

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO:** **THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**

**SUBJECT:** **SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY**  
**COMMITTEE – 20<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY, 2022**

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

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

Councillors: D. Bevan  
G.A. Davies  
G.L. Davies  
P. Edwards  
K. Hayden  
W. Hodgins  
J. Holt  
M. Moore  
G. Paulsen  
T. Sharrem  
T. Smith  
B. Summers

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

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

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| <p><b>No. 3</b></p> | <p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>Councillor Wayne Hodgins declared an interest in the meeting as some of his clients may also be service users of the Social Services Directorate.</p>   |  |
| <p><b>No. 4</b></p> | <p><b><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>It was noted that the Members briefing session with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board was scheduled for 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2022.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>   |  |
| <p><b>No. 5</b></p> | <p><b><u>ACTION SHEET - 18<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2021</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee held on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Item 7 - National Adoption Service Annual Report</u></b></p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding advertising comparisons with other areas, the Head of Children's Services said she was unaware of any comparison data but would look into this matter and inform Members in due course.</p> <p>A Member felt that the Authority should return to more traditional forms of advertising such as newspapers, roundabout ads and billboards to reach audiences who may not be aware of adoption services and may not use social media. The Head of Children's Services said analysis had been undertaken regarding the demographic of people interested in adoption and the data helped to focus adverts to those people most likely to adopt. Social media platforms were targeted as they were used by the majority of people potentially interested in adoption. She added that now that Covid restrictions were easing this would enable them to be</p> |  |

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|                     | <p>more present in communities and would provide a mix of both social media and community based advertising.</p> <p>The Chair felt that, along with social media advertising, there should also be a return to awareness raising in the community that had taken place pre-pandemic and local community hubs could be used for displaying advertising posters, etc.</p> <p>A Member enquired regarding information on children in foster care going on to become adopted by their foster carers. The Head of Children’s Services said there was a small number of children who went on to become adopted by their foster carers. They were looking to develop this area and were piloting new guidance to recruit adopters who would also be assessed as foster carers so the child could be placed with them immediately, stay with them and be adopted by them.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.</p>            |  |
| <p><b>No. 6</b></p> | <p><b><u>CORPORATE PARENTING PROGRESS REPORT 2021-22</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Service Manager, Children’s Services which was presented to inform Members of the progress made by Blaenau Gwent Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) throughout 2021 to improve outcomes and services for our Children Looked After (CLA).</p> <p>The Service Manager, Children’s Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main points in each key priority contained therein.</p> <p>A Member requested an update in relation to the recruitment of a psychologist. The Head of Children’s Services said there was a need for psychology input to support practitioners in relation to some very complex needs of children looked after. Through the ICF grant money they had been able to recruit a part time psychologist who offered consultations to foster carers in order to manage complex behaviours and prevent placement breakdown.</p> |  |

A Member enquired if the team engaged with the Education Directorate to improve the number of children looked after that had a statement of special educational needs. The Service Manager, Children's Services said they work in partnership with the Education Directorate, the Children Looked After Educational Officer sits on the Corporate Parenting Board and children had mentors and advisors attached to them around the educational agenda so their individual needs were looked at, monitored and individual actions plans were put in place to look at how they could be supported around their educational progress.

Councillor Hodgins left the meeting at this juncture.

A Member enquired regarding how many looked after children were still with their parents. The Head of Children's Services said of the 194 children looked after, 42 were looked after by the Authority and placed with parents. She explained that these cases were reviewed regularly, and if the local Authority no longer needed to be the legal parents alongside the birth parents, cases were taken back to court to revoke care orders.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members acknowledged progress made throughout 2021 and feel confident that the Local Authority and its partners are doing well to improve outcomes for our looked after children as part of our corporate parenting responsibilities.

**No. 7**

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES 2021/2022 (QUARTERS 1 AND 2)**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Social Services which was presented to highlight key points from quarters 1 and 2 of the Annual Report of the Director of Social Services 2021/2022 (Appendix 1).

The Corporate Director of Social Services introduced the report and the Head of Children's Services highlighted the main points in relation to Children's Services and the Head of Adult Services highlighted the main points in relation to Adult Services.

**Adult Services**

A Member referred to the shortage of carers and enquired if there had been any improvement in recruitment. The Head of Adult Services said there were lots of initiatives and currently they were working very closely with external and internal providers to look at recruitment and retention. It was extremely challenging but services were still being maintained and operating as normal as possible within the pandemic.

With regard to qualifications for the posts, if an individual did not have the relevant qualifications the Directorate would work with them to obtain that qualification. This approach enabled people without the relevant qualifications to apply for the posts and be supported in achieving the required qualifications.

The Corporate Director of Social Services commented that prior to Christmas they had been able to use some funding for winter pressures to support some domiciliary care and residential care providers and this had helped with retention, but recruitment across Gwent was still minimal. He felt that the real living wage was a move in the right direction but estimated that a higher hourly payment would make it a more attractive proposition for people to work in that sector.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report be accepted as provided.

**No. 8**

**SOCIAL WORKER VACANCY RATES IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES, PAY AND INCENTIVES**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Children's Services which was presented to provide information on the following:-

- The social work staffing pressures being experienced in children's social services;
- What is being done to manage these pressures;
- Comparisons of social work pay scales across Wales in particular Gwent;

- Additional incentives offered to Blaenau Gwent social workers.

The Head of Children’s Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

In response to a Member’s question regarding promoting health and social care as an area of work in schools and colleges, the Head of Children’s Services informed Members that pre-pandemic they had visited schools and attended open days at universities to promote the benefits of working for Blaenau Gwent Social Care and would be doing this again when Covid restrictions allow. The Corporate Director of Social Services said they had been working with colleges across Gwent including University of South Wales to develop opportunities for placements within social care to try and attract students into the sector. They had been concentrating on domiciliary care and residential care as that was often a precursor to people developing an interest in working in social care.

With regard to the comparison of wages, the Head of Children’s Services said this was kept under review but there was a concern that if one Authority raised their wage offer then other authorities may follow which could inadvertently lead to social workers moving from one Authority to another disrupting their relationship with the children and families they support. The Corporate Director of Social Services said this was a national issue and felt that a national solution was needed, and as the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) there was support for a national pay scale and they had also been pushing the Welsh Government for the introduction of bursaries for social workers, similar to that of nurses, to create parity between health and social care and to give some incentive to social workers to undertake the role.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members scrutinised the report on social worker vacancy rates in children’s services, pay and incentives and contributed to the continuous assessment of the effectiveness of the directorate.

**No. 9**

**FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 3<sup>RD</sup> MARCH, 2022**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee which presented the Forward Work Programme for the meeting scheduled to be held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2022.

The Chair advised Members that due to a Special Council meeting being held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2022, it was proposed that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee scheduled for the 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2022 be cancelled and the agenda items be considered in the next Committee cycle.

The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the meeting scheduled to be held on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022 be cancelled and the agenda items be considered in the next Committee cycle.

**No. 10**

**DEVELOPMENT OF A CAERPHILLY/BLAENAU GWENT COLLABORATION IN PROVIDING LEGAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SERVICES**

Having regard to the views expressed by the Proper Officer regarding the public interest test, that on balance the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and that the report should be exempt.

RESOLVED that the public be excluded whilst this item of business is transacted as it is likely there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Children's Services which was presented to provide information in support of a collaborative arrangement with Caerphilly County Borough Council providing legal services for Blaenau Gwent Children's Social Services Department.

The Head of Children's Services spoke to the report, highlighted the main points contained therein and responded to Members questions. She informed Members that a review of annual costs would be included as part of the SLA, but it was important to note that Blaenau Gwent

would be responsible for costs incurred when commissioning counsel for more complex cases and other associated court costs.

With regard to capacity, the Head of Children's Services explained that the continuation of the strategy to reduce the numbers of children looked after should result in a reduction of the number of court applications required in the future. Caerphilly had been successful in recruiting and retaining their legal team and she felt confident that there would be sufficient capacity to support Blaenau Gwent Children's Services. She advised that if agreement for the collaboration was given Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council would enter into a minimum 5 year SLA with Caerphilly County Borough Council.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report which contained information relation to the financial/business affairs of persons other than the Authority be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee support the collaboration between Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly, for Caerphilly County Borough Council to provide legal services for Children's social services.