

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 8 June 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors W Routley (Chair), Y Forsey, L Lacey, S Marshall, J Richards and H Thomas

Chris Humphrey (Interim Strategic Director - People), Sally Ann Jenkins (Strategic Director - Social Services), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officer)

In Attendance:

Apologies: Councillors J Cleverly, T Suller, C Townsend and T Watkins

1 Apologies

Councillors Tom Suller, Janet Cleverly and Carmel Townsend.

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 2 March 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 2nd March 2021 were **approved** as a true and accurate record.

4 2020/21 Service Plan End of Year Reviews

Adult and Community Services

Invitees;

- Chris Humphrey – Head of Adult and Community Services
- Councillor Paul Cockeram – Cabinet Member for Social Services

The Head of Adult and Community Services introduced the report and stated that the year had seen an increase in the number and complexity of referrals across all aspects of adult services but it was not yet clear how much of that was a temporary consequence of the Pandemic. The successful roll out of vaccinations was driving increased confidence for those who wished to return to services and the removal of restrictions meant that carers had less availability but we were still unable to predict the longer term impact on demand.

The year had ended in underspend which was mainly driven by the reduction in the overall number of people supported in residential care settings and in the community. This was sadly as a result of Covid related deaths early on in the pandemic and also due to the significant contributions from Welsh Government aimed at maintaining services during the pandemic. The additional funding made available by the Welsh Government was due to end in September 2021 and this would inevitably impact on the long term sustainability of some

services. Ongoing financial viability would depend on several issues including the need for Covid measures such as social distancing to remain in place and the preference of service users who may want to change the way their support was delivered

Planned work was impacted by the Pandemic and several strands were subject to delays. However, some significant progress was made, particularly around the opening of the Grange Hospital and the work that was required to review existing hospital discharge pathways to incorporate systems on the new site. Home First was now fully operational at the Grange as part of that discharge pathway. The Liberty Protection Safeguard was at risk as it was linked to a change in legislation which was due to be implemented this year, but now postponed to April 2022. This would change the legal framework needed to be in place for people without sufficient mental capacity, whether because of dementia or other mental health problems, such as a severe learning disability. The Council would have to put those legal protections in place to make sure those people's rights were protected

The Cabinet Member for Social Services told the Committee that the whole report showed how well the Service had coped during the pandemic and highlighted the commitment and dedication of all staff in ensuring continuity of service during this unprecedented year.

Members asked the following:

- In the absence of day services, what methods of respite care were provided over the year?

The Head of Adult and Community Services stated that the Local Authority were still expected to take all reasonable steps to continue to meet people's eligible care and support, and the support needs of carers. Following Welsh Government guidance the physical day service had to close because of the risks. Instead an outreach service had been established and staff used out in the community. This had complications of providing support in client's homes having to adhere to either social distancing or wearing full PPE. Following some easing of facilities we were able to take people out in the community, for example walks in the park, depending on what the clients wanted. People now seemed to prefer this rather than going back to a service based building. Now more of a blended type of support. The days of day services provided full time in, for example, Community centres were no longer what the client wanted. A new outreach service was developed to reduce isolation and loneliness and this would become a permanent service offer for the citizens of Newport to offer respite in the absence of the former day service provision.

- How have staff had been supported during this difficult year?

The Head of Adult and Community Services commented that initially there were quite a number of staff who were very anxious as they themselves had underlying health conditions but that a lot of work had been done within the Council and regionally too to put tools and support in place to effectively support staff. All staff had now returned to work and some had chosen to be redeployed into other roles within the Service that suited their particular needs better. Staff had commented that they had felt well supported throughout.

- How did our budget position compared with other similar Local Authorities and what were the concerns going forward regarding staffing levels?

The Head of Adult and Community Services commented that other Local Authorities were in a similar position to ours and others not quite as positive. We were in a relatively good position because we had a good reputation as an employer. Social Service recruitment was difficult in general and when we advertised a vacancy we did well and as a service area we only had a handful of agency staff. It was a nationwide problem to get qualified social workers on the books as it was a difficult area to

encourage people to take up a career in. We were looking at how we could expand numbers of trainees by working with the Open University in exploring how to support people to become qualified.

A member commented that we were fortunate to have a large team of loyal in-house staff and we would not have got through the last 12 months without their dedication and commitment and they should be rewarded for their hard work during the last year.

- What is the current number of homeless people compared to at the start of the pandemic

The Service Manager replied that we currently has six long term homeless persons who, for a number of reasons were difficult to support into accommodation as they were either unable or unwilling to take up offers of accommodation. However, we continued to work with colleagues in the housing Department to ensure the best long term solutions for this problem.

- Members queried how client satisfaction with the service they received was measured and how we checked that carers had the necessary skills for the services they provided?

The Head of Adult and Community Services responded that as we commissioned the care we were able to check with our providers that they had the requisite skills in place. The needs of the clients were reviewed on an annual basis but clients could contact us at any time to say their needs had changed and we could then put necessary changes in place. For respite care, providers were inspected by Care Inspectorate Wales in respect of quality, skills etc. Domiciliary care had difficulty as there were intense periods when all clients had the same need, for example getting out of bed. Whilst we did our best to fit in with the clients best wishes, it was a challenge.

- A member asked how 'first contact' had been operating and what it entailed.

The Head of Adult and Community Services responded that the First Contact Team was the team that dealt with new people being referred into Adult Social Services. Normally they would be a team based in the Civic Centre, however they'd been working virtually over the last 12 months. They would receive referrals from the public, but also GPs and Community Nurses, etc. They then carried out an assessment and talked to the person or the referring person and respond accordingly. If it was determined a physical visit was required, then that would be carried out.

- Are there any potential issues the Service was aware of and what measures were in place to mitigate risks?

The Head of Adult and Community Services said that a risk assessment had been taken of all care homes in terms of their levels of occupancy and financial sustainability and we were not aware of any major issues at this point. We were in a healthy position in the domiciliary care sector in terms of both their ability to recruit and providing the service and worked proactively to be aware of any upcoming issues in this sector.

A member followed up by querying the strength of the partnershipsThe Head of Adult and Community Services confirmed that working with the Aneurin Bevan Health

Board (ABHB) in particular was an area of considerable strength. Meetings had been held at least 3 times a week to monitor the care sector and information was shared on a daily basis to see what areas had been most impacted and react accordingly.

- Members enquired what support is given to carers?

The Cabinet Member for Social Services told Members that it was Carers week this week and that the pressure on care givers could not be underestimated. He said that the aging population and domiciliary care due to more people wishing to stay in their own homes rather than move into care homes would be an increasing pressure point on Local Authorities going forward.

The Service Manager commented that there was a Carers newsletter and a wealth of information on the web for our carers. Whilst some carers just wanted information, others preferred more hands on support and we aimed to provide whatever level of support each carer preferred.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Head of Adult and Community Services for the report which demonstrated the department had continued to work extremely well during the pressures of the last 18 months.

Children and Young Peoples Services

Invitees;

- **Sally Jenkins – Head of Children and Young People Services**
- **Councillor Paul Cockeram – Cabinet Member for Social Services**

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services introduced the report and stated that staff had continued to work throughout the pandemic although ways of working had obviously changed in essence. The budget was overspent and the biggest single cost had been placements although there had also been changes in the way money had been received from Welsh Government. Foster care and residential care placements had been a considerable challenge.

Child Protection Register figures had risen as some families had found the pandemic extremely hard. As adults had struggled this had had a knock on effect on vulnerable children in the families and safeguarding issues had increased. Surprisingly there had been an increase in fabricated illness, which was sadly associated with mental health issues of the adults involved and there had been a sharp increase in the number of referrals.

There had been a determination to look at new developments and better ways of working.

The 'Baby and Me' initiative had been a huge success. The aim was to get in quick and provide intensive work in the first instance in order to try to prevent further decline and the need for intervention further down the line. In regard to adolescents, the child exploitation toolkit had now been rolled out throughout Gwent and this aimed to work safely with children at risk. There had also been work done in relation to unaccompanied child asylum seekers. The children's home Rosedale was completed and opened and building work had started on Windmill Farm. During the pandemic there had been an increase in the number of foster carers and an expansion of safeguarding hub which included an increased police presence based within the Service Area. The Head of Service stated that the staff had coped extremely well throughout but were obviously tired. It was envisaged that some aspects of work would continue to work remotely as it was found to work better for all involved, such as Family Court and Child Protection conferences.

Members asked the following:

- Members asked what the current position was with the budget and how we had managed to decrease the overspend since the onset of the pandemic?

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services responded that the biggest factor was additional investment from Welsh Government. Late in the year we had

received a substantial grant for Children's Services and we were able to address budget issues in that way. Placements were always the biggest single challenge so reducing the number of children with independent fostering agencies and in external children's homes was a big factor in the budget and so the opening of Rosedale was welcomed.

Overall the numbers of children actually in our care had begun to drop a little. This was as a response to some of the work that had been done regarding reunification of families and revoking orders. If that continued then we could see a reduction in some areas of the budget although we couldn't predict at this stage what would happen in terms of grant funding from Welsh Government.

The Cabinet Member for Social Services echoed the Head of Service comments in relation to the success of our Foster care sector saying that the support provided by Newport City Council was a huge factor in encouraging potential foster carers to come forward. He stated that our children's homes were also a huge success story for the City.

- A Member commented on a report just published stating the increase in the numbers of children in care and queried if we were expecting an increase in Newport?

The Head of Children and Young People Services said that she was aware of the report but that the numbers in Wales had always been higher than those in England. The demographic between Wales and England was different so we shouldn't really compare favourably. Deprivation was a key driver in the numbers of looked after children and obviously we were aware that Wales had a higher rate of deprivation than England overall. If you compared Wales with, for example, the north west of England rather than comparing with the whole of England, we were much more similar. However if you compared Wales with Surrey, we obviously would be in a very different position for reasons associated with deprivation. But that doesn't take away from the fact that we had differences within Wales too. Newport actually sat slightly below the average and we had done for some considerable time. We had never been above the average for Wales and had always been in the lower half of the averages.

In Newport we had a policy of really supporting older children to go home and to be reunified safely with parents. Also we were beginning to see the impact of 'Baby and Me'. The figures we had for the number of children awaiting adoption was currently the lowest it had been in the last nine years. We had a range of provision which helped ensure the right children come into care and that we were able to get children home safely when appropriate.

- A Member asked if the number of people on the Child Protection Register had increased.

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services responded that whilst we had seen a slight reduction in the numbers of looked after children, we had seen an increase in the number of children on the child protection register. Historically there was a correlation between the number of children on the register and then an increase later on in the numbers of looked after children, which was worrying, but we were hoping that the increase in registration would level out without seeing a corresponding increase in numbers becoming looked after.

We had become much better about proactively working with families and recognised that whilst some parents might not be able to care for children when they were five or six, some six or seven years later, their lives may have changed, the children's needs were different and those parents may then be more able to

cope. We had learnt to recognise this and we had improved in the way we dealt with these variables.

- How is the service area dealing with the issues of mental health in children?

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services stated that the Department engaged across the whole spectrum for children with emotional well-being and mental health challenges, from children who are really very unwell to children who were experiencing sadness. We had benefited from quite a lot of work around the models that we had. Across Gwent the process was that a GP referral went into a multiagency panel. So rather than just going into health, it was looking across the whole spectrum in case there might actually be something for a different sort of approach such as for parenting or young carers. This was a very welcome step in terms of better being able to meet those kind of early signs that possibly children were struggling in terms of emotional wellbeing. Unfortunately there was a wait for some services now and that was in part because of an increase in the referrals.

We would be looking at how to deal with that across agencies, but also how to involve schools. The impact on children and young people of the last 15 to 18 months was only just beginning to emerge and we were very aware of that and working across agencies to address these issues.

- How were the young people in our care impacted in terms of their continuing education during the pandemic?

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services stated that in terms of children who had been in our care through this period, we had been absolutely clear that they would have the same provisions as all children throughout the City. For children in our care, we were their corporate parent and so we made sure that they had what they needed. We had access to various grants that we were able to use such as paying for internet access and ensuring access to IT equipment. We also had access to donated equipment. We worked really hard to provide support to foster carers and residential workers. We were conscious that many of our children would have to catch up and we were committed to doing this also.

- A Member asked a question about foster carers and competition in provision.

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services responded that we had already increased our fees for foster carers and we were on a par with neighbouring Local Authorities. We had continuity of care through solid links with training, support and communication. Newport children were fostered by Newport carers and this was a strong message.

We had a solid programme for foster carers with training and support and had communicated with them solidly all the way through the pandemic. To encourage fostering we were able to get the message out on Twitter and Facebook and in Newport Matters and were part of Foster Wales, which was the 22 local authorities working together. In terms of the private agencies there were third sector voluntary organisations who had charitable status but we stressed the benefits of the support we provided and strength of connectivity for those children when they were in our care.

In response to a follow up question, the Head of Service confirmed that whilst adoption leave was a statutory provision, there was no such provision in regards to fostering. When assessing people to become foster carers, part of the discussion was about how fostering would fit in with their life and the way that they worked. Although we did see families where people worked full time, we

usually saw that for people who wanted to foster particularly young children, it was a household with one member who didn't work or who worked part time. During Fostering Fortnight we did a session on myth busting about the requirements for fostering, that there were no exclusions in terms of work or age or household.

- Members queried about the youth voice for young people in care.

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services stated that a lot of work had been done in this area. One initiative had been for children to express their feeling through the medium of Art. We had done quite a lot of work linked to fostering fortnights to highlight young people's case studies and their experiences. As part of that, we had a young person who had been in our care for quite some time, who spoke about her experience of foster care. Also during this period, we'd expanded the membership of corporate parenting. We had also asked Barnardo's and the staff in the partnership to undertake a consultation for us. As part of this work they spoke with staff, children, young people and with parents about their experience of our services. They then produced a report for us to consider.

We strongly encouraged all our children to take part in the Children's Commissioner's two surveys and we'd also had children and young people involved in some work with the Family Justice Observatory in the field looking at how we worked with exploitation. This range demonstrated the range of methods we had used to ensure we heard the child's voice all the way through from the very young to young adolescents.

The Chair thanked the Head of Children and Young Peoples Services for her detailed report and responses to questions posed by the Members of the Committee.

5 **Conclusions of Committee Reports**

The Committee noted the Year-end Service Plan Report and agreed to forward the minutes to the Cabinet as a summary of the issues raised.

The Committee wished to make the following comments to the Cabinet:

Adult and Community Services

- The Committee were very pleased with the quality of the report, and wanted it to be known that all the officers and staff have every right to be proud of their work and ensuring that the services provided have been of good quality throughout one of the most difficult times in living memory.
- The Committee wished for a briefing to be arranged in advance of the Mental Capacity Act to ensure Members are ahead of the curve and understand fully what the Act entails. Members also request if the link to the glossary of service contacts on the Council website to be sent.

Children and Young People Services

- The Committee again praised the quality of the report and how easy it was to understand. The Committee again wished to thank all the officers and staff for all of their hard throughout the pandemic, and continued high quality of service.
- The Committee requested that once Windmill Farm opens to the public, would a site visit be able to be organised for Members to view the venue.

6 **Draft 2021-22 Annual Forward Work Programme**

Invitees;

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Draft Annual Forward Work Programme for 2021-22 and outlined the draft topics for the year. It was emphasised that the Committee has ownership of the Work Programme and would continue to have the opportunity at each meeting to adapt, reprioritise, add or replace items on its Work Programme. Members' attention was drawn to the proposed schedule of meetings for the year.

Agreed:

The Committee **approved** the Annual Forward Work Programme, the schedule of meetings for 2021-22 and **agreed** the start time for Committee meetings of 10am.

The meeting terminated at 12.03 pm