

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Partnerships

Date: 17 November 2021

Time: 5.00 pm

Present: Councillors J Clarke (Chair), Hussain, M Linton, S Marshall, M Spencer, T Suller and K Whitehead

In Attendance: Sally Ann Jenkins (Strategic Director - Social Services), Natalie Poyner (Service Manager - Childrens Teams), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Felicity Collins

1 Apologies

None.

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Invitees:

Natalie Poyner – Service Manager – Childrens Teams

Sally Ann Jenkins – Strategic Director – Social Services

The Strategic Director introduced the report to the Committee and the Service Manager provided a background to the work being done. The Service Manager explained the contribution of Newport City Council in supporting Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children entering care following being dispersed in line with the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), along with four case studies. The new national voluntary rota was part of a broader NTS package to remove barriers to local authority participation and increase their participation in the scheme and to ensure that there is a more equitable distribution of unaccompanied children across the regions.

In March 2021, lead officers from Newport and Cardiff made a pilot scheme to join the transfer scheme and are acting for the region of Wales. It has been agreed that they would take an annual allocation of 30 children per year, the estimate cut is meant to be 10 for Newport/20 for Cardiff. The Committee was advised that the region is in the seventh cycle of the rota, where they were originally looking at four cycles per annum, as noted in the report, Wales as a region will exceed the number of 30 children, the current situation in Afghanistan is going to impact that also. In terms of next steps, as a one off award; Newport and Cardiff have been given 1 million pounds which has to be spent by end of March 2022. Therefore the pause and plan stage has been requested, and they are putting together starter packs, training foster carers and social workers to accompany complex needs.

Members were advised they are collaborating with partners in Newport for a corporate response to develop an integrated one stop shop for asylum seekers and their families. This will be a multi-agency response and a strategic route to deliver on this has been developed.

The Committee asked the following:

- Members wished to ascertain how many Local Authorities are part of the voluntary scheme and how many of these are within Wales.

The Service Manager confirmed that Cardiff and Newport act for the 22 local authorities within Wales. The rationale is, is that they already are culturally different from the other authorities therefore already have the infrastructure to support a diverse demographic. Those who have been dispersed to other authorities tend to want to return to Newport or Cardiff as they have found their own communities. The officer could not confirm the exact number but data within the report shows further information. The Strategic Director clarified that England for example is divided into large regions of North, South, East and West and went on to confirm that with the voluntary scheme, the Home Office has made it a voluntary scheme initially but if not enough regions would take it up, the office would have to put in other methods. Therefore it would be sensible for Newport and Cardiff to take part as they could control some of what is happening and ethically, so that they can support the children efficiently.

In relation to the other 22 local authorities; if they are unable to find a safe place for a child; they would look to other authorities such as Caerphilly. Other authorities in England are also trying to work to bring in a certain number of children so there are supportive neighbouring authorities.

- Members queried why Swansea has not been included as it is a diverse city.

The Strategic Director asserted that Swansea is number three on the list. They go to them first if they cannot find a safe place for the children. Newport and Cardiff are also in a better geographical position also. Members were informed that all local authorities are keen to make it work and there is recognition that they cannot leave children in hotels.

- Members queried the administration side of the report data and asked if the numbers of the young people coming in are being included within the number of Childrens services in the data?

The Strategic Director responded, highlighting discussions with Welsh Government alongside this, as they are under pressure to reduce the number of looked after children but in this situation, voluntarily, the numbers in Newport have risen. Therefore confirmed that officers differentiate this number of intake as there will be a distortion, with recognition from the Welsh Government. Not in the presentation of data and won't be in the end of year data.

- Members then queried how Welsh Government provides legislation for foster carers for example. Because there is a mixed pot, and that the Home Office comes under the U.K. Government; where does this stand with the Welsh Government in getting funding considered.

The Strategic Director confirmed that the council receives funding from the Home Office per each child and the million pounds as well from the Welsh Government on top; so they access funding per child they take. With under 18's, currently that is a

reasonable sum to care for them as it would be more of a challenge for when they become 18 plus, and are in discussion with the Home Office on this. For the under 18s, the team used the funding money to employ more staff to care for the children and accommodation.

- Members acknowledged that these children come from war torn countries and pieces of home are a part of their identity. They then asked how the team would reflect that to engage and understand their families and identities so partnerships in the local community can be closer to them i.e religious community groups.

The Service Manager deemed that essential when supporting young people and assured the Members that they work very hard to ensure they can identify where their family members are as sometimes they can have relatives within the U.K. They also focus on infrastructure to ensure that they can engage with communities, not just the community that they identify with as they want them integrated within Newport too. It was noted that a number of organisations support the council in doing that. The officer mentioned the one stop shop will bring organisations together so it would not be so difficult for young people to navigate the complex systems. The more young people that Newport can support, the more they can enhance the service provision.

- How does the National Voluntary Rota work and how do officers determine which child should go to each local authority?

The Service Manager explained that cycles move round each Local Authority and region. The Home Office is trying to ensure that if young people have relatives within certain areas; that will identify people within those regions. It was recognised that there is a great need at the moment with the young people arriving at the port; they are hoping to disperse them to each region. It is ad-hoc in terms of the young people that are proposed. For Cardiff and Newport acting as the region, they receive 7 referrals each cycle and information is very limited. These people are only at the port for a very short time. Members were advised the team work out what position would be best to support each individuals from devising a process when they receive referrals from the Welsh City Migration Partnership.

The Service Manager advised that the allocation for age groups is actually needs led and that they do not look to put young people into a B&B. Newport is building a large number of shared accommodations within the portfolio for unaccompanied minors. The support package attached with breakfast would provide a base on their needs. The Strategic Director noted that part of the challenge is recognising that children should be in a family environment or shared housing environment with proper support and oversight.

- Does the team have any partnerships with churches/mosques/temples?

The Service Manager confirmed they are not involved within their strategic planning groups at the moment but they introduce the young people to these communities as a provision. For instance, the Sanctuary Project supports unaccompanied asylum seekers and assist us in supporting children to integrate within the community. They are very important to the team as the young persons are able to engage in the religious beliefs that they have.

- The Committee appreciated that the young people and children will have trauma from their experiences and asked how services help the children gain trust in people again.

The Strategic Director confirmed they tend to find children who come unaccompanied, are very keen to get an education and understand to work. Building trust is extremely challenging as any child they work with has experienced a high level of trauma. The workers keep to their word and show that they are caring, they offer them that safety with social workers and personal advisers.

- When the children are put in foster homes; how do they get around English not being their first language as the interpreter cannot be there 24 hours a day?

The Strategic Director responded, stating that foster carers can sometimes use google translate which has been vital in some circumstances so have to find other ways as they cannot use the translators all of the time.

- The Committee acknowledged that this is a huge logistical challenge in all areas and the standout would be the foster carers, as the children are dealing with trauma as well as being placed into foster care. They then queried if there is planning for foster carers to be fully equipped for what the children will be going through?

Members went on to appreciate that some young people coming in might be mute as a result from the trauma and asked if the team has had scenarios of that. On a final note, the Member commented about how the press stirs trouble with the question of the age of the asylum seekers, and also asked if the Home Office are ensuring that the young persons are being interacted with and not left in a room by themselves.

The Strategic Director confirmed that they have done specific training for foster carers; whereby they even have some experienced foster carers training other foster carers. They advised they have to think carefully with that on the skills they need such as language and culture knowledge while others need more about trauma and how to support them. As the services has a wider group, they understand the needs and are hopefully able to meet them.

The Services Manager added that as they will be seeing an increase of young people, they see the need for additional training to support for carers and staff. Some of the money secured from the Welsh Government will be going to support them. For instance they have age assessment training, human rights assessments and these are all a priority for them. Members were advised that they also look to bring in voluntary mentors around the same age as it would be less intimidating for them.

The Strategic Director stated that they are looking at adult ages all of the time and at statutory school age, they get into education as soon as possible. Any child that is 16 and under, they get them into education with language support. With the groups that are 16 – 17 years of age it is about getting them into college but also about negotiating relationships with their peers. The Youth Justice Services held a football tournament with some asylum seeking children, activities with peer groups are done for engagement. Schemes mentioned would be something to explore.

The Services Manager added that although with the voluntary mentor scheme being put on hold due to covid-19 that pre-dated them engaging in the NTS. The Committee was advised that this is something the service area could re-visit. The young person's advisers and social workers run many groups and undertake challenges to engage the children with their peers. The role of the hubs has been very helpful.

- A Committee Member asked the officers how far the team can go with the intake before they have to say no to further referrals.

In response, the Director explained that over a number of years; Kent have had to take over 1000 children who arrived in the ports. There are individuals in other places who discuss the politics of this with quite significant arguments in terms of numbers of people coming across the channel as people are aware of the dispute between the French and the U.K. Government but that is a discussion that the team are not a part of. In terms of how many the local authority have and could care for; the resources are able to be put in place due to the funding from the Home Office and the Welsh Government.

Members were assured that Newport is a long way off the position that Kent is in and that when they hit 0.07% of total children looked after; in proportion, that is still quite a small number. Newport is not even at 0.07% yet.

- Members queried if the children taken on have had to face any abuse from outsiders.

The Strategic Director confirmed not to their knowledge and the Service Manager asserted the same however they have a number of HMOs where they can accommodate their young people, there has been some issues in the community of residents saying no to that. It was clarified that it was not directed at the young individuals living there but more about a house of multiple occupants in the neighbourhood which was the issue. The Strategic Director confirmed they have generally found people to be very keen and recognise the need to support them.

- Members asked how workers get the exploited children into the mind-set that they will not be exploited by outside forces.

The Strategic Director built on the discussion had with another Member; they build trust, relationships and try to assure the children that they care for them and do not exploit them. The team has support staff in housing but there are issues with those in their care, but it does mitigate some of the risk as they do everything they can to support and protect them.

- A Member queried if businesses have been willing to assist the council in their endeavour of getting educated asylum seekers to work.

In response, the Director confirmed that it is very early days in arranging work with public agencies and third sector parties; however they are looking to explore for employment ventures as it is something they want to do.

- A Committee Member mentioned as a result from Brexit in December 2020, the Dublin regulation has changed; therefore asked whether the country has seen a difference in numbers coming to Wales as they used to have to go back to the first EU country but now they would go straight to the UK.

The Strategic Director stated that over the past 12 months there has been a large number coming in, however there are many reasons, such as the current situation in Afghanistan which has escalated in huge numbers of people trying to get across the channel. In terms of the withdrawal from the Dublin protocol; the officer confirmed that they would not be in a position to know this. The numbers have started to diminish due to the weather declining but acknowledged that the numbers have continued. For

instance 3 people are currently announced as missing in the channel while attempting to cross and reasons for that are very complex.

- A Member appreciated the inclusion of case studies for the report. The main concern of the committees are the protections of young people. Therefore the Member asked what types of partnerships has the service area got to protect them from sexual exploitation for instance, to safeguard them. And if there is anything being done to build on the partnership for instance the fact that an individual might have to pay a family member back for smuggling fees; they might have a feeling of guilt which would impact their mental health.

The Strategic Director stated that one of the reasons that the team are good at this work; is because they are good at understanding exploitation and have increasingly well attuned staff groups and processes for exploitations in terms of criminal, sexual or financial. Members were assured that the services team is better placed than many others because of the processes in place with the experience gained from a diverse population on the M4 corridor. This has developed their knowledge base and level of expertise.

With the initial point of partnerships; the children services team has an extensive working relationship with the police, health and education. They advised they have colleagues in those agencies therefore partnership is essential. It was highlighted that the Service Manager manages the safeguarding hub with the police sitting in the hub and a colleague chairs the child exploitation sign group every Tuesday. The Committee was advised that they have an excellent working relationship with the public protection unit.

- The Member then commented that it is also more about building on partnerships already in place. Because of the mental health issues arising from the asylum seekers experiences from living in a war-torn country; the member asked officers to confirm if they need partnerships to build that support package up for them.

The Service Manager advised that as the young people arrive, they have a health assessment which assists them in determining what intervention they would need. This could be in terms for physical health and mental health. Health operatives are part of their strategic meetings and know that they must a) remain safe in the city and b) remain trust that they will stay in their safety nets. Due to the increase of children coming in, the services are preparing for that need.

- Members queried if they have had issues of absconding and how the services prevent the fear from that.

In response, the Strategic Director confirmed that they build relationships of trust and when they see children placed in areas of Wales when they do not have the right resources; those children will make their own way to places they need. Members were informed they do not experience much absconding but sometimes do experience missing children but would use the mechanisms they have in place to deal with that. When children abscond in most cases; it would be when they discover that they have family members somewhere else in the U.K.

- Members asked where the officers see the partnership moving forward and if it is good enough, if not, would they require more partnerships to work with the new protocols.

The Services Manager replied stating that they believe they have good partnerships in place currently, but are looking to enhance them. They collaborate at every opportunity to develop services to meet the needs of these young people. They work closely with housing staff, health colleagues for adequate health care, GEMS with adequate support in school settings.

The Strategic Director confirmed they have made a good start to get to the point they are in a very short period of time. The area is quite contentious and have gotten as far as they can at the moment and assured the committee that they are all on the right track with the right relationships.

- The Committee Member asked the officers if there is anything that the Members can do within their roles to assist through knowledge or be present in their networks to assist the service team.

The Strategic Director recognised that the committee's questions are valuable to help them with their thinking. If the Members could raise the profile of this work wherever they can that would be of help to the team. The Strategic Director went on to state that this is a difficult area and the committee has skirted around the politics of it; therefore the officers requested for the Committee and its Members to raise the stories to expose the reality of what these children have been through and how they end up in the United Kingdom.

- Whilst the NHS is under such pressure, are the team able to get access to mental health support for assessments?

The Service Manager confirmed that the challenge for young people is the same challenge as for the demand of the NHS. So they have to work closely with their health colleagues to enhance provisions in place so the children can have the right support at the right time. It was stressed that this is a challenge that all of them are facing. The Strategic Director agreed that this is a challenge across for all children accessing NHS services. With the group of children that they work with, they start a base of a safe environment before exploring their trauma. The focus is giving them a safe place first then to look at how to deal with the trauma before taking established routes such as with the NHS. Much like physical conditions, trauma can manifest itself.

- Do Newport and Cardiff region swap best practice with local agencies?

The Strategic Director confirmed they do that to share and learn, everyone has different views but only about operational learning. The teams all do things differently so learn from each other well and have a good template for other regions.

- Members expressed concern from recent events in Liverpool and asked if security will be involved with the partnerships. It was acknowledged that members of the public will want to address that.

The Strategic Director agreed that they have to acknowledge that this will be considered by the public and have not discussed in full within the committee. In all of their work, it was explained that this is linked into agendas about working with prevent teams and with the channel areas, and working within those arenas where the team look at highlighting particular risks such as extremism. i.e. right wing extremism and what those risks might pose. They found that they kept coming back to making sure they get the basics right, offer the right support and care, and that the young people

they work with are not driven into a position where they could be exploited and manipulated, for instance as a Member mentioned the risk of a bad mentor.

It was stressed that the examples on the media are frightening however the Committee were reminded that the risks are very small and that there are far greater risks in local communities for instance such as violence against women and domestic abuse. This is a risk to the team as they cannot resolve these cases as a resource as they can with terrorism. They wish to address this and keep it in perspective also.

- The Chair queried when Newport works with Cardiff; does that make the work more difficult for the team, or is it a fair playing ground.

The Director confirmed that with the person employed is about project management; the operational work have the Newport's own staff covering that side of it. They coordinate the support rather than doing the work. It was stressed that the management role is beneficial in Cardiff as it is the larger authority and there has not been any problems. The Service Manager added that there has not been any issues, as both Cardiff and Newport receive just as much input; they put all of the data together to assess the sustainability collaboratively. They would go back to the Welsh Government if this would not be sustainable to inform them of what else they require to be contributed.

- The Chair noted that the partnership is a work in progress with improvements to be made. The Member asked if the partners would be happy to return next year to provide the committee with a yearly update.

The Strategic Director agreed and stated they would be delighted to arrange that.

- Members queried which authorities are working together in the scheme.

The Strategic Director confirmed that most regions of the U.K are; as all are part of the NTS. It was recognised that this is a shared responsibility and that they cannot leave it all to Kent.

The Committee expressed their thanks to the officers for their time and that they fully appreciate the ongoing work done by their teams.

Conclusions

The Committee wished to make the following comments –

- The Committee wished to thank the officers and their teams for the hard work that has gone into this partnership. They appreciated that this is a massive task and from what was learned from the meeting, changes by the day. The Committee also praised the quality of the information that was provided, it was a topic that the Committee had heard about, but knew little.
- The Committee were also happy to receive the cases studies in the report to see the real life situation of the people that have been through this system. It was felt it worked really well to build a bigger picture to scrutinise. Members further commented that it was interesting to read about the different situations and issues why children had to leave where they are from. As well as factual, Members commented that the

human side of things are important as well, which was shown through the case studies.

- The Committee would like to see if the partnership could revisit the volunteer mentor scheme, as it would be beneficial for children if they had mentors their own age to support them and help form friendships.
- Members request for this agenda item to come back to the committee annually to be scrutinised. It was also requested if possible for next year's report could include some success stories.
- Members discussed the numbers of children that are currently in Newport's care and found that the young people part of the discussion, are included in figures that get presented to members on the total number of children and young people in care of the Local Authority. It was highlighted that the Welsh Government expects the local authority to reduce the number, however this may affect the number seeing them collectively. Thus Members would like to know whether when the figures are next released, if they could be clearer on how many are being looked after by the authority and how many of those young people are ones seeking asylum.

4 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitee:

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

a) Forward Work Programme Update

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two committee meetings:

Wednesday 1st December 2021 at 5pm, the agenda items;

- Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV)
- Shared Resource Services (SRS) Update

Wednesday 2nd February 2021 at 5pm, the agenda items;

- One Newport Wellbeing Plan 2021-22 Q2 Performance
- Education Achievement Services (EAS) Business Plan

The Committee were reminded that the Gwent Public Services Board are establishing regional Scrutiny for the new Well-Being Plan, however this has not yet happened. We therefore need local Scrutiny of the Gwent Well-being Assessment which has a statutory deadline. The Committee would be needed to consider the consultation draft during the consultation window, so this would be 2nd week of January 2022 to 1st week February 2022. An additional meeting to be held on Thursday 20th January 2022 at 5pm was suggested to accommodate this.

The Committee agreed for the additional meeting to be arranged for Thursday 20th January 2022 at 5pm. The Scrutiny Adviser agreed to send out diary appointments shortly.

b) Actions Sheet

The Scrutiny Adviser informed Members that the Committee's comments to Norse and the Head of Regeneration, Investment and Housing were passed on for review. The same was done for the comments to the EAS team and Head of Education.

The meeting terminated at 6.48 pm