

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 19 January 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors J Watkins (Chair), H Thomas, J Richards, S Marshall, C Townsend, J Cleverly, Y Forsey and L Lacey

In Attendance: Chris Humphrey (Interim Strategic Director - People), Sally Ann Jenkins (Head of Children & Young Peoples Services), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Owen James (Assistant Head of Finance - Technical and Development), Sarah Morgan (Chief Education Officer), Clare Watts (Senior Finance Business Partner), Amie Garwood-Pask (Senior Finance Business Partner (Budget Strategy)), Kathryn Carter (Senior Finance Business Partner), Tracey Bastow-Hale (Finance Business Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officer)

Apologies: Councillors T Watkins and W Routley

1 Declarations of Interest

None

2 Minutes of the previous meetings held on 3 November 2020 and 17 November 2020

The minutes of the previous meetings held on 3 November 2020 and 17 November 2020 were **accepted** as a true and accurate record.

3 2021-22 Budget and Medium Term Financial Projections

Attendees:

- Chris Humphrey, Acting Director of Social Services
- Meirion Rushworth - Head of Finance
- Sally Jenkins – Head of Children and Young Peoples Services

The Head of Finance gave an overview of the budget position which had followed a similar process to previous years. The budget gap was £4.1 million in September of last year. Officers had then looked at planning savings down to half a million by the time the settlement was brought forward, and so the budget was almost balanced at this point. Grant funding received just before Christmas was £9 million better than expected. Population numbers were used as a large part of this calculation and the numbers being used for Newport historically had been too low. This had now been corrected and so we had received more money this year. Also, rather than it being phased in, the grant was made in full which had made it significantly better for the council this year. The final budget would be set in February following feedback received and considered.

- A Member asked if any capital money was used to reduce revenue costs, particularly in relation to environmental initiatives in schools.

The Head of Finance replied that the capital programme included a number of energy efficiency schemes including energy saving lights, green roofs, etc. but that much depended on the learning environment in some schools and taking into account the condition of the existing school buildings.

- A Member asked about projected pension costs.

In response to this question about pension costs, the Head of Finance confirmed that there were 2 relevant pension schemes, the NGAC fund and the Teacher's fund. The latter had increased last year but the NGAC employer contributions would need to increase next year, and this had been built into future budget requirements.

- A Member asked what changes to the budget were envisaged as a result of the Covid recovery plan?

There were continuing discussions regarding the budget due to ongoing increased costs, particularly in the domiciliary and residential care budgets. There had been additional financial support available during the pandemic but this funding (hardship fund) was due to cease at the end of March. This meant they would need to look into what the ending of the funding would mean going forward into next year. It could be that a more sustainable model would need to be found going forward. There were also specific challenges in some services due to additional costs such as PPE which would be a permanent funding issue and there were currently no specific reserves put aside for this.

The Chair thanked the Head of Finance for his report.

Adult and Community Services

Proposal 1 - AS2122/03 – Transformation of Adult Day Services

The Acting Director of Social Services introduced the saving proposal:

The service currently ran a number of day services from the Brynglas site. Over the past few years, the numbers attending the services had significantly reduced while there had been an increase in the referrals for older persons' respite care. Younger people coming into the adult PMLD group and their families did not want the traditional building-based service. The current service model delivered from Brynglas was not flexible enough to meet the needs of younger people coming through transition in the service. Some people tended to stay in the service for longer than they should, which created a dependency. For example, many of the people with mental health problems had continued to be supported by the service for more than 12 months, when there were other community based services that could meet their needs. During Covid the facility had been shut and this had provided the opportunity to deliver these services in a different way which had worked well.

Members raised the following:

- Mental health issues had become a huge issue for all, but was a particular issue in relation to the elderly. It was concerning to hear that this proposal would mean an end to meeting up and socialising in a group setting. Socialisation was hugely important so was this an acceptable proposal in this respect?

The Acting Director of Social Services responded that the number of elderly who attended Brynglas was very small, 10 people. It was proposed to move this facility

from Brynglas to Spring Gardens, where there was synergy with the existing building based respite service for older people. This would allow the existing management structure in day services to be stream lined, overseen by the Homes Team Manager of Spring Gardens.

- A member queried the consultation carried out with young attendees.

The Acting Head commented that findings had shown that the younger people coming forward were looking for a different type of service from the traditional 9 to 5 day service to wanting more access to opportunities in the community. Because of this, numbers of attendees had reduced over the years. It was beneficial having strong partnerships with those who provided services more in keeping with what families seemed to prefer.

- A Member queried how the Service worked with partners and how this helped to reduce costs?

The Acting Director of Social Services replied that the teams worked closely with colleagues to ensure that children moving into adulthood had their skills worked on in readiness. Working with Aneurin Bevan Health Board to ensure their need were met in the best possible way. They had been constantly reviewing what people needed and worked in close partnership. This had proved to be one of the strengths in Newport during the pandemic.

A Councillor queried who the different partners that were referred to throughout the reports were and would it be possible to have this provided as background information in future.

The Acting director stated she would take advice on providing this information taking into account data protection issues.

- A Member asked what back up was in place should one of our private providers give up their contract with little or no warning

The Acting Director of Social Services replied that this was always a risk and that the right approach was to have a sufficient number of providers so we were not overly reliant on one provider only. Approach in Newport was to have a healthy mix of different providers and not rely sole on one dominant organisation. We also had some in house services that we could use, the focus always being to ensure people were not left without any care. There were contingency plans in place should any issue arise.

- A Member asked if there were any particular concerns as a result of Brexit?

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Response was that there was a whole range of work in place for EU staff who wished to remain and work in the UK. In Newport, rather than an issue with numbers of carers, it was more of a supply of nurse issue, which did not directly affect our service provision. The Health board were responsible for ensuring adequate supplies of medications and any issues had previously been identified and contingency plans were already in place.

The Chair thanked the Acting Director of Social Services for her report.

Children and Family Services

Proposal 2 – CS2122/03- Closure of Cambridge House as a Children's Home

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services introduced the saving proposal for the Service Area.

There had been a clear commitment made by the Council to provide our own children's homes in the City and we currently had more than any other Local Authority in Wales. It was recognised that if we managed and implemented the care planning for our own children then we were more in control. Cambridge House had been used for over 30 years but it was no longer in good condition and needed a considerable amount of money spent to make it fit for purpose. It was not ideally situated, being very close to the city centre, which was also not ideal for children in care when trying to keep them safe. We would be looking to develop our portfolio further over time so this proposal was not about walking away from providing residential care but more into looking to provide the best care possible.

Members asked the following:

- A member asked how many children were currently based in Cambridge House and to where would they be transferred?

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services replied that it was registered for 6 children but there had only been 1 child there very recently. This meant that move on arrangements would be minimal if the proposal was accepted.

- A Member asked what emergency provision was proposed to replace those provided at Cambridge House

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services confirmed that historically it had been used to provide emergency accommodation but not for a number of months. There was 1 bedroom available at Forest Lodge and Brynglas Bungalow could also be utilised.

- Members asked if there had been an increase in numbers of children coming into care and what was the situation with the proposed new home at Windmill Farm?

The Head of Children and Young Peoples Services commented that surprisingly, there had been no increase in numbers during the pandemic. Staff had worked incredibly hard during Covid and they had also recruited more foster carers during this period. Risks had been managed well even during this very trying period. Windmill Farm proposals had just completed the Planning process and because it was a new building, rather than a conversion, it was likely to take longer to complete.

The Chair thanked the Head of Children and Young Peoples Services for presenting and discussing the budget proposal.

There were no specific budget savings proposals for Education contained within this report however Members wished to ask the Chief Education Officer questions regarding the Education Service in general.

- A Member asked what was being done to address the deficit that some schools currently had and what would be the impact on the education these schools were able to deliver?

The Chief Education Officer commented that the forecast showed an improving position. This was partly due to the pandemic – there were less consumables being used such as lighting and heating etc. but also, schools were able to claim costs through the hardship fund. With the 8 schools currently in deficit, the Service had set up deficit monitoring schemes and all had shown progress. The monitoring panels were made up of Business Improvement Team staff, together with Finance and Education staff to ensure modelling and assumptions were correct in order to reduce deficits.

It was important to ensure there was not a risky outcome for children and the risks had to be discussed against proposed cost savings. There were ways to investigate savings from small tweaks that would not have a knock on negative effect.

- Members asked what the situation was regarding the provision of laptops and free school meals?

The Chief Education Officer replied that they had provided 2,600 mifi units to support children and other IT on order from China was due to arrive at the end of January. Having done as much as possible with the funding available, it was the responsibility of each school to be aware of the situation of each of their pupils. Not all learning had to be provided electronically, blended learning was a menu of activities to reach all children. Live lessons were not always the best way but this was not the only way of learning remotely.

As regards free school meal provision, from April 2020, supermarket vouchers were provided during lockdown, holidays and to those in self isolation. Provision was linked to Housing Benefit so should have been automatic. The vouchers could not be used to purchase tobacco, alcohol or fuel.

- Members asked about blended learning and how the quality of teaching was being monitored?

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The Chief Education Officer responded that the Education Achievement Service (EAS) had been instrumental in building an effective network of information across the 5 local authorities to ensure successful learning outcomes. They had set up a website dedicated to blended learning to show how it should be implemented across the school sector. 2 blended learning surveys had been sent out by the Authority and it was vital that all governing bodies ensured these were completed and submitted in order to see where improvements could be made and best practice shared. It was noted however that self reported surveys did not always provide a totally accurate picture and so challenge advisors also worked with schools to validate the surveys in a positive way to provide support and constructive criticism where necessary. The surveys helped to identify any gaps in provision and provide any appropriate guidance.

The Chair thanked the Officers and their staff for information provided to the Committee and on behalf of all members present asked that their sincere appreciation be passed on to all staff working in their Service Areas during the Covid crisis.

Conclusion - Comments to the Cabinet

The Committee noted the budget proposals relevant to the People Service Areas and agreed to forward the minutes to the Cabinet as a summary of the issues raised.

The Committee wished to make the following comments to the Cabinet on the Proposals within the People Service Areas

General Comments

- The Committee felt that officers did lots to address concerns. They felt assured that these are the right proposals to take and that due consideration has been taken to mitigate concerns.

Proposal 1 - AS2122/03 – Transformation of Adult Day Services

- The committee raised concern about older people being isolated and meeting together and socialising. Changing the format in which they are supported needs to be considered and managed appropriately.

Proposal 2 – CS2122/03- Closure of Cambridge House as a Children’s Home

- The committee welcomed the detailed report and accepted this proposal. Members commented that every effort should be made to redeploy staff rather than issue compulsory redundancies. The committee would also like to know whether the building could be used for any other purpose, such as for homelessness charities and other supporting networks.

The meeting terminated at 12.50 pm