

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 21 September 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors W Routley (Chair), J Cleverly, Y Forsey, S Marshall, J Richards, T Suller, H Thomas, C Townsend and T Watkins

In Attendance: Chris Humphrey (Interim Director of Social Services), Sally Ann Jenkins (Head of Children & Young Peoples Services), Connor Hall (Scrutiny Adviser), Samantha Schanzer and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officers)

Apologies: Councillor L Lacey

1 Apologies

Cllr L Lacey

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 22nd June 2021 were approved as a true and accurate record.

4 In-House Children's Residential Care

The Head of Children's Services introduced the report and stated that there was a long history of children having to leave their Local Authority area to access residential care but that in Newport we were trying to address the national shortage of care and keep our children as close to home as possible. We had our own portfolio and had maintained our own homes for a number of years and had been committed to providing good quality residential care.

The Cabinet Member for Social Services told the Committee that this had been one of the most rewarding schemes that he had been involved in and the report reflected the commitment of all involved. He stated that we led the way in Wales and our achievement had been looked at by others as how to do things well. The new way of working meant through Project Perthyn that we had no locked doors and no office as we provided a home environment, which was as close to a family home as possible. We had a 'cwtch' approach in place, understanding the need for children to receive hugs and in turn learn about appropriate physical touch. Project Perthyn strove to establish and maintain the trust and confidence of our children. These facilities were real 'homes' for children and the comments from the children themselves reflected the dedication of the staff and demonstrated how they appreciated the manner in which they were cared for.

Members asked the following:

-Was the provision in place sufficient for the numbers of our looked after children and what provision was in place for the varying needs of these children?

The Head of Children's Services stated that we currently had 368 children and this figure was steady. The vast majority of these were in foster care and there had been a big push to recruit foster carers. The number we needed to have in residential care was relatively small. There was a small group of children with very complex needs and mother and baby units that we were unable to provide for and had to be placed outside of the Local Authority. We were currently close to the ceiling of what we needed for residential care in Newport with no emergency capacity at present. Emergency placements were a major challenge for us and an area we would continue to look at.

- What was the provision for respite care?

The Head of Children's Services commented that we would continue to have children in care so would continue to seek out the best ways of providing care. Oaklands house struggled during the pandemic to provide respite care. 2 children there needed long term care but it was hoped that they would be able to move on by end of year. We looked constantly at models of respite care. Newport City Council commissioned Ty Hafan on occasion and this was very particular specialist provision. Also some schools away from Newport provided respite care and specific foster carers for respite care, some which had very specialist skills. Newport City Council strived to try and look at what was best for the child and their family. Going forward we would be looking at potential regional provision.

- What was the date for the opening of Windmill Farm and the position regarding staff following the closure of Cambridge House.

The Team Manager confirmed that works to Windmill Farm were currently on schedule and on track to open in January 2022. The home manager had just been appointed and it was anticipated the Councillors could visit in December prior to opening. Following closure of Cambridge House all staff who had wished to had been retained and employed elsewhere. There had been no compulsory redundancies.

- What was the situation in neighbouring Local Authorities and what were the cost savings for our model of provision?

The Head of Children's Services responded that the number of Local Authorities that had their own in-house provision was very small so whenever they needed a residential bed then they would need to purchase it and competition for these was therefore very high. Newport had on occasion offered a short-term bed for another Authority, at a cost, but we were fortunate in having our own provision as this relieved the pressure on us somewhat. She stressed that the cost of our in-house provision was not a cheap option by any means, the costs were extremely high but the costs of placements were huge, one English authority currently paying in excess of 30 thousand pounds a week for a placement. Whilst there were some voluntary sector providers and charities that provided care, the majority of care was provided by private businesses and was traded as an equity. Even accepting that ours was an expensive provision and we were committed to funding and resourcing appropriately, calculations would suggest that in the long run, we would be making savings. Going forward, this was a piece of work that would need to be looked into fully so that the exact costs and savings could be calculated.

- What was the situation with the amount of Foster Carers and the role of the wider community?

There was a TV advert for Foster Wales, together with advertising throughout the city in the form of banners, posters etc. We had had a surge of applicants last year but this had balanced out now but we would always require more foster applicants.

The Chair thanked the Head of Children's Services for her presentation and congratulated her and the staff on a very positive report.

5 **Director of Social Services Report 2020/21**

The Head of Adult Services gave a brief introduction to the report. The report contained information on how services had been maintained throughout the extremely challenging period of 2020/21. Although the report contained performance information, the performance reporting system that was in the process of changing during that period of time was suspended because of the pandemic, meaning that some of the detail was not fully available. Some of the historic measures were therefore not able to be included but could be provided verbally if required, during this meeting.

Members asked the following questions:-

- With the reporting requirements changed, how were we able to draw comparisons without benchmarking figures?

The Head of Adult Services responded that the whole of the reporting performance framework had changed as Welsh Government realised a lot of the previous measures were not giving them the information that they wanted. No targets had yet been established as a full year of data would be required to establish a benchmark for future performance. The new performance framework had changed so a comparison against the previous year was problematic. It was sensible therefore to treat this period as a baseline set of figures upon which to build future datasets to support evidence of future success, good practice and service pressures.

-There was an increase in assessments – what type of assessments were these?

About 30-40% were assessments for occupational therapy and the other large cohort of people were those wanting assessment for care and support. Often the families were unsure of what support they might need so Social Services worked with them and their families to determine what kind of support was needed, be it domiciliary care in the community, respite care or residential care. Whilst the majority of people who approached for an assessment were older people, there were adults of working age as well, whether because of physical or learning disability or mental health. The number of people that we assessed with mental health difficulties had increased by about a third during this period some of that as a consequence of the pandemic and deterioration in people's mental well-being. There had also been a significant number of people who presented with early onset dementia and dementia that had previously been manageable but a combination of factors linked to the pandemic and social isolation had meant this was no longer the case.

In response to a follow up question the Head of Adult Services stated that it was often a family member who referred people with suspected dementia for assessment. People had presented later due to the pandemic and so because of deterioration in condition, people's needs were more complex. Whilst we were coping in Newport and the Covid uplift from WG would continue until March 2022, discussions with Welsh Government were ongoing on how to meet this challenge.

- What was the situation with mental health assessments?

It was a service that was constantly under pressure and now had seen an increase in a third of mental health assessments. We had a responsibility to provide a 7-day week approved mental health duty rota and out of hours this was provided in partnership with other local authorities. There was a shortage of suitably trained people so we had made a commitment to train in-house but found that quite often, once qualified, these staff moved on to other authorities who were able to offer more incentives for suitably qualified staff and as funding

for staff training came from Welsh Government we were unable to add any tie- in clauses for staff to ensure they stayed with the authority after qualifying. Newport did have a good reputation as an employer and a good retention rate but with a shortage of suitably trained staff generally, the system was always under pressure.

- How has the Youth Justice Service community payback scheme been operating during this period?

The Head of Adult Services confirmed that the scheme had continued to operate during the pandemic, albeit in a different manner. We had tried to move away from the more traditional schemes and do things which were more meaningful in terms of community schemes. For example groups of young people put together pamper packs for NHS staff and also took charge of an allotment. It was hoped that the change longer term would be a positive change and hopefully help young people to develop empathy for others.

– How many people were currently homeless and what were the challenges in finding suitable accommodation?

The Head of Adult Services said she would confirm and report on the number as the figures depended on which definition of 'homeless' was used. The figures were collated by the Housing department and there were those who were permanently homeless as opposed to those who were for example, sofa surfing and therefore only temporarily homeless. Nevertheless, there was a significant challenge in finding people permanent accommodation, just in terms of the accommodation currently available. During the pandemic and through the efforts of colleagues in housing, social services and housing support teams, a huge effort and liaison with partners as well as work with the voluntary sector, ensured that we were able to move people into accommodation and keep them safe. Now the challenge would be to try to convert some of that into long term solutions for getting people into permanent accommodation, alongside dealing with some of the challenges that resulted in them being in that predicament in the first place, drug and alcohol challenges being a significant area being worked on. All had been offered accommodation but some, for a whole range of very complex reasons, had either not been able to remain in the accommodation that they'd been placed in or had declined help.

-What specialist care did we provide for those with dementia?

We had made changes to the way we provided day services for the elderly and support for older people and in particular, provided specialist provision and support for people with dementia and this was something that we would be increasingly focussing on and providing. Alongside this, providing respite and support for carers of people with dementia was of vital importance. Specialist training for our staff had been provided, and we'd also improved and changed the physical environments of our care homes to make them as suitable as we could for those with dementia.

-Was Newport involved in the Afghan refugee resettlement effort?

At this stage the specifics of the resettlement programme were not fully known because that sat within the Partnerships Team although when any vulnerable children were involved then Newport City Council's Social Services would become involved with the family aspect. Newport City Council were committed to support families and Children's Services worked on supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children. We anticipated seeing an increasing number of children arriving from Afghanistan who would arrive at the ports and there were now a number of children being cared for by the Home Office in hotels and which was far

from desirable. We were looking at how we could offer accommodation and support for those children that was funded by the Home Office although there would also be a financial implication for the local authority due to staffing issues. The Head of Children's Services agreed to present a report to a future meeting on the work being done around the issues of unaccompanied asylum seeker children and this was welcomed by the Chair.

-A Member noted that they would like to hear from the Government Ministers in future.

-How had we adapted our ways of working and what was the situation with the Courts?

It had been business as usual for many due to front facing roles whilst adapting due to Covid restrictions and implementing regulations such as PPE, social distancing etc. There had been more working from home with meeting via Teams etc. with staff adapting to work more flexibly. It had been easier to co-ordinate strategy meetings and more efficient to hold those meetings virtually rather than try to get participants together physically, so this had been an improvement. Feedback was that this approach was more popular and so going forward, this hybrid method of working would probably continue. However, the pressures on staff could not be underestimated and their well being would need to be considered over the Winter period to ensure their mental health was looked after.

Court proceedings had all moved online at the start of COVID-19 and there continued to be problems with differing IT platforms being used. One advantage was that our Social workers did not have to spend long hours in court but there was a case for trying to get people back into court for some hearings. For some parents it was much easier to be in the court to hear and understand what was happening so it was a mixed approach currently across England and Wales. The aim for resolution in the Family Court was twenty six weeks but there were significant delays in meeting this target. The average wait now for children in court was thirty four weeks. In Newport there was a reduction in the number of cases in the family court but these were significant cases that were traumatic for staff to deal with and unfortunately it was not envisaged that there would be any significant improvement in waiting times for quite a long time.

-We had a significant underspend in Adult and Community Services due to the Covid grant provisions. Could this have been invested and used elsewhere?

The Head of Adult Services and Cabinet Member responded that the underspend had been as a result of a significant grant from Welsh Government towards supporting and insulating care services and we had also experienced a reduction in the number of elderly people we had looked after due to increased death rates. The grant money was targeted specifically to prevent care homes from closing with constraints around its use and so we had been unable to use that budget to use for capital projects. We had invested the money where best suited such as taking on additional care home staff where we could and we also upgraded the call system in our care homes. However, we had been unable to make any long term commitments such as increasing long term pay as this grant was only short term funding.

The Chair thanked the Head of Adult and Community Services for her report which demonstrated the department had continued to work extremely well during the time of the pandemic.

6 Conclusions of Committee Reports

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

Residential Care Report

- Committee wished for the opportunity to visit Windmill Farm before reopening to see the changes that have been made since their original visit.
- The Committee would like to thank the officers for the report, as it was comprehensive and well set out.

Director of Social Services Report

- The Committee would like further context on some of the statistics on homelessness contained within the report, namely:
 - Why have those who have been offered accommodation then chosen to leave it?
 - Clarification on the number of homeless and street homeless in Newport, and how homelessness is defined by Newport City Council.
- The Committee would like to note that the overall report as well as their response to it was a positive one.

7 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

The Scrutiny Adviser noted changes to the Forward Work Programme – namely the change of dates for upcoming meetings. The Committee agreed to the change of dates and times.

The meeting terminated at 12.53 pm