

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 - FRIDAY, 20 JANUARY 2023

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 HELD HYBRID IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, CF31 4WB / REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS - CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, CF31 4WB ON FRIDAY, 20 JANUARY 2023 AT 13:30

Present

Councillor F D Bletsoe – Chairperson

S Aspey	E L P Caparros	P Davies	M Lewis
RL Penhale-Thomas	A Wathan	AJ Williams	R Williams

Apologies for Absence

P Ford, D M Hughes and J Llewellyn-Hopkins

Officers:

Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer – Scrutiny
Claire Marchant	Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing
Jessica Mclellan	Scrutiny Officer
Chris Morris	Accountant
Mark Wilkinson	Group Manager - Learning Disability

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Richard Williams declared a personal interest in paragraph 4.1.7 of agenda item 3, as a former member of the staff for Bridgend County Borough Council – Public Protection.

3. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2023-24 TO 2026-27

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change presented a summary of the report, the purpose of which was to present the Committee with the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023-24 to 2026-27, which set out the spending priorities of the Council, key investment objectives and budget areas targeted for necessary savings. The strategy included a financial forecast for 2023-2027 and a detailed draft revenue budget for 2023-24.

The Chairperson thanked the Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change for her comprehensive summary and referred to the proposed draft Budget Pressures the Committee was considering, reminding Members to consider whether these were sufficient, adequate and robust.

Members discussed the following:

In response to a question regarding whether the reduction in providers of children's residential care was due to Welsh Government developing proposals to eliminate private profit, the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Services and Early Help (Deputy Leader) advised that some for profit providers were trying leave the Welsh market resulting in the need to place children over the border but still for profit. She also advised that any complex care needs were at an additional cost.

The Corporate Director for Social Services and Wellbeing (Corporate Director) advised that due to some providers choosing to exit the market, it resulted in those remaining

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having more children and young people. There was increasing difficulty in finding placements and a need for more bespoke placements as well as a number of children requiring support outside of regulated settings which brought a cost premium. Whilst the Directorate was developing an in-house provision, it remained reliant on independent outside providers at present. She highlighted the increased complexity of needs of children and young people post pandemic and the economy experiencing significant issues in terms of workforce were impacting on costs.

In response to a question regarding any plans for remodelling in social services, the Corporate Director advised that there was a significant transformation programme including transformation of strength-based practice in adults and children's social care based on enabling and promoting independence. She highlighted the importance of preventative services offered by Awen and Halo which provide good value and focus on the most vulnerable as well as the remodelling in care and support at home services, in-house and commissioned care at home services, learning disabilities and mental health.

The Deputy Leader advised that the Regional Partnership Board, which is responsible for community delivery, had transformation on its agenda.

In response to a question regarding the public consultation on the proposed 6% increase in Council tax, the Deputy Leader advised that residents' views would be discussed, debated and considered.

She advised the Committee that Health and Social Care workers needed to be valued, recognising the aging population causing increased demand on services and that their pay and terms and conditions needed to reflect such. She also highlighted the Welsh Government Directive regarding a National Care System which would mean all staff would have the same terms and conditions, resulting in decreased competition between authorities.

In response to a query as to what were the cost pressures arising from the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and whether they were fully funded, the Corporate Director advised that this was funded on a formula which reflected the numbers and vulnerabilities in the population, but highlighted the increasing demand and needs of the population. She also highlighted a significant pressure arising due to a statutory responsibility on the Authority which hosted secure estate, such as HMP Parc, and whilst initial funding for that had been forthcoming from Welsh Government, the initial ringfenced allocation no longer covered the pressure arising due to changing needs of the population.

The Deputy Leader advised in response to a question about the long-term implications and costs following the pandemic, that demand on services had increased exponentially in Social Services, Education, Third Sector and Voluntary Organisations.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations highlighted the shortfall in the number of people taking up the offers from Halo and Awen and that there were costs associated with not having as large a membership or participation as with those services previously.

In response to a question regarding the budget pressure figures for future years, the Corporate Director advised that the figures for 2023-24 represented recurring pressures, but the reason for why most of the future year figures were not included was due to the unknown inflationary uplift and pressures.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change clarified that if the budget pressures were approved, they would go into the base budget for the service. Therefore, any increases due to pay or inflation would automatically be picked up.

In relation to the £758,000 pressure on the Learning Disabilities budget, the Group Manager – Learning Disability, Mental Health & Substance Misuse advised that it related to the contracts held with 4 organisations to provide support to people to live in their own homes. He advised one of the intentions of the Learning Disabilities Service Delivery Plan was to give people wider choice and range of activities to engage in. The service development was accelerated when day services were scaled down during the pandemic and people decided, post pandemic, they would prefer to engage in activities at home. He also highlighted the aging population and increase in complexity of need for people with learning disabilities as well as the increase in wages and providers' increased rates impacting on costs.

The Corporate Director – Social Services and Wellbeing advised that post pandemic, more older people were accessing day services so the budget could not be shifted from that to support the Learning Disabilities budget. However, an external expert organisation was producing a piece of work to look at a sustainable operating model for Day Services and Learning Disabilities and the finances required to resource it.

In response to a question regarding what was being done to try and reduce the number of children in residential placements out of county and the cost and whether it was possible to staff to capacity, the Corporate Director – Social Services and Wellbeing advised there were up to 20 independent residential placements, but advised that some children were in independent foster agency placements or with extended family out of area. In order to reduce the number, she highlighted the need for supported foster carers to be available in a timely way and the co-location of the assessment unit and the foster team utilising the therapeutic model to work intensively with children to step them down from residential placements to foster carers.

The Deputy Leader assured the Committee that a child is placed in the most appropriate placement for them, where they would thrive irrespective of cost. She advised that the increase of children in residential placements was due to the increase in the number of care experienced children and the reliance on services to provide for them.

The Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing advised that the proportion of care experienced children in residential placements was relatively low, when benchmarked against the care experienced populations of other authorities.

In response to concern expressed about the impact of proposed savings to the schools budget and any increased demand that could have on social services, the Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing advised that the Schools Safeguarding Forum had been re-established providing regular interface meetings between colleagues. She advised that a significant number of referrals were made by schools and the service worked with schools to support de-escalation where possible. There was also a piece of work being done with Safeguarding and Education and Family Support regarding targeting preventative services to manage the risks outside of statutory services, where possible.

The Deputy Leader advised that highlighted the benefit of having Social Work Support Officers and allowing Social Workers to keep caseloads down and get work done quicker. She advised that the 2% efficiency savings in schools' budgets would not have a direct impact on the work within social services.

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In response to a question regarding the increased pressure in the direct payments budget, the Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing advised that it was due to an increase in need and highlighted that post-pandemic, direct payments were a very cost-effective way in supporting the pressures within families and enabling them to secure their own support, bringing social care into the workforce.

The Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing, in response to a query regarding the sufficiency of the £2m pressure in adult social care, acknowledged that whatever is invested in the pressures in Social Services impacts on other parts of the Authority, but that she had a statutory duty to advise on the resource required for social care. Whilst the pressure would alleviate the budget pressure, it did not meet the current level of overspend and she highlighted a number of areas which would be supported through the pressure including workforce and care home costs and occupancy.

A Member expressed concern regarding how long other Directorates would be able to continue to find budget reduction proposals to support the pressures in social services and whether social services would be facing cuts.

The Deputy Leader advised that it would be at least 2-3 years before any benefit was seen, highlighting the cuts to grant funding and the unsustainable cuts to social services over many years.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations advised that it was likely that the consequences of pandemic would likely be felt across the public sector for decades to come and some flexibility and understanding was necessary to allow individual local authorities to deal with the impact in the best way for them. However, he also recognised the support from Welsh Government, highlighting the recent uplift in housing and homelessness funding.

The Deputy Leader advised that she would continue to make representations to Welsh and UK Government until all public services were fairly funded.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer – Scrutiny reminded Members that before Invitees were invited to leave the meeting, that it was the Committee's opportunity to ensure they had all the information they required regarding the budget pressures and to ensure they were satisfied that they were necessary, robustly calculated and sufficient.

In response to a question submitted by a Member regarding whether any options for budget reductions from discretionary services had been considered by the Directorate and the reasons why they had been rejected, the Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations highlighted that culture and leisure was within his portfolio and that there had been discussions regarding library closures and the potential to look at closure of some Halo venues. However, on balance the Cabinet felt that the saving that would have been achieved was minimal and would have too great an impact on isolated and vulnerable residents and their access to necessary support.

The Deputy Leader advised that when the pressures on staff were so extreme, she was not prepared for any reductions in Social Services acknowledging the significant cost and resource required for the managed team but without which, social services would be under specific scrutiny from Care Inspectorate Wales or Welsh Government. She highlighted the introduction of the position of the Deputy Head of Children's Social Care due to the significant pressures at managerial level and that if caseloads continued to rise to an unmanageable level, there would need to be a further introduction of agency staff to mitigate against risk.

The Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing advised that Adult Services had worked hard to move away from a deficit-based model and promote what people could access in their local community. However, post-pandemic, there had been an increase in emotional and physical health and wellbeing challenges resulting in increased need for statutory services, which happened at the same time as the increased cost of provision and workforce challenges. She also highlighted the impact on statutory services if discretionary services were reduced.

In response to a question submitted by a Member as to what the Directorate was doing to decrease reliance on costly agency staff and to incentivise people to join the workforce as permanent members of staff, the Deputy Leader acknowledged that it would be preferable to be able to have no agency staff in the workforce, however she highlighted that the last social work training course in Cardiff was only half full and advised that Welsh Government needed to support and deliver a national care service to look at the terms and conditions of all staff in order to resolve the issues of recruitment. She highlighted that health and social care staff were not appropriately valued and wanted the same support for them as WG had recently just provided to nurses. She continued that there was an ongoing campaign to recruit, including international recruitment drives, videos on social media, adverts in newspapers and the 12 Days of Christmas which promoted presents for carers.

The Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing advised that it was important to promote both the financial and the non-financial aspect of working for Bridgend. She reiterated the need to look at the terms and conditions but within Bridgend on the financial side, they had utilised market supplements in some teams and re-evaluated job roles. On the non-financial side, she acknowledged the need for manageable caseloads, support workers for staff, good management oversight, supervision, training, and marketing. She encouraged Members to continue sharing the videos on social media which demonstrated the positive experience of working for Bridgend.

Whilst in the short term, the service was looking at international recruitment, in the medium term, there was a need to grow their own social workers. However, this required seconding people on to the social work course which meant that the Children's Social Services' reliance on agency staff would continue for at least a year. In Adult Social Care, she highlighted the support and assistance available to give them the best experience and tools for their jobs and advised that Workforce was a top priority for the Directorate.

The Chairperson advised that Members of the Committee who wanted to ask questions had all spoken, so as there were no further questions for the invitees, thanked them for their attendance and they left the meeting.

RESOLVED:

Following consideration of the report and appendices, the Committee made the following Recommendations for consolidation and inclusion in the report to Cabinet on the draft MTFS, including the proposed budget pressures and budget reduction proposals within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee, as part of the budget consultation process:

1. The Committee recognised the physical and emotional demand on social care workers and recommended that Cabinet review the wages for social care workers, in light of external pressures and consider how to ensure that these staff feel appropriately supported and valued.

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The Committee noted that the majority of the budget pressures were within the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate and, following detailed consideration and discussions with Officers and Cabinet Members, the Committee were content that they are sufficient and necessary.

4. **URGENT ITEMS**

None.