



***CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)***

10.30am THURSDAY, 12TH FEBRUARY 2015

COMMITTEE ROOMS A/B - NEATH CIVIC CENTRE

PLEASE NOTE TIME AND VENUE

PART 1

1. To receive any declarations of interest from Members
2. To receive the Minutes of the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee held on 15th January 2015 (*Pages 1 - 12*)
3. To receive the Scrutiny Forward Work Programme 2014/15 (*Pages 13 - 16*)

To scrutinise decisions, information and monitoring issues reported by:

Presentation of the Peer Review Team

4. Children's Services Peer Review
(Report enclosed with Cabinet Board papers)

Report of the Children's Services Improvement Member Panel

5. Visits to Social Work Teams (*Pages 17 - 28*)

Presentation of the Head of Children and Young People Services

6. Safeguarding Children and Families in Neath Port Talbot

7. To select appropriate items from the Cabinet Board Agenda for pre-scrutiny (Cabinet Board reports enclosed for Scrutiny Members)
8. Any urgent items (whether public or exempt) at the discretion of the Chairman pursuant to Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972
9. Access to Meetings to resolve to exclude the public for the following item(s) pursuant to Section 100A(4) and (5) of the Local Government Act 1972 and the relevant exempt paragraphs of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the above Act.

PART 2

10. To select appropriate private items from the Cabinet Board Agenda for pre-scrutiny (Cabinet Board Reports enclosed for Scrutiny Members)

S.Phillips

Chief Executive

**Civic Centre
Port Talbot**

Friday, 6th February 2015

Committee Membership:

Chairman: Councillor A.R.Lockyer

Vice Chairman: Councillor Mrs.D.Jones

Councillors: A.Carter, Mrs.A.Chaves, Mrs.J.Dudley, M.Ellis,
P.Greenaway, R.G.Jones, J.D.Morgan,
Mrs.S.Paddison, Mrs.K.Pearson, M.Protheroe,
A.L.Thomas, Mrs.L.G.Williams and Mrs.A.Wingrave

***Co-opted
Voting Members** Mrs.H.Stephens

***Co-opted Non
Voting Members** R.De Benedictis, A.Hughes and Mrs.C.Wheldon

Notes:

- (1) *If Committee Members or non-Committee Members wish to have relevant items put on the agenda for future meetings, then please notify the Chief Executive/Chair eight days before the meeting.*
- (2) *If non-Committee Members wish to attend for an item of interest, then prior notification needs to be given (by 12.00 noon on the day before the meeting). Non-Committee Members may speak but not vote, or move or second any motion.*
- (3) *For pre scrutiny arrangements, the Chair will normally recommend forthcoming executive items for discussion/challenge. It is also open to Committee Members to request items to be raised - though Members are asked to be selective here in regard to important issues.*
- (4) *The relevant Cabinet Board Members will also be invited to be present at the meeting for Scrutiny/ Consultation purposes.*
- (5) *Would the Scrutiny Committee Members please bring the Cabinet Board papers with them to the meeting.*

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**CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Members Present:

15th January 2015

Chairman: Councillor A.R.Lockyer

Vice Chairman: Councillor Mrs.D.Jones

Councillors: A.Carter, Mrs.A.Chaves, M.Ellis, P.Greenaway,
J.D.Morgan, Mrs.S.Paddison, Mrs.K.Pearson,
M.Protheroe, A.L.Thomas and Mrs.L.G.Williams

**Co-opted Non Voting
Members:** R.De Benedictis

Officers InAttendance N. Jarman, A.Jarrett, Thomas, C.Millis,
Mrs.D. Berni, Ms.J.Jones, H.Roberts and
Ms.H.Lervy and Ms.C.Gadd

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors P.A.Rees and P.D.Richards

1. **TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN, YOUNG
PEOPLE AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON
4TH DECEMBER 2014**

Noted by the Committee.

Members queried if there had been any progress with the Children and Adolescence Mental Health Service (CAHMS) in the area. Officers informed them that the Director of Social Services, Health and Housing was in discussions about a CAHMS service for Hillside Secure Unit, which could also provide support to Children and Young People Services. The Committee would be informed of progress.

2. **TO RECEIVE THE SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME
2014/15**

Noted by the Committee.

Members were informed that if they had any additional items for the Forward Work Programme to inform the Scrutiny Officer.

3. SUPPORT FOR BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS IN NEATH PORT TALBOT

The Committee received the report on the progress in the new and updated framework for support for behaviour in schools in Neath Port Talbot, as detailed within the circulated report. Members were informed of the personnel changes in Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning Services and the new Inclusion Co-ordinator was introduced to the Committee.

Members had requested information on behaviour in schools at a previous meeting and they had previously received reports on the inclusion review that had been undertaken. The Review had highlighted some good practice and the Service had been monitoring the effectiveness of the behaviour management strategies in place in schools. It was highlighted that as Members were aware there had been an increase in the number of fixed term exclusions from schools during 2013/14 and the majority of pupils excluded had Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Members were informed that instances of challenging behaviour in schools had become more frequent and the behaviour was more challenging. It was confirmed that the background paper “Understanding and supporting children and young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties” had been circulated to Members. A PDF version of the document was requested as it was large and difficult to open on some devices. It was explained that this document would support the work that was being undertaken in schools and the tools in the document would be adapted to suit the needs of individual schools. Members were informed that an educational psychologist, with considerable experience, knowledge and skills in supporting schools and pupils with behaviour difficulties had developed the framework to support schools and was working with them to implement it over a 6 month pilot. It was noted that a similar pilot had been undertaken in one cluster area to assist pupils with learning difficulties and had been positive outcomes that were sustained afterwards. The pilot the approach had been rolled out to all clusters of schools. This was the same aim for the behaviour in schools pilot and there would be three phases – self-evaluation by schools, bespoke training and learning lessons, so that the strategies in the framework can be adjusted and amended throughout the process. Members requested that the updated guidance document be brought back to the Committee following the completion of the pilot and not wait for

the annual report. It was confirmed that Members would receive regular updates on progress.

Members highlighted that it was important for children to be in school as the impact of being excluded can have a significant impact on the rest of their lives, which was evidenced in the report. It was recognised that schools need to identify triggers for certain behaviours and put processes into place to address them. It was noted that different schools had different thresholds for behaviour intervention.

It was noted that children and young people can often become disengaged during the transition stage and Members asked if the work would look at school structure including transition. Officers confirmed that part of the improvement work would be around transition and the earlier identification of needs. One approach has been through learning walks and an example was given of following a pupil with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) through their school day. It highlighted that their behaviour from class to class varied depending on whether or not the teacher knew the needs of the child and how well they could address them. Exercises such as these help to develop an understanding of what works effectively.

Members asked if the Service had any influence with colleges and universities in regards to teacher training, as there was not much training in ALN. Officers informed Members that this had been identified by the regional setup Education through Regional Working (ERW) and they were looking at undertaking some work with Trinity St David's University in the first instance. It was also queried if would be sharing of good practice across the hubs and if all Local Authorities were establishing a consistent approach in regards to behaviour management. It was noted that Inclusion Services were not included in ERW's remit at the moment. However, if Neath Port Talbot got it right it could have a big impact on inclusion work across the area.

Officers recognised the work undertaken by Members in raising the profile of school attendance and asked for their assistance in supporting reducing exclusions and behaviour management.

Members queried who the stakeholders were on the Inclusion Review Action Group. It was outlined that it included secondary and primary schools representatives, challenge advisors, the Inclusion Co-ordinator, Principal Psychologist and the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning. It was chaired by the Head of Transformation.

Members asked if Children and Young People's Services, Team Around the Family and Health Services were going to be involved in this work. It was

confirmed that partners would be involved as there would be cross over with other areas. This would be included within the pilot to identify which services should be involved, as some issues would need to be addressed outside of school.

Members asked if there had been any research into the change of behaviour of children and young people and was it used to feed into the work. Officers explained that a lot of evidence based research and good practice was being used in the framework. It was noted that speech and language has a big impact and the Youth Offending Team had a lot of evidence in this area. Members also asked if there was any evidence of whether both parents working full time had an impact on behaviour as there could be a lack of support. In addition if there was any difference with grandparents undertaking childcare responsibilities rather than professional carers. It was highlighted that there was extensive research and evidence, however, nothing conclusive in these areas.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

4. **SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

The Committee received the report on school attendance that included data and information that Members had requested on comparison with similar schools and development of procedures to raise attendance, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members had previously received reports which outlined the Council's priority in raising levels of pupil attendance. Officers thanked Members for their support in this priority, particularly in raising it at School Governor meetings.

It was highlighted that attendance levels were going in the right direction. Primary schools had surpassed the targets set for them and Neath Port Talbot had moved up the rankings from joint last to 16th in 2013/14. They had also surpassed their targets for Free School Meals (FSM) pupils. Secondary schools had improved attendance, however, they had dropped slightly in the rankings from 12th to 13th. It was highlighted that this was still positive and Neath Port Talbot was just below the Welsh average for improvement at secondary school level. Members highlighted that there had been more exclusions from secondary schools and queried whether this impacted on attendance figures. It was confirmed that it would depend on the length of the exclusion, but it was recognised that this was a small cohort of pupils.

Members noted that schools had undertaken different approaches to attendance and asked if it had been identified which strategies were the most effective. Officers informed them that there had been a lot of sharing of ideas and Education Welfare Officers had shared different approaches across schools, however, there was no particular strategy that was the best as they had to be tailored to suit the school. Members they were pleased that pupils had been involved in the process.

Members queried if the size of a school made a difference to attendance levels. It was highlighted that it could have more of an impact on small schools as the overall percentage could be affected by one or two pupils, however, other factors also have an impact such as levels of FSMs. It was noted that there were schools that buck such trends and outperform similar schools.

Members were provided with prosecution data for 2013-14, when on occasion poor attendance had to be dealt with through the legal system. On those occasions the Council had won all except one case, which was withdrawn due to family circumstances. The result was penalties imposed by the courts and during 2013-14 there had been no custodial sentences. Members asked if the number of prosecutions had decreased and they were informed that they had not. Members asked if attendance of children improved after their parents had been prosecuted. It was noted that in some cases it did and in others it did not.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

5. **PRE-SCRUTINY**

The Committee scrutinised the following matters:-

Cabinet Board Proposals

5.1 The Future of Youth Offending Services

The Committee received the report on the future of the Youth Offending Service, as detailed within the circulated report.

It had previously been reported to the Committee that the Swansea, Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot Councils were undertaking a voluntary merger of their Youth Offending Services by April 2014. However, by this date the right architecture had not been put in place and Trade Unions had not been involved in the process. The Western Bay Youth Offending Services Board was established in May 2014

and the Director of Social Services, Health and Housing was Chairman of the Board. A recovery plan was then put in place and Trade Unions were engaged and it was noted that they had been accommodating, which resulted in some progress. A Regional Manager had been appointed and following this three locality managers. The full amalgamation had not taken place, however, Members were informed that there was now a workable model in place. This included the development of a Central Business Unit, which has delivered the 20% savings required for two out of the three Councils (Neath Port Talbot has delivered in full). The potential changes in local government reorganisation also have had an impact on the design of the service. Officers were recommending to Members to maintain the model that was now in place, which includes the Central Business Unit and Area Manager and continue to deliver services on a local level and not complete the full amalgamation. It was noted that the Police and Crime Commissioner was supportive of this approach.

Members recognised the work that had been put into this area by the Director of Social Services, Health and Housing. It was queried if the delay in the amalgamation and the subsequent changes had had an impact on the Council's excellent Youth Offending Service. Members were informed that it had not but could have due to the uncertainty facing staff and the service remained strong, which was a credit to the staff.

Members asked if there had been any communication with the Minister of Public Services regarding the complications of uncertainty over potential local government reorganisation. Officers informed Members that it had not officially been communicated and in this instance it had not been the main block in progress.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposals to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

5.2 Looked After Children Strategy

The Committee received the Looked After Children Strategy, which sets out Children's Services plans to safely reduce the number of Looked After Children in its care and to meet placement sufficiency and quality of service, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were aware that the number of children in care in Neath Port Talbot has significant implications on resources and the outcomes for

those children. Several strategies and plans have had some success in addressing these issues and the Looked After Children (LAC) Strategy brings them together under one overarching strategy. It was explained to Members it was ambitious but achievable and there were several elements to the plan. This included reducing the number of LAC placed with Independent Fostering Agencies and using internal fostering placements where possible. Actions would be taken to address the shortage in specialist placements, such as 11 plus and there would be improvement to the accommodation plan, improved planning and monitoring processes and strengthening the role of the Independent Reviewing Officers. Adoption Services were also being strengthened and ensuring those children remaining in the system had the right care and support. In addition a Communication and Engagement Strategy was being developed. Members were informed that monitoring arrangements for the Strategy would be through the Children's Services Improvement Plan.

Officers informed Members that it was an internal strategy to deliver and make improvements and would have a positive impact on the Service. Members highlighted that Officers completed Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) differently and it was easier to follow if the EIA explicitly stated the information or signposted to it and Members would like to see some consistency in the information contained within EIAs. For example, in the EIA section 4 states that the Strategy should have a positive impact but does not explain how it would do so. It was recognised that the positive impacts were in the Strategy, however, it would be helpful if the information was also included in this section. In addition Members highlighted that aspects of the EIA information referred to the impact being neutral and others to it being positive and requested clarity on this. Officers confirmed that the Strategy would have a positive impact. Members felt that the EIA should be amended to reflect this. Officers noted these comments and they informed Members that it was one of the first that they had completed and it was a learning curve for them.

Members highlighted that advocacy did not feature strongly in the Strategy and suggested that the wording should be amended to reflect its importance. Officers explained that advocacy would be picked up in other strategies, such as the Commissioning Strategy that was being developed, and it would feed into this overarching Strategy. It was noted that such strategies within the Children's Services were now dovetailing, which was positive.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board. It was also agreed that Cabinet

Board be asked to consider the following additional recommendations:

1. The EIA to be adjusted to reflect the positive impact of the Strategy.
2. The wording around advocacy under priority 3 to be changed to “All children who need an advocacy service will receive one”.

5.3 Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) Monitoring Report – April to September 2014

The Committee received the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) Monitoring Report for April to September 2014, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were informed that there were indicators to demonstrate that good progress was being made in improving the quality of practice. Members highlighted that there had been a reduction in the number of agency workers, which was pleasing. It was queried how many agency workers had become permanent members of staff. Officers informed them that it was around four or five and would confirm the exact number following the meeting.

Members asked what measures had been put in place to ensure consistency in evaluating caseloads and supervision. It was explained that having a stable workforce and management team with less turnover of social workers would assist with this. The Practice Improvement Group also helped to support this work in identifying potential improvements. Supervisions were a high priority and case audits were regularly undertaken. External partners had also been engaged in this process through such activities as the Peer Review.

Members noted that the Think Family Partnership was supporting 15% of vulnerable families identified and asked if there were any capacity issues. Officers explained that the Partnership and Team Around the Family worked with other agencies to deliver support and this would not be counted in their figures.

In relation to the information in the report Members queried whether low re-referral rates were a good or bad indicator of performance. It was explained that a lower rate was good as it demonstrated the Service was dealing with referrals effectively, however, if they were too low then questions would need to be asked to ensure children were not inappropriately screened out before referral stage.

It was highlighted that the Service had made continued improvements since this report and staff morale was high. Members were informed that the visits to the Social Work Teams by the Improvement Member Panel had reinforced this and the Committee would be receiving a report from the Panel in a future meeting.

The Committee was informed of the dates of the full inspection from CSSIW, which were the weeks commencing the 9th February and 23rd February 2014. There would be seven inspectors considering 65 cases. The inspectors would also be meeting a number of representatives, including some Elected Members and details would be confirmed.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

5.4 School Attendance Penalty Notice Authorisation

The Committee received the report to agree delegation to the named officers authorised to issue and withdraw Penalty Notices for Irregular Attendance at School, as detailed within the circulated report.

Since Members were presented with the 'Code of Conduct for Penalty Notices, Irregular Attendance at School/Alternative Education Provision' in September 2014, a recommendation had been received from Legal Services that the officers authorised to issue penalty notices to be noted in the document.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

5.5 School Attendance Payment of Penalty Notice

The Committee received the report on School Attendance Payment of Penalty Notices, which proposed to withdraw the option of a payment plan for parents, as detailed within the circulated report.

It was highlighted that when Members were presented with the 'Code of Conduct for Penalty Notices, Irregular Attendance at School/Alternative Education Provision' in September 2014, a recommendation was made from the Scrutiny Committee to Cabinet Board that Officers looked at the viability of a payment plan to be

included. Officers had investigated and it had found it would be impractical to deliver.

Members accepted that it was not practical and highlighted that it would add confusion in legal processes if part payments had been made.

Members asked how much latitude Local Authorities have in regards to the trigger for Penalty Notices to be issued. It was explained that below 90% attendance was the trigger for proceedings to start and this was agreed by Welsh Government and was consistent for all Local Authorities. It was highlighted the schools would engage parents in the process and if there proof of a valid reason, such as a medical note, then the Notices would not be issued.

Members noted that it was discriminating that parents who could afford to pay the penalty notices could take their children out of school to take them on holiday and other parents would not be able to afford this. However, it was highlighted that the key message was that children should attend school.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning thanked all those involved in improving attendance.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

6. **URGENT ITEM**

Because of the need to deal now with the matter contained in Minute No. 6 (i) below, the Chairman agreed that this could be raised at today's meeting as an urgent pursuant to Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972.

Reason for Urgency

Due to an administrative error the report was submitted to the incorrect Cabinet Board and it was therefore presented to today's meeting.

(i) Review of Youth Club Provision – Results of Consultation and Recommendations

The Committee received the report on the review of youth club provisions and to approve changes to the current allocation of youth

clubs to enable continuity of the service within the context of current budget limitations, as detailed within the circulated report.

Officers highlighted that there had been consultation on the proposals during November 2014 and the responses had been taken into consideration. For example, one of the proposals had been to reduce the annual number of weeks open from 30 weeks and the majority of respondents indicated that 30 weeks should be maintained. Officers have taken this on board and subsequently clubs would remain open for the 30 weeks. It was outlined that the reduction in staffing would be due to held vacancies and Early Retirement and Voluntary Redundancy. Members asked if the Trade Unions had been consulted over the reduction in number of posts. Officers informed them that they had not at this point but they would be as part of the management of change process, if the recommendation was agreed by Cabinet Board.

Alternative methods of delivery had been considered where possible. There had been some offers of help and support, however, it was noted that there were not many volunteering offers and that community members who wished to volunteer to work with young people were most likely already doing so. The proposals put forward were intended to have minimal impact on provision and the community. Members noted that community organisations can be useful in helping to deliver services and it was confirmed that Service Level Agreements already existed with some local organisations to deliver youth provision.

Members highlighted that the compliance statement indicated that there would be positive impacts and this would not be the case. Officers agreed that it should be amended. Officers informed Members that, where possible, actions would be put in place to mitigate against negative impacts. Members highlighted that Youth Workers were important to young people in communities to help identify concerning behaviours. Officers informed them that there would still be regular contact by the Youth Service with young people. The consultation had shown that young people had indicated that they felt safer having youth workers around. Members also expressed concern about the impact reduced services could have on anti-social behaviour. However, it was noted that youth clubs were already only open on certain nights and some had low attendance numbers. Officers would also be ensuring that the Personal and Social Education curriculum in schools was delivering what was required.

Members commented that a report on youth club provision had been brought to the Committee previously and had been rejected as the information was felt to be inaccurate. It was noted that these proposals

were not based on the information in that report. Members recognised that the current proposals were regarding existing provision and that budget savings had to be met. Members requested that if these proposals were implemented that further work was undertaken on the distribution of youth clubs in Neath Port Talbot. Members would like more information on overall provision and if resources were allocated in the right areas.

Members noted that the Principal Youth and Community Officer would be leaving the Council at the end of March and the Committee thanked her for her hard work and wished her the best for the future.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board. It was also agreed that Cabinet Board be asked to consider the following additional recommendation:

Following the implementation of the recommendation the need and corresponding best distribution of youth club provision is assessed and brought back to the Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet Board.

CHAIRMAN

**Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee
Forward Work Programme 2014/15**

Date of Meeting	Agenda Item
19 th June 2014	Draft Foster Carer Finance Policy
	Safeguarding Children – Children Who Go Missing & Children At Risk Of Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
	CYPS - Performance Monitoring, End of Year Report
	Pre-Scrutiny – Cabinet Board Items
31 st July 2014	EDLL - Performance Indicator Monitoring Report 4th Quarter 2013/14
	Update on the Modernisation of the Process and Work Programme Development.
	Pre-Scrutiny – Cabinet Board Items
18 th September 2014	Performance Scrutiny – Children and Young People Services

	<p>Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of progress made against quality and consistency of assessments and care planning.
	Performance Monitoring – EDLL Quarter 1 (Cabinet Board Paper)
	Performance Scrutiny – CYPS Quarter 1 (including 8 Key Priority Performance Grids) (Cabinet Board Paper)
	Hillside Monitoring
	Pre-Scrutiny – Cabinet Board Items
17 th October 2014	Special Scrutiny – Potential Budget Savings – EDLL and CYPS
23 rd October 2014	Pre-Scrutiny – Cabinet Board Items
4 th December 2014	Performance Monitoring – Report of the Independent Support Team on Progress To Date on the Improvement of Children’s Services in Neath Port Talbot
	Performance Monitoring – CYPS Quarter 2 (including 8 Key Priority Performance Grids) and

	Corporate Improvement Plan Objectives Update
	Performance Monitoring – Annual Report on Pupil Performance 2013-14
	Performance Monitoring – EDLL Quarter 2 and Corporate Improvement Plan Objectives Update
	Pre-scrutiny – Cabinet Board Items
15th January 2015	Support for Behaviour Management in Schools in Neath Port Talbot
	Pre-scrutiny - Cabinet Board Items
12 th February 2015 (Special)	Peer Review Report Report from Improvement Member Panel Safeguarding
26 th February 2015	Performance Monitoring – EDLL Quarter 3
	Performance Monitoring – CYPS Quarter 3 including 8 Priority Indicators
	Pre-scrutiny - Cabinet Board Items

9 th April 2015	
	Pre-scrutiny - Cabinet Board Items
28 th May 2015	
	Pre-scrutiny - Cabinet Board Items

Note: other items to be scheduled include: Hillside progress; Complaints.

- Youth Clubs
- Placement of Looked After Children in Schools
- Use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant by Schools and links to pupil attainment (link to Schools Monitoring Group)
- Children Services - Staff Appraisals System
- Update report on Independent Support Teams recommendations

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

12th February 2015

SECTION B – MATTER FOR INFORMATION

WARDS AFFECTED: All

Report from the Children’s Services Improvement Member Panel on recent visits to Social Work Teams

Purpose of Report

To provide the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee with feedback from the Member Improvement Panel recent visits to Social Work Teams.

Background

The Children’s Services Improvement Member Panel was set up in November 2012 to provide the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet with additional assurance that rapid and sustainable improvement was being made to the Council’s arrangements to safeguard children and young people and to support looked after children. Part of their remit is to highlight specific areas that required improvement.

The Panel has met with Children’s Services Social Work Teams on several occasions to discuss the changes that have happened and to help identify any issues that need to be addressed. The Committee previously received a report from the Panel in March 2014 following focus groups that they held with a cross section of staff from the teams. Members found this evidence useful in complementing the other workforce development information received by the Committee.

The Panel undertook its third set of visits with teams during the period of 27th October 2014 to 18th December 2014. The meetings with the teams provided Members with an insight of what progress has been made and to gather social workers views on how the Service is progressing. It also identified areas of

concern to be addressed. The notes of the meetings were shared with the Head of Children and Young People Services and the relevant Principal Officers to feed into service improvements. This report provides Members with a summary of this information.

During the visits there were some topics raised which have been outlined below under cross cutting themes.

Morale and Stability of Teams

The Panel noted that the moral of all teams was high and there was a marked difference compared with previous visits to the teams. Every team visited felt that members of their team were supportive of each other. Social Workers felt that the reputation of Neath Port Talbot Children and Young People Services had improved it was a more positive and safer place to work. Several examples of this were highlighted, such as some agency workers had become permanent members of staff, a member of staff that had left the Authority had returned, social workers had joined Neath Port Talbot from other Local Authorities and a deputy team manager had stated that 2 years ago they would have not considered doing the job. All commented that the Service had moved forward and the majority of staff felt valued and supported. The commitment of staff was evident. No references were made to bullying or oppressive practice by any teams.

All teams felt that the Senior Management Team was approachable and they had positive comments about the Head of Service and Director of Social Services, Health and Housing. Particular mention should also be made to the comments regarding the excellent job that the business support staff were doing within the teams.

Teams that had recently moved into Neath Civic Centre gave a balanced view on what worked well being based there and what did not. Overall, teams were happy with being based in the Civic Centre and felt less isolated and more supported. It was felt that it is easier to liaise with each other and created better working relationships.

The two Community Teams that are not based in the Civic Centre (Dyffryn and Sandfields) clearly stated that they wanted to remain based within the community. The Dyffryn Team were happy with where they are based and the Sandfields Team were very positive about their impending move to new accommodation.

At the time of the visit Route 16 were based in Pontardawe and there had been some discussions about accommodation, however, since the visit this team has moved into Neath Civic Centre and so the comments and issues raised have not been included within the report. A better base was also being looked at for the Emergency Duty Team, to ensure safer working arrangements for the team.

The majority of teams seemed to be stable and it was apparent that there are actions in place to provide additional support to teams that require it. It was noted that inconsistency in teams had an impact on performance. Building trust and relationships with families, children and young people was a very important part of the work of the Service and this was also reliant on consistency of Social Workers and Practice Support Workers (PSWs) that are involved with families.

Improvements

Particular improvements that were highlighted by teams, included the following:

- The Service was felt to be less reactive and more proactive in preventing children coming into care.
- The IT System praised as being much easier to use, however, there was still some confusion over whether spell check had been set up on the system.
- Some teams were seeing more family members willing to take in children to prevent them going into care. There had also been a drive to increase Special Guardianship Orders to prevent children becoming looked after.
- The reputation of the Service has improved externally.
- Good quality training including multiagency training.
- Most teams reported good relationship with partners. The need to work well with other agencies and schools to ensure referrals are made where necessary and to inform assessments was emphasised.

Performance Information

Several teams referred to performance indicators and the commitment to meet targets. Concern was raised over the way dips in performance of some teams was reported to Members and if they were provided with background reasons. The Panel took the time to assure teams that the context to performance information was provided to Members of the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee and where there had been unexpected circumstances it was fully explained. In addition what action had been taken to address dips in performance was also explained to Members. Teams seemed to be reassured by this explanation and were pleased that Members were receiving the full picture on the performance of the Service.

All teams reported no significant problems with sickness absence and the Panel were pleased to hear this. There were also less agency staff and it was highlighted that there was a better calibre of agency staff where they were required.

Supervisions, Appraisal System, Training and Newly Qualified Staff

The Panel asked all teams about supervisions and all teams indicated that they were receiving regular supervisions. It was highlighted that there had been some issues with consistency in who undertook supervisions for some teams, however, actions had been put in place to address this. Space and privacy for supervisions is an issue for some teams. Individual issues were raised in regards to supervisions and these had been reported to the Head of Service to investigate. It was evident that there is a lot of indirect supervision, in addition to formal supervisions. It was highlighted that team discussions were useful for team members to learn from each other. The Panel asked the teams about the introduction of an appraisal system and all indicated that they would welcome this approach.

The Panel was informed that there is more emphasis on nurture your own and more social workers going “through the bar”. Some concerns were raised by those that were starting their second year in practice over workload balanced with academic work and having support to do it.

Other practices that were felt to be helpful included Social Work Panels as they are structured and effective. The Practice Improvement Group was also seen as a good way for teams to feed into improvement process.

All teams felt they had received good training. The resilience and vulnerability tool was particularly mentioned in being helpful in making difficult decisions and managing risk. Some teams had received training that had been specifically tailored to their needs and there had been very positive feedback on this. Student social workers reported that they were happy with the support they received and the experience they had gained. Consultant social workers are looking at developing consultancy and mentoring roles.

Workload and Quality

All teams seemed to be focussed on improving the quality of work. It was also highlighted that the quality assurance work was being strengthened. There is more emphasis on ensuring that care plans meet the needs of the child. It was recognised that the voice of the child needs to be heard and they should have easy access to their social worker. Previously the focus had been on frontline teams but now the Service was looking at other aspects.

Concerns that were raised included a shortage of good quality locations for contact visits. Some teams suggested that a similar centre to Pendarvis would be useful in the Neath or Pontardawe areas of the County Borough. It was also highlighted that a lot of venues were not suitable due to health and safety aspects and size. There are also cost implications for using other venues, which had to be paid for even if the visits were cancelled at short notice. In addition it was highlighted that there are a shortage of contact workers and PSWs often had to cover contact visits, which takes them away from undertaking more quality work with children.

Caseloads varied from team to team and it was emphasised that the complexity of cases had an impact on how manageable they are. It was highlighted that some teams have more varied work than others as there is currently more demand in some teams than others (e.g. LAC Team).

The increased demands from court work was highlighted by a lot of teams as adding pressure, especially as this work takes priority. The changes in timescales had added to this. Courts are more reluctant to put care orders in place and sometimes place unrealistic demands on social workers. New adoption legislation has also increased the workload for some teams. It was noted that there were still a lot of unclaimed hours worked by social workers and PSWs.

Several teams highlighted that they would like to spend more time on quality work with children. For example, there is a backlog of lifestory work as social workers and PSW have to prioritise other work areas. It was also noted that there have been some mixed messages over what should be included in lifestory work, as the information should be age appropriate but accurate.

Care Leavers

Some of the issues raised were specifically in regards to care leavers. It was highlighted that there has been an improvement in accommodation for care leavers. However, there is still a lack of supported accommodation and in finding emergency placements in support lodgings. It was recognised that the commissioning arrangements for this service are being revised and should help to resolve such issues. The relationship between Children's Services and Housing Options has been improved, however, there are still some concerns over intentionality. It was noted that this could partly be down to the way that the young person is being presented to Housing Services. Further work is required in this area between the two services.

The implications of the bedroom tax were raised and it was highlighted that it is a complex issue. Care leavers are not exempt from it; therefore, if a care leaver is in Social Housing then it can have an impact on their financial situation, as there is a lack of one bedroom accommodation. However, if a care leaver is in a privately rented accommodation then it will not have an impact. It was queried if the Council had any discretionary powers to ensure care leavers would be exempt from bedroom tax or if there would be any possibility for the Council to make a contribution towards it.

It was noted that there has been a reduction to the Education Participation Funding which has had an impact on care leavers. Also it has changed from being paid weekly to termly have made it more difficult for some to manage their money.

Concern was raised about a shop selling legal highs in the Neath area and it was asked what powers the Council had in preventing this. The Panel had raised this issue with Trading Standards, who were already aware of it and were looking at what steps could be taken. The Panel had asked to be kept up to date with any progress.

Attainment of Looked After Children

It was noted that there are some inconsistencies across schools in liaising with social workers and in understanding the needs of Looked After Children (LAC). It was suggested that further training for teachers in this area would be helpful.

Speech and language therapy was also highlighted as a significant tool for LAC.

Foster Care

There was a lot of discussion around foster care. It was highlighted that there is sometimes a lack of in house foster care placements particularly for certain groups, such as teenagers and children with disabilities. Further recruitment of in house foster carers should be encouraged. It was noted that the Council has a low rate of losing foster carers once they are with Neath Port Talbot. It was noted that Independent Fostering Agencies can offer more support but the costs of this support is paid for by the Local Authority through the fees they charge.

Some Local Authorities pay foster carers a retainer, which is beneficial to carers and could assist with recruiting more. However, it was recognised that it could be expensive to have a lot of retainers if placements are not being used. It was also noted that the Fostering Team actively tries to recruit foster carers within Neath Port Talbot boundaries to try and provide LAC with more stability.

It was highlighted that the most difficult group to find a placement for was teenagers and it would help to have more foster care plus in house. It was

suggested that a specialist group of foster carers for this age range could help with finding placements. It was also suggested that foster carers could receive further training in such areas as attachment, which would assist them in dealing with the behaviour of some children.

The majority of teams noted that there are more children with complex needs including behavioural and emotional problems. Some Local Authorities have child psychologists that foster carers can access and it was suggested that this would be useful for Neath Port Talbot foster carers. Another suggestion was to have a behavioural specialist to help foster carers deal with challenging behaviour.

The other group that is difficult to place is children with disabilities. Often specialist skills, such as medical training, are required and there is one independent agency that specialises in this area. More children on the Autistic Spectrum Disorder Spectrum could be placed with in house foster carers if they had the right support.

Stability for LAC was raised as a key issue and it was recognised that the new Placement Strategy will have a positive impact in this area, as it will provide more direction and focus. The changes to adoption services will result in more flexible working and hopefully provide more adopters.

Additional Resources

As part of the visits the Panel asked teams what would assist them in carrying out their work. Most teams were aware of the budget pressures and some teams asked for what they had to be protected rather than additional resources.

A lot of teams highlighted that it would be useful to have another behavioural specialist within Children's Services, especially as teams are seeing more children and young people with more complex needs. Targeting support at an early point will also help to prevent some cases reaching crisis point. Alternatively it was suggested that access to a child psychologist would assist teams, parents and foster carers in addressing behavioural problems.

One team had requested passes to be able to park in residential areas during work hours to provide easier access. Teams that work in valley areas had asked if there was any possibility of having access to 4x4 vehicles during inclement weather. They had also enquired if the Council put on any training for employees for driving in ice and snow.

It was noted that diaries were no longer provided to employees and there was useful contact information in them. The Panel reinforced that not providing diaries was a corporate decision and applied across the board. On investigation it was apparent that the contact information was available in other forms such as online.

Some teams requested Blackberries rather than mobiles for PSWs, other teams asked for more up to date mobile phones as it can be hard to get a signal in some areas. Also some non-frontline teams would like Blackberries as situations can change quickly and they could react more promptly if they had the information earlier on.

A lot of teams requested more PSWs, especially as some are doing the Social Work degree which takes time out of their jobs. Some teams also requested more business administration staff.

One suggestion to help progress the service was for more work to be carried out on developing disability practice.

Support Services

Most teams mentioned that there was a decrease in the amount of support services available and concern was raised about reducing funding to some support services and what would be put in place.

It was highlighted across the board, including for Looked After Children, there was a sporadic Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAHMS) and there was a need for improvements in this service. It was highlighted that there is limited support for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Lack of parenting classes was also raised as an issue and a need for counselling services was identified.

It was noted that courts are requesting more therapeutic input for Looked After Children. There is a lack of this type of service in Neath Port Talbot and it is expensive. It was also noted that quicker decisions are sometimes required from senior management on such services when they are asked for by the court.

Some teams would like additional information on Think Families Partnership and their work. They would also like clearer links with Team Around the Family.

General Issues

Some working environment issues were raised. All teams based in Neath Civic Centre raised safety concerns regarding parking in the multi-storey car park, whilst the new car park is being built. It was recognised that this is an issue for all employees in the Neath Civic Centre and not just Social Services staff. The heating control in Neath Civic Centre was raised as an issue as it can be too cold or too hot and can be uncomfortable.

Some teams noted that there were problems associated with substance misuse and domestic violence, especially during holiday periods, which had an impact on demand. One team highlighted that poverty was a significant influencing factor.

It was noted that early intervention and prevention work is being prioritised and it was also felt that it is important to have the right support for the children already in the system.

Across the board raising the profile of the work of the teams was highlighted, especially in recognising the good work that is being undertaken. Some teams would like to make more use of social media.

It was felt there were fewer complaints with the new system in place and the Director of Social Services, Health and Housing signing off all stage 2 complaints.

One team mentioned that they would like more feedback at times on whether suggestions were acted upon by senior management.

Some teams had extra suggestions to make improvements and to add value. For example, the Sandfields Team are looking at developing a drop in for children and young people to break down barriers and take the fear out of social services. The Panel were pleased to hear about such ideas.

Corporate Parenting Panel

Some of the topics highlighted in this report are relevant to the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel as they relate to Looked After Children and Care Leavers. The Improvement Panel have also produced a report for the Corporate Parenting Panel to draw out the topics that are relevant to their work. This information could potentially assist the Panel with their work and highlights points to be considered in taking forward work and in monitoring the impact.

Summary

Each round of visits by the Panel has found that morale has improved and there has been a big improvement in staff satisfaction. During these recent visits the Panel were particularly pleased to note that the discussions had progressed to quality of work and suggestions for improving the Service. This is a significant step forward as all teams seemed more positive and there was more stability. This information complements other evidence on workforce performance information and staff feedback.

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