

Social Services, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Committee
(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

7 November 2024

Chairperson: Councillor C.Galsworthy

Councillors: O.S.Davies, S.E.Freeguard, J.Jones,
A.R.Lockyer, A.Lodwig, P.D.Richards,
D.Whitelock and C.Williams

Officers In Attendance R.Davies, C.Howard, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas,
K.Warren, E.Wellington, A.Bradshaw, C.Jones,
S.Coe, M.Potts, E.O'Brien, G.Hargest,
G. Powell, H.Jones, V.Smith, M.Weaver and
P.Chivers

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors S.Harris and J.Hale

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2024 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

4. To consider items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme

Members considered items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme

(a) **Budget 2025/2026**

The Director of Social Services, Health and Housing, advised members that the budget setting process had been difficult, the required 5% savings from the directorate amounted to £5.4m at a time of increasing pressures on services and complexities of need. The Director noted that other agencies such as police, prison and probation services as well as some areas of health, were reducing services to vulnerable people which was creating additional demand.

The Heads of Service provided of overview of each of the budget proposals contained within the report.

Reference SSH&CS-A: The Head of Housing and Communities advised members that the expected efficiency saving for the department was £112k which will be achieved through cost reduction in providing homelessness services through service redesign and preventing people from requiring temporary accommodation; this is in line with the strategy that was previously brought to committee.

A restructure of the Housing Options Team was carried out in August and a strategic housing function is in place. The efficiency target is connected to the teams that are now in place and the work in the strategy is being progressed.

Reference SSH&CS-B. The Head of Children and Young People Services advised members that the pro-posed saving of £232k related to a natural reduction in the number of looked after children. There will be a reduction in the amount of allowances that are currently paid but will stop when the young person turns 18.

Members questioned how this figure would be affected should there be an increase in young people needing care in the future.

The Head of Service confirmed that any child needing care would be provided for. However, due to the service set up and the quality of the social work practice, there has been a downward trend over the last 10 years of young people needing care, and although this is a risk, it is anticipated that the numbers will reduce further.

Members asked for clarification of the term non looked-after children that was used in the report.

The Head of Service confirmed that this term related to previously looked-after young people who ceased being looked-after at 18.

Members referred to page 20 of the report and the mention that 'historically the underspend for in-house allowances offset the overspend of external residential provisions' and asked if the underspend was saved and was it connected to this budget proposal.

The Head of Service confirmed that this could be discussed under a later budget proposal.

Members requested data in relation to the special guardianship order.

The Director of Social Services, Health and Housing, clarified children who have been adopted or are on special guardianship orders are no longer looked after by the local authority and are classed as non looked-after.

Members questioned whether any of the non looked-after children required any transport.

The Director confirmed that this may be the case, the young people were supported to stay with their special guardians or adopted parents.

SSH&CS-C The Head of Children and Young People Services advised members that a review of support workers within the Family Support Service had been undertaken. The proposal was for a more flexible workforce, with support staff at a lower grade who can provide practical support outside of traditional office hours.

Members asked for further information on the negative impact of the proposal.

The Head of Service confirmed that this exercise would have been conducted regardless of the budget savings required; feedback received from families was that more flexible support was needed. Confidence is held that this savings proposal could be achieved without an impact, but should the exercise be repeated, then there would be an impact on service delivery.

The Chair commented that the budget proposal information provided was limited. Any reference to negative impacts needed to be considered carefully. It was acknowledged that there were risks around some budget proposals, but confidence was held that staff would consider the risks appropriately. There is an expectation that any risks would be brought back to the committee for further consideration.

The Head of Service confirmed that there were proposals for £1.4m of savings but confidence was held that these could be achieved during the next financial year. However, any further reduction of support services will have a direct impact on the most vulnerable families.

Members questioned whether the reduction in staffing costs would be achieved naturally or whether there would be redundancies.

The Head of Service confirmed that staff, human resources and unions were meeting shortly to discuss further. Some staff may be interested in flexible retirement or possibly voluntary redundancy; it was anticipated that the target would be reached naturally.

Members requested more information on the proposal and questioned whether this was high risk? If the proposal led to redundancies, further detail would be required.

The Head of Service confirmed that due to the stability of the service, the saving proposal was achievable and was not high risk as a one-off exercise. The risk would increase if the exercise was repeated. A paper will be developed which will provide further detail on the type of work and hours that staff will be able to carry out, to enable them to be more responsive and visible within the community.

Members asked for further clarification regarding the possibility of increasing staff hours and changing contracts and whether on-costs been taken into consideration.

The Head of Service confirmed that there would be no increase in the amount of hours but there would be changes to hours and contracts. The current contracts state that there is a need for flexibility. The on costs have been factored into the proposal.

The Director stated that it had been difficult to identify savings without risk; staff had attempted to balance between savings and keeping proposals as low risk as possible. Once further work is completed, a report can be brought to scrutiny for further consideration.

SSH&CS-D – The Head of Children and Young People Services advised members there was a reduction in in-house allowances, external agency costs and carer travel budget. Historically the underspend for the in-house allowance, has offset the overspend for the residential provision. Residential numbers doubled, particularly during Covid but are beginning to reduce. There is a risk in using the underspend that the buffer will be taken away. There is also a risk with the potential harmonization of fostering allowances across Wales which could result in an increase of foster carer payments. An exercise has been carried out to reduce travel costs and the amount of independent fostering agency costs has reduced which has contributed to the overall saving.

The Chair enquired how the decline in people applying to be foster carers was impacting on the service.

The Head of Children and Young People Services confirmed that as part of the transformation work, experienced foster carers were sought for young people who are in residential care to step them down into a family home, with wrap around support for the carers. There has been an increase in assessments for this type of carer and, an increase in potential mainstream foster carers coming forward.

Members requested data in relation to costs and figures for people in out of county residential care. Concern was expressed that budget pressures will limit the amount of people that are brought into care. The reduction of in-house allowances will potentially deter prospective foster carers. Members questioned if this budget proposal was realistic.

The Director of Social Services, Health and Housing, advised members that the needs of a child who requires care is a priority, even if this results in an overspend. An overspend in residential care is a current pressure which needs to be addressed, however, children will not be moved from residential care without ensuring their needs will be properly met elsewhere. It was confirmed that foster care allowances were not being reduced. The underspend in the fostering budget was related to the decrease in the amount of looked

after children who are with expensive out of county placements, in private agencies. The director confirmed that there was a risk to the proposal and next year the number of children in residential care would be reduced from the current amount. Within the transformation program there are plans in place for a proper step down, if this is not achievable within time frames, this will be reported back, and children will stay in their current placements.

Members thanked the Director for his reassurances but commented that staff should not be pressured, and that children's needs come first.

The Head of Service commented that all decisions were taken with safeguarding as a priority.

SSH&CS-E The Head of Children and Young People Services, informed members that the proposal was for income generation. There is a provision across Wales where unused foster placements can be offered at a small cost to neighbouring authorities. The scheme supports need across other authorities and allows foster carers to care for children. Officers confirmed that the income generated for next year is around £52K but the amount is dependent on the amount and length of placements.

SSH&CS-F – The Head of Children and Young People Services confirmed that the proposed saving related to a jointly funded health visitor post. The Health Board have been unable to contribute to the funding and another arrangement is in place for the service.

SSH&CS – G The Head of Children and Young People Services, informed members that the discretionary spend budget was allocated to teams and was used to support families in crisis.

SSH&CS- H The Head of Children and Young People Services, advised members that through joint working across the council the cost of looked after children taxi routes was reduced.

Members enquired whether the taxi's related to Social Services or Education taxi's.

The Head of Service confirmed that they were education taxi's.

Members commented that the cost would come from the Social Services budget and stated that there were issues with families that

need transport, but the provision has been cut. Consultants have been engaged to conduct a transport review, at a cost, and members felt that staff could have carried out the review.

The Head of Service reassured members that transport is still being provided and there were no examples where families have not been provided with transport. The review was conducted by staff who are supporting families; foster carers are providing transport. There has been no cut to the number of journeys undertaken only a different approach in providing this.

In relation to budget proposals **SSH&CS-I – SSH&CS-P**, The Head of Adult Services confirmed that there were £3.9m worth of savings and £1.3m worth of vacancy that has to be identified during the next year. Some of the narrative is purposely brief, the information is sensitive and will re-quire full public consultation. All proposals will be followed up with detailed reports to scrutiny and Cabinet.

SSH&CS-I – A review of Direct Payments will be undertaken; some packages of care may have been oversubscribed. Substantial sums of money have accrued in bank accounts where there are delays in personal assistant appointments and there are issues around managed accounts.

Members questioned how the legislation affected the council?

The Head of Service confirmed that reassessments would be conducted by Social Workers to ensure that the right size packages of care were in place. The authority has a duty under the act to offer a direct payment, but there is a need to look at different outcomes and how they are achieved so that direct payment is not the only solution.

Members questioned whether there would be an appeals procedure and commented that, if so, there would be a cost implication to this.

The Head of Service confirmed that this is currently the case and ongoing.

SSH&CS-J/SSH&CS-K/SSH&CS-N The Head of Adult Services confirmed that the proposals were to develop in-house provision for complex care needs; proposals included the site at Gelligron for supported living or extra care provision, additional day services, possibly at Afan Nedd and increasing the number of respite beds in Trem Y Mor. It was noted that currently there are nineteen people

with mental health and twenty-six people with learning disabilities residing in supported living or residential placements at a cost to the council of £4.5m. By developing in-house provision, it was projected that a saving of £2m could be realised. However, there was a risk that this may not be achievable within required timescales.

Members questioned whether the savings figure was realistic and achievable.

The Head of Service confirmed that figures had been calculated and there are currently forty-five people in placements they do not need to be in. There are currently no alternative or in-house provision and external providers can charge high prices with prices averaging £4k - £8k per week. This is an invest to save proposal.

Members enquired whether internal processes would delay the project and affect the ability to achieve these proposals within timescales.

The Head of Service advised members that the Director chairs a transformation program and there is a dedicated officer in relation to the transformation agenda. Progress is being made and there will be a better position from January. It was noted that an issue facing the service is risk aversion from providers and risks could be better managed in-house.

SSH&CS-L The Head of Adult Services advised members that there was an ongoing review by the com-missioning team to review placements, supported living schemes and challenge costs of external providers. This year £720k has been saved and there is confidence that a £650k saving was achievable for the next financial year. It was confirmed that the review did not result in any reduction to services.

SSH&CS-M The Head of Adult Services advised members that the proposal was for a review of domiciliary care services in the community and in supported living schemes. The proposal does come with some risk but with the use of technology, there was confidence that the saving could be delivered. It was noted that there would be no reduction in packages of care but all support will be reviewed. There are issues around the cost of sitting services and by providing the service in-house or using third sector organisations, the cost could be reduced.

Members questioned whether placement efficiencies would affect hospitals with bed blocking.

The Head of Service confirmed this was not the case. The placement efficiencies related to challenging costs and overheads that are charged within supported living arrangements.

SSH&CS-O The Head of Adult Services advised members that by creating residential reablement capacity at Trem Y Glyn, the council will be able to provide people with a period of respite from the community and from hospitals for up to six weeks, people would return home with a reduced package of care or no care at all. The savings would be dependent on there being twelve beds, there are currently four beds available and the possibility of a further two shortly.

SSH&CS-P The Head of Adult Services advised members that any reduction in staff would be a last re-sort. If further savings are required, parts of the service will be restructured. There has been some interest in early retirement.

The Director of Social Services, Health & Housing confirmed that the proposals were not easy to make and finding savings did not come without impact on services. Further work is needed on some of the proposals and members will be updated throughout the process.

Following scrutiny, members noted the report and the suggestions and views put forward by the committee.

(b) Neath Port Talbot Council Children and Young People Services Placement Commissioning Strategy 2024-2027

The Chair thanked officers for their comprehensive report.

Members referred to the background section on page 20 of the Cabinet report, and requested that text is added to the report to reflect that the council will support children to remain with a parent or person with parental responsibility, where it is safe to do so. It was important to reference safeguarding as this is the primary focus. Members requested data for different types of establishment such as foster carers, residential children's homes or supported accommodation.

Officers confirmed that the suggested change would be made to the report and the requested information would be provided to members.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendation outlined in the draft Cabinet report.

5. **To consider items from the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme**

(a) **Update Report on Housing and Communities Transformation Programmes**

The Head of Housing and Communities provided members with an overview of the report contained in the agenda pack and advised members that satisfactory progress has been achieved against the programs of work.

Members referred to page 89 of the report and asked if Officers could provide examples of the different types of models that have been analysed.

Officers advised members that work was ongoing with colleagues in commissioning, to review different modelling types. There is a need to look at full supported range of accommodation options. It was hoped that this would be moved forward shortly, following events with commissioning colleagues, service providers and meetings with registered social landlords to advise on property opportunities.

Members questioned whether officers were referring to the model of the system or different models of housing?

Officers confirmed that different models of housing such as container housing and canal boats have been explored, however, the cost is high. A briefing paper is being developed. Ongoing work is being undertaken to understand clients needs to help in profiling the type of accommodation required.

Members referred to the review of the housing options IT platform and asked how the homeless could access digital information. Members commented that the page was not user friendly.

The Head of Housing and Communities thanked members for the feedback and confirmed that work was ongoing.

Officers advised members that work is ongoing with Digital Transformation in relation to urgent IT requirements for the service. It was acknowledged that the information on the webpage was not satisfactory. An intern from Swansea University is working with the service to enable improved engagement opportunities.

Members stated it was important to consider people's needs when accessing information.

Members referred to the increasing number of lettings and the cost of rental properties. There is an issue currently with private landlords selling rental properties. Members enquired whether there was a change in the amount of Section 21 notices.

Officers confirmed that the situation was stable at present and there was no increase in Section 21 notices, however, the sector is inaccessible to some clients due to the prohibitive cost of rent. The service employs a private sector officer who carries out a weekly availability check but the rental cost does not fall within people's budgets.

Members shared concern regarding the cost of rental properties. Members referred to page 19 of the report within the agenda pack and asked if there was an update from the analysis undertaken on temporary accommodation at the Ambassador and Treetops.

The Head of Housing and Communities advised members that more person centred work has been undertaken to understand the holistic needs of people in temporary accommodation. There are challenges in obtaining tenancies due to support needs.

Officers advised members that reports on the Ambassador and the Treetops Hotel have been prepared and the cost element to both of those options was considered. Work has been undertaken to understand the potential housing pathways, and to manage people's expectations to ensure the pathway was accessible. People who may have been stuck in the system are being supported. The service is looking to ensure people who are eligible to move on, are maximising their opportunities by showing interest and accepting properties. Work will continue with Tai Tarian to ensure the housing register is up to date so all clients who are owed a homelessness duty are correctly placed. The Data Sharing Agreements with Tai Tarian will be reviewed with a full review of the Shared Lettings Policy in 2026.

There are a number of observations and requirements for consideration for inclusion in the policy and these will be shared with scrutiny at a later date.

Members asked whether clients were met face to face when decisions were made or whether decisions were based on paperwork. Concern was held that people could be judged unfairly by paperwork.

Officers confirmed that not all decisions were made face to face presently. Opportunities are being explored with Tai Tarian to be collaborative and increase opportunities for face-to-face meetings. A high number of applicants apply to join the register weekly, which proves difficult for conducting face to face housing needs assessments. Work is ongoing with Tai Tarian to have a more person centred approach for housing option clients who hold a homeless duty. Concern is held that the amount of people on the housing register has increased, analysis work is being undertaken to determine the reason. Officers agreed on the benefits of meeting clients in person and gave an example of a decision being reversed following intervention.

Members asked for further information regarding empty properties across the borough being brought back into use.

The Head of Housing and Communities advised members that funding was available for people to apply for a grant to enable empty homes to be brought into use. This is separate to the wider piece of work conducted by Environmental Health in relation to empty properties across the borough. Officers confirmed that properties were at various stages within the scheme. There have been nine site completions to date with 155 applications to the scheme. The scheme is currently full and not based in any specific areas of the borough. Currently there are specific empty properties within the Pontardawe area. There have been fifteen properties put forward from environmental health with inspections taking place over the coming weeks. Progress will be reported back to committee in the next update report.

Members requested a copy of the analysis report in relation to the temporary accommodation at the Ambassador and Treetops.

Members expressed concern around the Leasing Scheme Wales and requested further information.

Officers confirmed that some of the schemes are successful but landlords can obtain considerably more rent in the private market than on the leasing scheme. There have been thirty inquiries over the last two weeks following a promotion by Rent Smart Wales. Some properties were not suitable for inclusion in the scheme due to the £25k limit. Two properties are at the advanced stage in the process and are expected to complete the legal process in the next two to three weeks. The scheme is being promoted as much as possible in the landlord forums. There has been interest in the scheme but landlords are deterred by the low local housing allowance.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

6. **Performance Monitoring**

The Chair advised committee that Quarter 1 & Quarter 2 performance reports were added to the forward work programme for 12th December, with quarterly performance reports being received for future meetings.

There were no performance monitoring reports for consideration.

7. **Selections of items for future scrutiny**

Officers advised members of new items that had been added to the Cabinet Forward Work Programme and changes to the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme; members were given the opportunity to request further items for consideration.

Officers advised members that an All Members Seminar on Safeguarding would be taking place on 21st November. The Committee had previously asked for a report on the Child Protection Register and this topic will be covered in the seminar. If members have further questions on this topic, a report can be re-programmed into the Forward Work Programme.

Members requested data in relation to the Child Protection Register.

The Director of Social Services, Health & Housing confirmed that this data could be sent to the committee in addition to the information provided at the seminar.

Members noted the Forward Work Programmes.

8. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

9. **Access to meetings**

Resolved: 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.

10. **Scrutiny of Private Items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme**

Members considered the private items selected from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme.

(a) **Business Case for Establishing an In-House Short Breaks Service for Children with Disabilities**

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

(b) **Business Case for Establishing an In-House Family Link Short Breaks Service for Children with Disabilities**

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

(c) **The Manager's Report on Hillside Secure Children's Home**

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(d) **The Regulated Service (Service Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) regulations 2017 and Hillside Secure Children's Home update**

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(e) Fire Safety Guidance Impact Report

This item was deferred.

11. Scrutiny of Private Items from the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

Members considered the private item from the scrutiny committee Forward Work Programme.

(a) Update Report on the Children and Young People Services Transformation Programme

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

**Cllr. Charlotte Galsworthy
CHAIRPERSON**