the early help service and had assisted 320 families to realise significant progress.*
- The committee requested detail of the outcomes of the work with Staffordshire and Doncaster when it was available. *The DCF explained that work was just starting, focusing on looked after children and edge of care. A briefing note on progress could be provided.*
- It was queried when business cases for early help and edge of care services would be available. *The CFO explained that the business cases were being worked up and would be available in the future.*
- It was queried whether there would be any savings resulting from joining a regional adoption agency (RAA). *The Assistant Director Safeguarding and Family Support (ADSFS) explained that preparations to join an RAA were at an early stage and any savings that would result from membership would be known at a later date.*
- The potential savings involved in the recruitment of permanent social workers and a reducing reliance on agency staff was queried. *The DCF confirmed that there would be a reduction in cost of having permanent staff in place of agency staff but newly qualified permanent social workers would require greater support from the Council. The ADSFS explained that whilst agency staff continued to be used programmes to recruit permanent social workers continued.*
- The committee queried how the Council was lobbying central government regarding increases in the high needs budget. *The CFO explained that the society of county treasurers had conducted analysis around the high needs block*

*funding and had written to the minister about the challenges that local authorities face.*

- The committee queried what assurances could be provided of the likely outcomes of the early help services. *The DCF explained that proposals were being developed and were focused on assisting families to help themselves as well as supplementing that with support from statutory services, including those from the Council. The ADSFS explained that the signs of safety model that was being developed with Doncaster was looking at working with willing families and edge of care services.*

The Cabinet Member Children and Families thanked the committee for its considerations and explained the close work that took place between Adults and Children's Services.

The committee agreed those recommendations below.

**RESOLVED – That the committee:**

- **supports investment in early help, edge of care and placement stability services and requests that business cases are shared with the scrutiny committee when available; and**
- **supports the separate monitoring and reporting of overspends on the LAC budget from the children and families budget.**

**47. WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW**

The committee received and noted its work programme for the remainder of 2018/19. It was felt that an item should be added to the work programme to look at bereavement service. The inclusion of an item on the work programme would be investigated. The committee also received detail regarding arrangements for the committee in the event that an alternative budget was received.

The meeting ended at 4.15 pm

**Chairman**