

BUDGET & FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Budget and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 15th January 2013 at 6.30pm in Meeting Room 3, Darby House, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors S. Reynolds (Chair), A. Lawrence, C. Mollett and Co-optee R. Williams.

Also attending: Cllr. W. McClements, Cabinet Member Resources & Service Delivery; F. Bottrill, Scrutiny Group Specialist; S. Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

BFSC-22 MINUTES

Due to the short period since the last meeting, the minutes from the 9th January 2013 were not available and would be carried forward to a future meeting for confirmation.

BFSC-23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr. A. Stanton.

BFSC-24 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

BFSC-25 SERVICE & FINANCIAL PLANNING STRATEGY 2013/14-2015/16 (DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS)

The Chair advised members that as agreed at the meeting on 9th January, the Cabinet Member Children, Young People & Families and Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding had been invited to attend the meeting but due to prior commitments neither were available to attend this meeting or the next meeting on 22nd January. However, the Cabinet Member had offered to provide a written response to the Committee's questions and this meeting therefore provided an opportunity for members to consider the Safeguarding / Early Help – Cost Improvement Plan in more detail and to formulate questions for the Cabinet member to address in writing.

The Cabinet Member Resources & Service Delivery was invited to provide an update on any matters since the previous meeting and he made the following comments:

- Confirmation of the Public Health funding had been received. The allocation needed further analysis as some of the funding was ring-fenced, but overall the amount was higher than expected.
- Cllr. McClements again reassured members about the robust financial monitoring in place for children's safeguarding which involved monthly monitoring by himself, the Cabinet Member Children, Young People & Families, the Managing Director, Director of Children's Services and Assistant Directors for Children's Safeguarding and Family & Cohesion Services. He suggested that if the Committee had concerns about this, the Managing Director could be invited to a future meeting to seek assurances on the monitoring.

Following the update Cllr. McClements left the meeting.

Members then considered the safeguarding budget and Cost Improvement Plan presented in the budget proposals in order to formulate questions. The Scrutiny Officer informed members that Cllr. Stanton who was unable to attend the meeting had put forward a question which was what lessons had been learned from last year's budget setting and how the lessons had been applied to this year. The following points were made during the discussion:

- Cllr. Lawrence had seen a league table in the press of the number of children waiting for fostering by local authority. The number for Telford & Wrekin was around 10, and he requested an explanation of how Telford & Wrekin's position in the table compared to other authorities when taking population size into account.
- The target to reduce the time spent in care by 6 weeks by April 2013 was noted and members wanted to know what the average/mean length of time spent in care was, and whether this was a realistic target.
- Members questioned whether the Council had looked for research that may have been done into models of care in other countries and if so, how this information had been used.
- A performance indicator for Objective 2 of the Cost Improvement Plan was to drive down the costs of placements and members wanted to know how unit costs of care were benchmarked with other authorities and how Telford & Wrekin compared. It was noted that the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee would be inviting a Director of Children's Services from another authority with an Outstanding Ofsted rating to a meeting to find out what could be learnt from them.
- There was a discussion about early intervention and members said they had been hearing for a long time about how early intervention would reduce the need to take children into care which would have an impact on costs. Family Connect had been launched last year and the family support model was in place, and members wanted to know more about what this looked like (what kind of interventions were made), how it was making a difference and how the cost benefits were measured and monitored. Members asked for examples of how this worked in practice.
- Following on from the previous discussion, members wanted to know how families were targeted for support and whether the family support services were provided borough wide or targeted at particular wards.
- There was a discussion about the Resource Allocation Panel and the Permanence Panel and members wanted more information about what these groups were, their respective remits and what impact they have on savings.
- There was an action under Objective 2 to recruit 2 contract foster carers. Members wanted to know more about this – how the contracts were structured, how the cost and role compared to the regular carers' and why it was thought they would provide value for money. Without understanding the role better Cllr.

Lawrence questioned whether the contract carers were intended to look after children with more complex needs and if this was the case wanted to know why this idea had not been picked up earlier as it was a suggestion made at a Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee meeting last year.

- Members requested clarity on the care costs for children placed for adoption, and whether this was different from the usual foster care allowance, and wanted to know whether the number of children put up for adoption was more or less than the number of prospective adoptive parents.
- There was a discussion about the overspend in safeguarding and the fact that the service had a history of overspend. Members wanted to know why they should be assured that an ambitious savings target of £2.2m would be made this year and in 2013/14 when there had been a consistent overspend in previous years – they wanted to know what was different now. This led to a further question about the culture of the service and whether the fact that overspend is always covered by contingency had led to a culture of reliance on contingencies, and whether the culture had changed with the drive for savings. A question was then raised about the consequences of not making the projected savings and how this would be managed.
- Moving back to the question about the average length of time spent in care, members also asked how many of the current 300+ children in care were repeat cases.

When there were no further comments or questions, the Committee agreed that the Scrutiny officers would draft a list of questions to reflect the points raised which would be circulated by e-mail for comment and approval by members. It was agreed that the questions would be sent to Cllr. Paul Watling to provide written responses by 31st January.

BFSC-26 CHAIR’S UPDATE AND FUTURE MEETINGS

The Chair reminded members that the next meeting would be at 6.30pm on 22nd January and that Cabinet members and officers from Adult Care and Neighbourhood & Leisure Services would be attending to answer questions.

The meeting ended at 7.45pm.

Chairman:.....

Date:.....