

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 JANUARY 2023

Present: Councillor Bridgeman (Chairperson),
Councillors Boes, Davies, Ferguson-Thorne, Hopkins, Melbourne,
Simmons and Singh

Co-opted Members: Patricia Arlotte (Roman Catholic representative),
Carol Cobert (Church in Wales Representative) and Celeste Lewis
(Parent Governor Representative)

Emily Gao (Cardiff Youth Council)

37 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Joyce, Brigid Corr (Parent Governor Representative) and Councillor Simmons has advised that she would be late in attending the meeting.

The Chair gave a personal tribute to Dan Wilson, who passed away in December.

38 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest in accordance with the Members Code of Conduct were received.

39 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 19 October 2022 and 14 November 2022 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

The minutes of the meeting held on the 13 December 2022 will be considered at the next meeting.

40 : CHILDREN'S SERVICES STRATEGY

The Chair advised the Committee that the item allowed Members to undertake pre-decision scrutiny in relation to the Children's Services strategy, covering the time frame 2023-26. The strategy covers progress to date, as well as how the Council and its partners will meet its main aims in the three key areas of focus: people; place; and practice.

The Chair welcomed Cllr Ashley Lister, Cabinet Member for Social Services, Children's; Sarah McGill, Corporate Director for People and Communities and Director of Social Services; and Deborah Driffield, Director of Children's Services.

The Chair invited Cllr Lister to make a statement, during which he outlined the vision behind the strategy and the challenges of budgetary pressures, case complexity, sufficiency of places, and social worker recruitment and retention.

Sarah McGill made a statement introducing the report, during which she told Members that the steps outlined in the strategy were practical, pragmatic and deliverable, and that the plans were based on evidence and data.

Deborah Driffield gave a presentation, during which she outlined the achievements during the course of the previous strategy and the challenges to be addressed by the new strategy. The workforce strategy sets out key principles and an implementation plan will be put in place with clear timelines. The commissioning strategy sets out how the Council will meet demands both corporately and with partners; and the accommodation strategy sets out the provision necessary to achieve the Council's aim of ensuring children's needs are met closer to home. An outline of staff recruitment and accommodation plans was provided.

Members were invited to ask questions and make comments, and the discussion is summarised below:

Members wished to know whether it was easier to recruit social work assistants than social workers. Officers advised that it was easier to recruit social work assistants and social care practitioners, and that a new qualification is being developed by Social Care Wales. Many applicants have a relevant degree and experience, and the Council trains them in placements before they go to university and become qualified social workers. There is anecdotal evidence that recruitment of social work assistants is becoming more difficult.

Members discussed lowering the required professional qualification for a social worker to a diploma. The view was expressed that the high level of qualification required was a disincentive to recruitment. Officers advised that the Council was developing a trusted adult model, where a skilled social care practitioner is assigned to each family and social workers move in and out of cases. A two-pronged career pathway for managers and expert social workers on the same pay scale is also being examined. Members were advised that there could be conversations with Welsh Government about conversion routes for people without relevant degrees. Conversion degrees with placements are available in England and it was difficult to see why they could not be offered in Wales. Work is also required on retention and ensuring social workers have safe caseloads. The number of people applying for social work degrees is falling and innovative solutions are required.

Members discussed the possibility of making employment with Cardiff Council more attractive to prospective social work recruits, by offering more leave and rest time in the week for physical activity or mindfulness. Officers advised that there had been pilot sessions with psychologists supporting social workers experiencing second-hand trauma and compassion fatigue, and the workforce strategy would examine employing psychologists. Social workers are encouraged to attend wellbeing sessions and to take breaks, work reasonable hours and take their leave. It was suggested that recruitment advertisements could advertise Cardiff's attractions as a place to live, and consideration be given to the reintroduction of a relocation fee.

Members were concerned that there was no possibility for people to be paid a fair salary while retraining as social workers. Members were advised that the Council wanted to make it as easy as possible for people to become social workers in order to attract a wide range of applicants. The Council is also concerned that there should be a level playing field for social worker recruitment across Wales.

Members wanted to know whether the Council had contact with Parents' Voices in Wales, which advocates for children with neurodiversities and learning disabilities. Members were advised that there was a recognition that there was more that could be done regarding children with complex needs and disabilities, including afterschool and summer holiday provision. Officers advised that they were unaware if that organisation was one the Council worked with, but would investigate.

Members expressed concern that it was difficult for the Council to compete with the salaries paid to social workers by agencies. Officers advised that a national approach to the use of agency staff was under consideration. The hope was expressed that consideration of the parallel career progression pathways could allow the Council to offer attractive salaries to agency social workers.

Members sought clarification on the North Yorkshire model. Officers advised that it was an accredited model developed in North Yorkshire, and was considered to fit well with the service provision in Cardiff. The Council has gone through a rigorous process to be accepted as a partner and be accredited by North Yorkshire.

Members wished to know whether the Council is looking at best practice in other places, and whether Cardiff has been used as best practice anywhere. Officers advised that best practice is shared across Wales. Cardiff is the hub for the drug and alcohol court pilot, and there has been interest in the Council's practice lead work and development of newly qualified social workers and social care practitioners.

Members sought information on the Council's partnership work with South Wales Police on knife crime. Officers advised that there was support across the public sector for the Community Safety Partnership and results were being seen from the focus on violent crime with police partners. There was a welcome reduction in the number of young people entering the criminal justice system, but it is important to ensure there are the appropriate interventions for when they come to the attention of Children's Services. The hope was expressed that a briefing on the safe model could be shared to make Members aware of the work being done to prevent criminal exploitation of young people.

Members sought clarification on whether the Covid pandemic was responsible for the rise in referrals and wellbeing assessments, and whether the numbers were now stabilising or declining. Officers confirmed that the increase was linked to the pandemic. There had not been a significant decrease immediately following the end of the pandemic, but numbers are now beginning to stabilise.

Members sought clarification on whether the figures for the number of vacancies contained in Appendix B of the report covered the time of the last Scrutiny meeting. Officers advised that at the time there were 20 Grade A experienced social worker posts that were vacant, and most of them are now covered by social work assistants or social work resource posts. Officers apologised for the way in which the information was presented in the Appendix.

Members sought information on whether there was a delivery plan and whether the Committee would be updated on progress. Officers confirmed that there was and that the Committee would be updated if desired.

Members sought information on the work of new statutory partnerships, particularly involving the LA and health boards, in relation to the closer to home strategy. Officers advised that there were examples of good practice, for example in the development of integrated services for children experiencing mental health issues, but there was more that needed to be done. Members were advised that there had been a lack of clarity until recently about what different services did, and that there had been significant work in developing that understanding and making progress in partnership working. Analysis has revealed significant duplication of effort and work is in progress to simplify arrangements and ensure the most effective use is made of limited capacity.

Members discussed the problem of recruiting foster carers and the lack of placements, and sought information on how it was hoped to overcome these issues. Members were advised that work was being done to recruit more inhouse foster carers and reduce reliance on independent foster agencies. The importance of having different options available for children becoming looked after is recognised. Officers advised that the management team had been restructured to allow a senior manager to spend more time on the fostering service. More detailed performance information is available and the Council has been successful in supporting younger children into inhouse foster care, although less so in finding inhouse provision for teenagers on the edge of care. Officers are confident there will be improvement in the statistics.

Members sought information on how the Council copes with the placing of unaccompanied children asylum seekers at very short notice by the Home Office. Officers advised that under the National Transfer Scheme the Council is given a quota of unaccompanied children asylum seekers, but that others arrive unannounced. There is a multi-agency arrangement in place and there is a facility for assessing the needs of young people and linking with other services. There is pressure on staff resource across the whole of Wales and additional training provision has been made by Welsh Government.

Members discussed whether it might be better sometimes to take more young people into care to break the intergenerational cycle of care dependency. Concern was expressed that if there was a focus on reducing numbers going into care, opportunities for helping individuals might be missed. The importance of treating cases individually was highlighted, as was that of keeping families together when it is safe to do so. It was noted that Cardiff University has complimented the Council on the When I'm Ready scheme. Confidence was expressed in the frontline work of staff and the management support for social workers. Officers stressed there was no pressure to comply with targets. The measure should be what is in the best interests of the child.

RESOLVED:

That the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Member on behalf of the Committee expressing their comments and observations captured during the way forward.

The Chair advised the Committee that the item provided members with a presentation by the Central South Education Consortium on the Welsh Government's School Improvement Guidance Framework for Evaluation, Improvement and Accountability, including an overview of the purpose and expectations arising from the new guidance, and a summary of the implications and accountability for schools, the Council and the consortium.

The Chair welcomed Cllr Merry, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Education; Melanie Godfrey, Director of Education and Lifelong Learning; and Geraint Lewis, Principal Improvement Officer for Cardiff Secondary and Special Schools, and Kate Rowlands, Principal Improvement Officer for Cardiff Primary and Special Schools, both from the Central South Education Consortium.

The Chair invited Geraint Louise and Kate Rowlands to make a presentation, during which they provided an overview and summary of the implications of, and major changes required by Welsh Government guidance; the role of governing bodies, LAs and consortia in accountability; the timeline for implementation; and planned CSC support.

The Chair invited Cllr Merry to make a statement, during which she expressed scepticism about the changes in terms of accountability and data.

The Chair invited Melanie Godfrey to make a statement, during which she emphasised the change in culture from accountability at LA level to support and collaboration with head teachers, and that accountability would lie less with the LA and more with school governing bodies and Estyn. The guidance sets out the roles and expectations for the LA, and the LA needs to develop a relevant scrutiny programme with the Committee.

Members were invited to ask questions and make comments, and the discussion is summarised below:

Members expressed the view that there was a lack of clarity in some aspects of the guidance, in particular around commonalities and comparisons between schools, public availability of outcomes, and data sources.

Members expressed concern about transparency and accountability in regard to governing bodies under the guidance.

RESOLVED:

To note the report.

42 : SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLANNING - ANNUAL REPORT ON INVESTMENT IN THE EDUCATION ESTATE

The Chair advised the Committee that the item provided Members with an update of progress in relation to school organisation planning.

The Chair welcomed Cllr Merry, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Education; Melanie Godfrey, Director of Education and Lifelong Learning; Richard Portas, Programme Director for School Organisation Programmes; Michelle Duddridge-

Friedl, Operational Manager, School Organisation Programme Strategy; Brett Andrewartha, Schools, Organisation Programme Planning Manager; and Jennie Hughes, Senior Achievement Leader, Inclusion.

The Chair invited Cllr Merry to make a statement, during which she gave a brief introduction to the report and invited feedback on its format.

Richard Godfrey gave a presentation, during which he gave an overview of progress in the SOP strategy, including the wider strategic context; funding streams; the Band B context; changes in the Sustainable Communities for Learning programme; Band B and LDP progress made; Band A and Band B spend 2022/23; asset renewal; planning of ALN places; independent/out of county placements; One Planet Cardiff progress; strategic planning considerations; growth in specialist placements; Sustainable Communities for Learning anticipated investment objectives; condition of assets; and next steps and engaging with stakeholders.

Members were invited to ask questions and make comments, and the discussion is summarised below:

Members sought clarification on the reasons for the work on the roof of the Court School, and officers advised that it was because it was unsafe.

Members suggested it would be useful to have more detailed information on the areas of the city where population was growing or falling. Officers advised that this was taken into account and correlated with the schools that are perceived as more popular in certain areas. New schools will have low numbers in the first instance as people go to trusted schools with established reputations. The Council looks at how many places will be needed in an area and how many children in an area are choosing local schools.

Members sought clarification on the reason for the increase in numbers of ALN children. Officers advised that it was not directly linked to population growth, but that there was a national increase in ALN populations, partly due to a higher number of children with certain disabilities surviving old enough to attend school. There has also been an increase in complexity of needs and demand for specialist provisioning. The presence of the National Children's Hospital for Wales in Cardiff attracts families of children with significant needs. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of children with mental health and emotional difficulties due to the special circumstances of recent years.

Members wished to know whether there were any predictions on how the Council would meet the clinical needs of children with ALN. Officers advised that the health board appoints a designated Educational Clinical Lead Officer. The Council is in discussion with special schools and therapy services about working collaboratively to further enhance services in schools.

RESOLVED:

That the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Member on behalf of the Committee expressing their comments and observations captured during the way forward.

The Chair advised the Committee that the item provided Members with an update on reports on: Children's Services Quarter 2 Performance 2023; and Childcare Sufficiency – 12-month update.

The Chair advised that Quarter 3 Performance will be provided to the Committee at the meeting in April.

44 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

No urgent items were received.

45 : WAY FORWARD

Members discussed the information received and identified a number of issues which the Chairman agreed would be included in the letters that would be sent, on behalf of the Committee, to the relevant Cabinet Members and Officers.

46 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting is to be confirmed.

The meeting terminated at 7.55 pm