

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT: SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 5TH NOVEMBER, 2020**

**REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER**

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**PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S. THOMAS (CHAIR)**

Councillors K. Rowson (Vice-Chair)  
D. Bevan  
G. A. Davies  
P. Edwards  
K. Hayden  
J. Holt  
M. Moore  
G. Paulsen  
B. Summers  
T. Smith

**WITH:** Corporate Director of Social Services  
Head of Children's Services  
Head of Adult Services  
Communications & Policy Officer  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

| ITEM  | SUBJECT   | ACTION |
|-------|---|--------|
| No. 1 | <b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b><br><br>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service. |        |
| No. 2 | <b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b><br><br>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, G.L. Davies and L. Elias.               |        |

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|              | <p>The Chair said that Councillor Elias had requested that the Director of Social Services pass on his thanks to the Head of Adult Services and her team for their help and quick response to a recent matter.</p>  |  |
| <b>No. 3</b> | <p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATION</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>  |  |
| <b>No. 4</b> | <p><b><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 17th September, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>   |  |
| <b>No. 5</b> | <p><b><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME - 10TH DECEMBER 2020</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the meeting on 10th December, 2020 be approved</p>  |  |
| <b>No. 6</b> | <p><b><u>UPDATE ON STRATEGY TO SAFELY REDUCE THE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Social Services which was presented to update Members on the progress made in relation to the implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2017-2020.</p> <p>The Head of Children's Services spoke to the report and highlighted that the Strategy to Safely Reduce the numbers of Children Looked After had three objectives:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To support families to stay together.</li> <li>2. To manage risk confidently and provide support at the edge of care.</li> <li>3. To provide affordable high quality placements.</li> </ol> |  |

In response to a Member's question regarding foster carers, the Head of Children's Services said that it had been a challenge over the summer for the recruitment campaign. Heads of Service across Wales had been developing a national approach for local authorities to recruit foster carers. The brand 'Foster Wales' had been developed and funding of £300,000 had been allocated by the Welsh Government to support the 22 local authorities, and an official launch would take place next year. The number of foster carers in Blaenau Gwent remained constant, however, enquiries had increased in January/February 2020 but slowed in March due to the pandemic. The challenge for the Service was to transfer enquiries into approved foster carers as not all applications were successful. Consultation had been undertaken with existing foster carers regarding how they had been supported over the summer and the feedback had been extremely positive.

A Member enquired regarding the £400,000 overspend on legal costs, the Head of Children's Services explained that there were many different elements to each case and some may need a number of independent assessments that were commissioned through the court such as assessments of parents or of a sibling group. Another part of that overspend was the full year costs associated with external legal services as the Council's Child Care Solicitor had left the Authority. The Legal Department had gone through the procurement process to enquire if neighbouring authorities were interested in taking on this legal work, at that time there had been no take up of the offer, however, a neighbouring authority had since expressed an interest and the Directorate were now exploring this option.

In response to a Member's question regarding the Integrated Care Fund monies and how the Directorate was meeting the three objectives, the Head of Children's Services said that the Welsh Government had given verbal confirmation that the Integrated Care Fund would continue up to April/March 2022. In relation to meeting the three objectives, this was evidenced by a reduced number of children coming into care and demonstrated the important work of the Supporting Change Team in supporting families and how to manage risk confidently. As there was further work to be carried out, the Directorate was in the process of developing a five year strategy.

With regard to legal fees a Member felt that the Welsh

Government should look at legal fees with a view to providing support for local authorities. He also enquired if collaboration with other authorities to bear part of the costs would take place. The Head of Children's Services said that each local authority had to manage their own budgets in relation to every aspect, including legal costs. In relation to collaboration with a neighbouring authority, work gathering information on the numbers of court applications made over the last five years was being undertaken to help the neighbouring authority manage capacity. Work was also being undertaken to identify how costs were attributed to solicitor's fees, assessments commissioned during the court process and application fees to the court. When collated all the information would be provided to the neighbouring authority and discussions would be ongoing.

The Chair said that given the complexity and nature of the legal cases it was difficult for local authorities to be able to procure legal services at a lesser cost and felt that collaboration with partners may help alleviate some of the burden.

With regard to recruitment of Child Care Solicitors, the Director of Social Services said that it was difficult to recruit legal professionals into local authorities as the Council was competing against private companies who paid higher wages.

Members felt that it was a positive report with great strides being made in safely reducing the number of Children Looked After, but there were still some concerns regarding legal costs.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, namely that the information contained within the report be accepted.

**No. 7**

**REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP UPDATE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Social Services which was presented to update Members on the work and decisions taken over the last 9 months by the Regional Partnership Board, developed under statutory guidance Part 9 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWB Act).

The Director of Social Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main areas that had occupied the Regional Partnership Board:-

- Coronavirus outbreak across partner agencies and the effect on services.
- The continuation of the Transformational Offer beyond 2021.
- The reallocation of underspend for 2019/20.
- The continuation of the Integrated Care Revenue and Capital Funds.
- Integrated Winter Plan for 2020/21.

In response to a Member's question regarding the impact on child and adult mental health services, the Director of Social Services said that it had been difficult to deliver the service in the same way as before the pandemic as there had been less face to face contact. During the first lockdown there had been an increase in mental health issues for adults and children and he felt that there would be some additional pressures on the system as a result of this. It was important to continue to deliver the service going forward and to continue to make face to face contact and by other social media means.

A Member referred to the verbal agreement for Transformational funding up to 2022 and enquired what impact next year's Welsh Assembly elections may have on this funding. The Director of Social Services said that because of the Welsh Assembly elections next May this had been a transitional period to allow any incoming or existing party to be able to make decisions whether the funding continued going forward. The Directorate had been evaluating programmes to evidence the clear benefits of each and what outcomes they could achieve for families and communities living within the Gwent region. The Director felt confident that similar funding would continue for the transitional year and this would protect some services.

On a point of clarity the Director of Social Services said that the offer in Gwent related to four areas derived from the priority areas within the Area Plan. The fifth bullet point on paragraph 2.9 related to the development of workforce planning and organisational development to underpin transformation activity and was to support the four themes.

The Chair enquired regarding the relationship between the Authority and the private sector residential settings and if there was an improved exchange of information with regard to possible Covid-19 outbreaks within those care homes. The Director of

Social Services said that an excellent relationship had developed with the private sector care homes with regular feedback from commissioners, Environmental Health Officers were also in contact with private sector care homes to provide advice and guidance. Information was gathered regarding staff and residents within care homes and if there were any positive cases an enhanced testing regime was carried out within those care homes. In relation to supported living and extra care facilities there was also good information sharing, but less so with sheltered accommodation as they did not receive as much support. If an outbreak was reported in a particular facility support was requested from Public Health Wales for lab technicians from Rodney Parade to carry out testing within that facility. At the same time Environmental Health Officers would provide guidance regarding what measures needed to be put in place to protect other residents of the facility.

In response to a Member's question regarding track and trace, the Director of Social Services said that track and trace was particularly important in relation to sheltered accommodation complexes, as they would advise the Authority of an outbreak and testing would be requested from Public Health Wales for that complex to ensure there was no spread of the virus.

The Head of Adult Services said that the service was providing practical support across all its care facilities i.e. sheltered housing, care homes, domiciliary care, and supported living. The level of daily contact within sheltered housing schemes was lower than care homes, however, additional measures had been put in place. Social Workers had been ringing residents known to the service to provide additional support in relation to wellbeing and also offer any other support services. The Officer felt it was important for Members to know that tenants in a sheltered housing scheme were provided with the same level of support as residents of other care facilities.

The Chair commented that track and trace was essential particularly in relation to people living within non extra care settings who move about freely in the community.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, namely that the decisions of the Regional Partnership Board be supported.