

BUDGET AND FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Budget and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 23rd April 2012 at 6.30pm in the Scrutiny Meeting Room, Civic Offices, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors R. Sloan (Chairman), K. Austin, R. Evans, A. Lawrence, C. Mollett, A. Stanton, C. Turley and R. Williams (Co-optee).

Also attending: Cllr. P. Watling, Cabinet Member Children & Young People; L. Johnson, Interim Director of Children's Services; K. Perry, Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding; C. Jones, Assistant Director Family & Cohesion Services; Stephanie Jones, Scrutiny Group Specialist.

BFSC-39 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Budget and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on 1st February 2012 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

BFSC-40 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr. S. Reynolds.

BFSC-41 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

BFSC-42 CARE PLACEMENTS

The Chairman reminded members that this meeting had been arranged to look at the costs of care placements in more detail following questions raised at the previous meeting. The key question Members wanted to address was what steps were being taken to ensure that the provision of care placements remained within budget in 2012/13. The Cabinet Member and officers were invited to present reports relating to the issue.

Cllr. Watling, Cabinet Member for Children & Young People, said that he welcomed the opportunity to speak to the Committee and felt that responsibility for children in care was an issue for all members as corporate parents and cut across party lines. He was confident that a clear preventative strategy was in place which would lead to a reduction in the number of children needing to come into care. He could not guarantee that care placements would remain within budget as this was an uncontrolled cost, and there was an upward national trend in the number of children coming into care during the recession. However, he assured members that children and young people needing help would get the right service at the right time, and over time this would have an impact on care numbers.

Laura Johnston, Director of Children's Services, said that the service restructures had been completed with teams now in place and ready to start work. The number of children in care in Telford & Wrekin had been benchmarked against All England, regional and statistical neighbour averages which showed that Telford & Wrekin was performing slightly better than all other non-shire authorities in the West Midlands except Birmingham.

Karen Perry, Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding, presented a "scorecard" which had been developed to monitor the effectiveness of the strategy over time. This provided data in three key areas:

Numbers: this showed the monthly trend in the total number of children in care, the number of new children in care (CIC) by age and as a % of the CIC population and the number of children leaving care by age range and reason. Admissions data would monitor patterns so that the approach could be adapted e.g. towards key age ranges. The reasons for discharge would help identify how discharge could be supported, focussing on safe return home or to alternative permanent placements eg adoption.. It was noted that 60 of 123 children discharged in 2011/12 had returned home safely.

Costs: a cost analysis showed total placement costs, the number of children by placement type as a proportion of overall spend, monthly spend against budget by placement type and average weekly unit costs. A key aim was to bring overall costs down and to reduce the average weekly unit cost of care (currently £832) in particular by increasing the number of internal foster care placements (average weekly unit cost £279) and reducing the number of residential care placements (average weekly unit cost £3,493). Costs were also high due to the length of care placements, and there would be a focus on returning children home safely more quickly. Research had shown that children should not be moved home too quickly before it was safe, but that there could be a tendency for placements to "drift" and the longer a child remained in care, the more difficult it became to return them home. Placement duration would be monitored closely.

Performance: a number of indicators had been selected to monitor performance. Some were national indicators sets (NIs) which Telford & Wrekin continued to monitor, although national targets no longer existed. A RAG rating had been applied to each indicator to compare performance in 2012 with 2011.

- The % of CIC aged 10-16 in foster placement or placed for adoption was positive, although performance was slightly lower than 2011.
- Performance on adoptions within best interest timescales was very good and significantly better than All England and Statistical Neighbour (SN) averages. The 100% target had only been missed due to one case where complex health needs had caused an acceptable delay.
- 30 new fostering households had been approved, including 20 mainstream foster carers and other kinship and respite carers. Nine mainstream foster carers had de-registered making a net gain of 11 against a target of 14. However, there was a good on-going recruitment campaign and ideas to speed up the process.
- Performance on all other indicators had improved and was better than All England or SN averages where data was available.

- Additionally, the characteristics of children and carers were monitored so cultural and ethnic backgrounds could be taken into account as part of the matching process

Karen explained that the scorecard was work in progress and further refinements may be made to ensure the right data was collected.

Members then received the Action Plan which set out the range of activities for proactively managing the number and costs of care placements, showing the anticipated impact on numbers and outcomes, the anticipated financial impact and progress against implementation for each activity. Clive Jones, Assistant Director Family & Cohesion, highlighted two key work streams which were fundamental to delivering both service and cost improvements:

- The focus on commissioning e.g. the reconfiguration of Jigsaw provision, the implementation of a regional residential framework contract, looking at local commissioning to support families with the most complex as part of Strengthening Families.
- Family Connect, the single point of contact to children's services. This would enable earlier intervention and problem resolution delivered through a multi-agency approach which would reduce the need for expensive care placements. The model has been implemented in other authorities including Devon and Knowsley where it had made a positive impact on outcomes. Family Connect will be launched fully in Telford & Wrekin over the next few months.

Following the reports, further information was provided in response to Members' questions and comments:

- With regard to the increase in the number of children in care, the criteria for bringing children into care had not changed since the Baby P case, but agencies did have a greater awareness of the signs of neglect and abuse and were more prompt in making referrals. Advice had been sought from a local judge as to whether unnecessary applications were being made by Telford & Wrekin, and assurance had been given that the cases referred were appropriate. The criteria would not be changed to reduce costs: the safety of the child and integrity of the Council were paramount. Even with marginal cases, finance was not a factor. From a budget point of view, the focus was on funding preventative work to reduce the need for care placements and on better ways of providing support for families, and not on whether a child should come into care or not.
- There were many different types of intervention. Services had been joined up to take a "whole family" approach to tackling presenting issues. Family Connect Advisors and the Triage team will be aware of all available interventions, including adult services. Given the budget situation it is necessary to use resources effectively targeted towards pockets of disadvantage and families with the most complex problems. We also plan working with the voluntary sector and people in their local communities to develop low level preventative support such as the kind provided by extended families and neighbours. Cllr. Lawrence suggested that a creative approach to developing community support networks was required.

- Members wanted to know whether the Council used the register of births to routinely contact or mail-shot families with information about children’s services including nurseries: Cllr. Lawrence felt it was important to reach all families and that by targeting resources at pockets of deprivation, families with problems in more affluent areas could be missed. Officers responded that the issue was not how many people were contacted, but how effective that contact was. Resources were limited, and concentrated on engaging the most disadvantaged children with universal services to reduce the risk of them slipping through the net, and (through the Strengthening Families strategy) on supporting the most challenging families . Early Years provision was essential, and the children’s centres and nurseries had received continued funding. The idea of registering births in children’s centres was being explored.
- Paul Watling again emphasised that the Council needed to meet its statutory duties, but that the budget for preventative services needed to be protected to mitigate against incurring avoidable statutory care costs. Karen Perry said that it was also important to ensure that children in care received the best possible service from social workers and that efforts were being made to provide consistency of support and to minimise changes of social workers. Cllr. Stanton was pleased to hear this as the issue of changing social workers had been raised by children and young people in care at a previous scrutiny meeting.

At the end of the discussion, Members agreed that although the spend on the care placements budgets was difficult to control the , the Committee needed to be assured that what was being spent was being spent in the right way. A further report was requested to come back to the Committee in six months.

RESOLVED - that a further report be brought to the Committee in six months.

BFSC-43 FORWARD PLAN

The next meeting would be at 6.30pm on 15th May was agreed for the next meeting to look at the costs of Supporting People services, subject to confirmation by the Scrutiny Officer.

The meeting ended at 7.50 p.m.

Chairman:.....

Date:.....