

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Partnerships

Date: 8 November 2017

Time: 5.00 pm

Present: Councillors M Rahman (Chair), J Clarke, D Davies, R Hayat, M Linton, S Marshall, R Mogford and T Suller

In Attendance: James Harris (Chief Education Officer), Sally Ann Jenkins (Head of Children & Young Peoples Services) and Meryl Lawrence (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Apologies: Councillors K Whitehead

1 **Declarations of Interest**

None.

2 **Minutes of the Meeting held on 4 October 2017**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 October 2017 were considered. Councillor Linton advised that he had sent his apologies for the last meeting but they hadn't been included.

Agreed:

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 October 2017 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting, subject to Cllr Linton's apologies being included.

3 **Proposal to Develop Fostering Services on a Regional Basis**

The Committee welcomed Sally Jenkins, Head of Children and Young People Services and James Harris, Strategic Director - People.

The Head of Children and Young People Services advised the Committee that links to further background information had been included in the Agenda and reports circulated to Members. She advised that the Fostering Team has been in place since the Council had been formed and currently have well supported and respected in house foster carers who provide quality care in a family home for children who have suffered significant trauma and who can be highly vulnerable. In 2015 / 16 across Wales 76.1% of children that were looked after were cared by foster carers. Fostering service providers across Wales include public services, independent commercial providers and independent not for profit providers. This has been replicated in England but Scotland differs as they do not have a private sector provision, as they are unable to profit. In 2015/16, as a region Newport performed better with 72.4% of children being cared for by its own Local Authority foster carers.

The table on page 14 of the Agenda Pack showed the differences of average weekly cost between in-house provision and independent fostering agencies and explained that the cost is significantly higher if the Council places via an independent provider. The Authority tries to secure placements within Newport first, but if this cannot be done then a placement in

another authority; such as Monmouth or Vale of Glamorgan would be explored, which can cause issues. It was also advised that the vast majority of children in care are older, and children between 11-14 have been known to want to make their way home to visit family, which can be a risk.

The spend on fostering and the care needs were rapidly increasing so there is a national need to look at how to increase the number of carers and realistically keep money within the public sector.

The following was discussed:

Members praised the Head of Service and the Social Services team for their hard work compiling the report and advised that the background information was really helpful, in particular the information and recommendations included in the National Fostering Framework Report Phase Two Report, which give a clear understanding of the strategy from the Welsh Government, that is helpful to Members.

Members asked for clarification on the comparative spend and noted the chart demonstrated a big difference in the average weekly cost and also the numbers of children. It was also queried how well the recruitment of foster carers was currently going. Members were advised that the Council always use in-house foster carers first and only use independent foster carers as a last resort. Six years ago the Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru (4C's) ran a framework arbitration which brought down prices on the Council's behalf and that NCC's in-house foster carers had come out best in terms of quality and were paid the best rates. The purpose is to try and ensure NCC can grow more carers which would leave the authority better financially and also give a better quality of care for children. In regards to recruitment, Members were told that this was slow but steady as fostering is difficult, and with historical statistics show that foster carers in full time jobs struggle to foster the most challenging children. The Council do assess and recruit but it is currently slow. It was told that the biggest difference with the Council and independent fostering agencies is that the Council can always place children, which isn't guaranteed with the agencies. Members were also advised that the Fostering Team also write to all foster carers and ask if other family members would be interested in fostering, which has been quite successful.

It was queried how many carers have been consulted, as it is important that they are involved in the process and have their say. Members were advised that the Head of Service attends a foster carer forum twice a year, and she finds that the carers do not hold back from asking difficult questions. It has been discussed with them, and while they aren't comfortable with change they recognise that it is needed. She also advised that there would be further involvement in the next stage.

Members stated the important of keeping Newport looked after children locally, and there was some concern that the biggest risk of having a regional programme is that children could be placed further afield such as Monmouth. Members were told that Newport has a responsibility up until the final part of the child's placement. It was agreed that there is a risk and the biggest risk in Monmouth is that they have a large amount of independent foster carers from agencies and not in-house. Newport Fostering team are doing all they can to minimise the risk of placing children further afield.

Members queried where the £3.8 million comes from to fund placements, would the Council be able to cope with the demand of the growing population and whether families have financial responsibility for the children. It was advised that the money comes from the Council budget. The budget process for 2018-19 is currently being examined. The team use models and look back at previous years' statistics to forecast what is likely to be needed. This is especially important for children with additional complex needs. It was also advised that the Council was currently experiencing challenges with the numbers of children being looked after and there had been a rise in the last quarter. It was advised that there are currently 311

looked after children, with the last 20 children coming from families with significant threatening issues. They are in the Council's care because the families exposed the children to risk. It was noted that the one exception was children with severe disabilities such as frequent seizures, as they require care beyond the standards given and need an element of nursing care. Members were advised that families do not have financial responsibility for the children.

Members queried if agencies have a less stringent vetting procedure for recruitment and if they are recruiting more carers. It was clarified that all agencies are subject to regulation using the same framework, but that sometimes agencies have made poor matches for children. Members were told that there are good agencies with good foster carers working for them, but were reminded that agencies are there to make a profit. It was also stressed that the NCC Fostering team try to ensure that Newport children can be placed with Newport carers.

Members asked if the team try to keep siblings together or if they are placed with separate families. It was explained that when placing siblings keeping them together can be challenging, but it was agreed that the importance of sibling relationship is huge. The team firstly try to keep the siblings together but it is not always possible to find placements for even two children to be cared for together. If this is the case the team try to keep the children as near as possible, and if separated to always keep them in contact with each other.

Members queried what the greatest benefits would be in moving towards a regional service, and who would scrutinise it. They were advised that a massive benefit would be that the Council would be in a better position to recruit, with a greater access to carers and potential for savings. Also, with a larger pool of carers to choose from it would give strength to the Fostering team. It was advised that the 5 different authorities have different strengths and that Newport City Council are strong with mother baby placements but not so good with 7-9 year old placements, but this could be another authority's strength. Members were told that a Management Board meets quarterly and nationally. Data and budgets are looked at an Officer level, which the Head of Service would report annually to Members.

Members asked if the 5 local authorities were on same level with training of foster carers, especially with children with complex needs. They were advised that all of the authorities provide training but the calibre of each was not known and the Council would train to the expected standards.

It was queried whether the Authority would be able to use other Authorities' resources, such as temporary accommodation. Members were advised that there is a clear understanding across Gwent that the Local Authorities are committed to working together, to have good work relationships and to ensure that it is sustainable. The hope is to explore all resources going into fostering and the best ways to share recruitment budgets.

Members agreed that keeping Newport children within Newport was important and stated that compared to the 5 other regions Newport is unique with its large ethnic background. It was asked if the Fostering team try to place children in a similar background. Members were told that the Council do have Muslim carers but ultimately the team need to make sure whoever the child is placed with have their needs met. With an expanding pool of carers it will give a greater number able to meet ethnic needs, as identity is an important element.

Members asked whether there were any early intervention or preventative measures in place for parents of children previously taken in to care. Members were advised that with evidence from extensive work with looked after children, all four British nations found absolute correlation between poor areas and children being looked after, and in Wales this was even more acute. It is a challenge to break the cycle of poverty. Members were told that Newport has a good record to mitigate and praised the preventative services in place and advised that Newport have the best educational psychologists in Wales. In addition, there is a project

named Reflect that supports women who have had more than one child removed and are at high risk of having children who will be subject to the same experience.

Members enquired whether the regional fostering proposal would meet the requirements of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and Social Services and Wellbeing Act. They were advised that the proposal fits with both pieces of legislation and their principles. The Council has to make decisions for children and to ensure children have the best possible future, and has very clear looked after children arrangements. Within the regulations it is clearly laid out for children to be situated as close to home as possible, or at least remain in Wales.

Conclusions:

Following consideration of the proposal to develop fostering services on a regional basis, Members made the following comments:

1. That the National Fostering Framework Phase 2 document linked to this report, which shows greater context and rationale behind the regional proposal, should be shared with Cabinet when considering the proposal.
2. It is important that consultation continues with Foster Carers to feed their views into the ongoing development of this proposal and the need for harmonisation of policies for paying fees and allowances to local authority foster carers, to address the payment of foster care allowances and fees identified by foster carers and staff as a key issue during the consultation programme, was recognised. (Recommendation 9 of the National Fostering Framework Phase 1 Report refers.)
3. The Budget modelling and forecasting for foster care provision is key and balancing the spending on fostering with the care needs, both of which are rapidly increasing.
4. The Scottish Model, where legislation removed profit-making private sector foster care provision, could be explored and considered in Wales and nationally look at how to increase the number of carers and ways to maximise the use of the available funding, while reducing the spend on profit-making private sector foster care agencies.

4 Forward Work Programme Update

At the meeting held on 4 October 2017, the Committee had requested that Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales be invited to this meeting to provide an update on how the PSB is progressing on meeting the requirements of the Act.

Members were advised that although the Commissioner's general duties included monitoring, this was limited to monitoring and assessing the extent to which **Well-being Objectives** are met. The Wellbeing Objectives would be included in the Public Service Board's Draft Wellbeing Plan being developed, so monitoring the objectives would be premature at this stage. The Future Generations Commissioner was therefore not invited to attend this meeting.

In the meantime the Council's Regulator; Wales Audit Office (WAO) would undertake a Fit for Future Review, to look at how Authorities are responding to current challenges including the **Wellbeing of Future Generations Act**. The Review would include speaking to Chairs, Members and Officers in separate focus groups and some Members had been invited to attend these Focus Groups by the Senior Overview & Scrutiny Officer. WAO would also be attending and observing meetings including the Performance Scrutiny Committee - Partnerships to be held on 10 January. Arising from the Review there would be a Report including any recommendations and an action plan, which could be reported to this Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer presented the Forward Work Programme to the Committee in particular the items that would be discussed at the next two meetings, and advised there were no amendments to the programme to report. Members were also referred to the attached minutes of the Public Service Board meeting held on 12 September 2017 when the Chair of the Committee attended to feed back the Committee's comments. The Chair advised that representatives from the Public Service Board would be invited to attend future meetings for related reports. He reminded Members that the Wales Audit Office would be observing how the Committee conducts scrutiny of the PSB at the next meeting of the Committee on 10 January.

Finally, the Chair mentioned the training session that had been run by the WLGA which had been open to all Scrutiny Committee Members upon questioning techniques and how to approach scrutiny. He advised that he was disappointed with the lack of turn out especially with the two options of training dates offered and stressed the importance of training especially for this new Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer confirmed that slides of the training session would be circulated to Members of the Scrutiny Committee. The Chair encouraged Members of the Committee to make every effort to attend the training upon the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act that would be scheduled for early in the New Year.

Agreed:

The Committee noted the information provided above and approved the forward work programme for the next two meetings.

The meeting terminated at 6.40 pm