

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

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

SUBJECT: **SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 17TH MARCH, 2021**

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

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S.C. THOMAS (CHAIR)

Councillors: K. Rowson
D. Bevan
G.A. Davies
P. Edwards
K. Hayden
W. Hodgins
J. Holt
C. Meredith (substituting Cllr Summers)
G. Paulsen
T. Smith

AND: Corporate Director of Social Services
Head of Children's Services
Head of Adult Services
Team Manager – Looked After Children
Communications & Policy Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u> It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<u>APOLOGIES</u> Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, M. Moore and B. Summers.	

<p>No. 3</p>	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
<p>No. 4</p>	<p><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 21st January, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p>No. 5</p>	<p><u>REVISED SAFE REDUCTION OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER STRATEGY 2020- 2025</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Children’s Services which presented the refreshed Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020-2025.</p> <p>The Head of Children’s Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>In relation to budgets, a Member enquired if the underspend for 2019/20 was a direct result of extra funding received or reduced demand for the service. The Head of Children’s Services explained that there had been an increase in the budget into Children’s Services because of the significant initial overspend in 2016/17 and this had prevented a continued overspend and stabilised the budget.</p> <p>A Member referred to page 27, Figure 1: Children Looked After population broken down into placement types and enquired regarding unregulated homes for 16/17 year olds and how Blaenau Gwent’s independent living placements were monitored. The Head of Children’s Services assured the Member that there were no children in Blaenau Gwent placed in unregulated homes. All children were placed in regulated homes overseen by the Care Inspectorate Wales and were subject to inspections, as were the local authority’s homes, and had to abide by various regulations and standards of care.</p> <p>A Member raised concerns regarding children from other Authorities coming to live in small private care homes in</p>	

Blaenau Gwent and enquired if these homes were regulated by Blaenau Gwent or by the Authority that the children came from. The Head of Children's Services explained that there were a number of private children's homes that had been established within Blaenau Gwent, and if that home was under a certain occupancy planning permission would not be required and the Local Authority would not be aware of it, but the private provider would have to register that home with the CIW and adhere to all of the different regulations and standards in law that were required to open a children's home. The CIW would inspect the home prior to opening to ensure all relevant policies, procedures and a suitably qualified workforce was in place. Blaenau Gwent was not responsible for any of those homes, however, if there were safeguarding concerns that occur as a result of that child living in Blaenau Gwent then Children's Services would have a responsibility to investigate those safeguarding concerns in partnership with the Authority from which that child was placed. She clarified that the Authority which placed that child would always maintain overall responsibility for that child's care and for monitoring the placement to ensure it meets that child's needs.

A Member enquired if Children's Services would be made aware of any safeguarding concerns at any of these homes. The Head of Children's Services explained that Ofsted was the regulatory body for England and the CIW was the regulatory body for Wales, Children's Services had received alerts from Ofsted regarding different homes in England where there were concerns, however, they had never received any alerts from the CIW in relation to children's homes in Blaenau Gwent.

The Chair commented on the sterling work that had been undertaken since the strategy had been introduced, previously it was the most significant cost pressure and the Directorate had performed extremely well to bring it to this position.

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

No. 6

UPDATE ON PROGRESS OF THE MY SUPPORT TEAM

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Children's Services which was presented to provide an update on the work of the My Support Team for the period January 2020 - January 2021.

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

A Member commented on the excellent work carried out by the team and the figures highlighted in the report were a significant saving that would help some of the cost pressures within the service. The Head of Children's Services said that the MyST team had been set up on a permanent basis and with the budget contribution of just £300,000 provided good value for money.

The Chair emphasised that these were safe measures that improved outcomes for Children Looked After and provided savings.

In response to a Member's question regarding recruitment of foster carers, the Head of Children's Services said that despite the pandemic a significant amount of work had been undertaken nationally, regionally and locally around the recruitment of local authority foster carers. There had been a presentation at the Corporate Parenting Board and the intention was to launch a national local authority brand to market foster carers for local authorities in May 2021. A significant amount of work had been undertaken with the Council's Communications Team and a Regional Marketing post had been appointed to support this work, such as television publicity, social media and local radio etc. to help increase the numbers of local authority foster carers.

A Member congratulated the MyST team on the work they were doing to support children with complex needs before and during the pandemic putting the needs of the children first was to be commended.

A Member enquired if Blaenau Gwent's foster carers foster children from outside the borough. The Head of Children's Services explained that the majority of Blaenau Gwent's foster carers lived in the borough, only a small number lived

outside the borough but all looked after Blaenau Gwent's children. On occasion Blaenau Gwent looked after children from other local authorities in Gwent for example Monmouthshire may require a baby placement and Blaenau Gwent may have one available. There was a reciprocal arrangement in place in Gwent to offer each other's foster carers. Those placements outside the borough would need to be paid for, however, it would be less expensive than an independent fostering agency and outcomes for the children with local authority foster carers was far better than with Independent foster carers.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Scrutiny Members acknowledge the positive work MyST has undertaken in demonstrating good outcomes for our children looked after and the positive impact the work of the team has had on the Children's Services budget.

No. 7

CHILDREN'S SERVICES RESPONSE TO VULNERABLE CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Children's Services which was presented to provide Members with information on how Children's Social Services supported vulnerable children since the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020.

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

A Member enquired if resources were available to cope with any increase in cases coming forward with the easing of Covid restrictions. The Head of Children's Services said that there were no additional monies set aside, and there was a mixed view regarding whether there would be a significant increase in the numbers of referrals. There had been no significant increase after the first lockdown and preventative services such as Families First and Flying Start had continued to work with families across Blaenau Gwent on a preventative level to stop their needs escalating. She felt the Service was as prepared as it could be.

A Member referred to any increase in domestic abuse referrals and enquired if this had impacted on Children's Services. The Head of Children's Services said that it was not the number of increased cases but the complexity of the situations of the cases being referred that was more difficult. There were increased numbers of domestic abuse cases but they were not disproportionate at this time in comparison to previous years.

The Corporate Director of Social Services commented that regionally there had been an increase in the number of referrals of domestic abuse cases across the board. Over the last 12 months referrals had steadily increased in Wales and the Regional Safeguarding Board would closely monitor the situation. There were concerns that with the easing of lockdown restrictions there could be a further increase in referrals as people would have the opportunity to come forward looking for support.

A Member enquired if Social Services staff had been offered the Covid vaccine. The Head of Children's Services said the names of all the social care staff had been put forward for vaccinations, the majority had received their first vaccination, however, the criteria had been made more specific which may exclude some of the front line Social Services staff. As such there was a small but significant cohort of staff within Children's Services who had not yet had their first vaccination, however, their names had been submitted for the 'mop up' sessions.

A Member referred to the use of virtual technology and enquired if this was now considered good practice in relation to Children Looked After, the Head of Children's Services explained that all of the teams and social workers had laptops and work phones, the move to using Microsoft Teams had led to holding virtual meetings, although it had been difficult to get children and families involved in that particular platform of meetings. She advised Members that work was currently being undertaken to ascertain what was working well during Covid and what could be improved or returned to. Some of the feedback from this work was that parents whose children were on the Child Protection Register needed to return to face to face meetings to ensure that parents were supported and she felt this had not worked well virtually, but it could also be that professionals,

social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers could join the meeting virtually. In relation to Children Looked After they would continue to talk with them via WhatsApp through access via work phones. She felt that the nature of the work was to build trusting relationships with children and parents to talk through some very sensitive issues and that was quite difficult to do on a virtual system.

A Member enquired what impact Covid-19 would have on Children's Services going forward. The Head of Children's Services said it had impacted on staff, however, sickness had not increased significantly during this period and she felt that was testament to the workforce. There had been peaks and troughs regarding morale and staff had continued to take leave, with the Directorate providing support to the team and the workforce. In relation to Children Looked After, as needs arise the Team were doing everything they could to ensure that those needs were managed in the right way.

The Corporate Director of Social Services informed Members that in relation to vaccinations, an estimated 90% of staff had received their first vaccination. There had been a limited number of staff who had initially refused to take up the vaccine, however, after discussions and reassurances from Public Health colleagues some of those staff had subsequently received the vaccine. In relation to the workforce, the Director had slight concerns that as staff had worked at an intensity they had not experienced before that they may need extra support going forward particularly during the transition from this intensive period of work to returning to some sort of normality. The Directorate would try to ensure that any support required by staff could be provided as they move through the transition period.

A Member enquired if the Directorate would apply for extra funding for additional staff to support some of the issues raised. The Head of Children's Services said that as situations arise there may be a need to make a case to the Corporate Leadership Team for additional resources. There was a national shortage of Social Workers and recruitment had always been a challenge and may be even more difficult after the pandemic.

	<p>The Corporate Director of Social Services informed Members that the Welsh Government had confirmed that the Hardship Fund would be available for another six months, if there was an increase in demand the Directorate would look to accommodate that demand through the Hardship Fund. He commented that work was being undertaken nationally looking at the long term implications for Social Services as a result of the pandemic and included the impact on budgets. When completed, he felt it would be a useful document for all Councils to consider.</p> <p>A Member commented on the excellent work of all the staff and the Directorate adapting to significant changes to working practices during Covid to support the most vulnerable people in the community and expressed his appreciation to the whole workforce. He suggested that a generic letter or email be sent to all staff conveying their heartfelt thanks on behalf of the Local Authority and the community of Blaenau Gwent.</p> <p>The Chair and Members agreed with their colleague's comments and supported the suggestion. The Corporate Director of Social Services would relay that message across to all staff.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report as provided be accepted.</p>	Director of Social Services
No. 8	<p><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 22ND APRIL, 2021</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>A Member referred to the Domestic Abuse Bill which was due in April, the Corporate Director of Social Services said that a report on the regional work across Gwent could be included on the Forward Work Programme for the next cycle of this 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 22nd April, 2021 be approved.</p>	

No. 9

UPDATE ON LEGAL COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDREN'S 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, Part 1, 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 relation to the Children's Social Services legal budget.

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 legal collaboration with neighbouring authorities, the Head of Children's Services explained that consideration had been given to establishing a regional legal service for local authorities but this had not progressed. Discussions were now taking place with neighbouring authorities exploring collaboration for legal services, however, there had been difficulties in recruiting solicitors into the specialist area of child protection.

The Corporate Director of Social Services explained that solicitors working for private companies earned higher wages. Consideration had been given to adding a market supplement to encourage solicitors to apply for vacant posts, however, this could lead to solicitors moving from one authority to another. He felt that the regional approach would be more suitable for local authorities but as this had not progressed, discussions with neighbouring authorities regarding legal services would continue.

The Chair commented that there were 22 Authorities in Wales, all very different in size and population and felt that the Welsh Government should look for solutions to help address the issue.

A Member enquired regarding the issue of establishing a regional approach. The Head of Children's Services explained that each of the 4 Authorities in Gwent had their own legal team which worked well for them, and informed Members that the Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance was a participant at the discussion meetings.

A Member commented that it was important to receive the best legal advice in order to protect vulnerable children, parents and the Authority.

A brief discussion ensued, and

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 Members endorse Option 1; and recommend that:-

- the Social Services Scrutiny Committee understanding the difficulties in finding a solution to the issue of legal support, recommend that the Executive Committee prioritise discussions with neighbouring local authorities in an effort to seek a wider solution regarding the collaboration in relation to providing legal services for Children's Services; and also that senior politicians continue to highlight the position in Blaenau Gwent with the WLGA and other relevant bodies.