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SCRUTINY BOARD (CHILDREN AND FAMILIES)

WEDNESDAY, 24TH JANUARY, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor D Cohen in the Chair

Councillors D Blackburn, E Bromley,
R Downes, O Edwards, E Flint, C Gruen,
J Heselwood, N Manaka, L Martin,
K Renshaw, T Smith and R. Stephenson

CO-OPTED MEMBERS (VOTING)

Mr E A Britten - Church Representative (Catholic Diocese of Leeds)
Mr A Khitou – Primary Parent Governor Representative

Co-Opted Members Non-Voting

Ms H Bellamy – School Staff Representative
Ms K Blacker – Co-Opted Member
Ms J Ward – Co-Opted Member
Laura Whitaker – Young Lives Leeds

60 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

61 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There was no exempt information considered by the Board.

62 Late Items

There were no late items.

63 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

64 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

The Board received the following apologies:

Cllr Amanda Carter, with Cllr Trish Smith attending as substitute

Cllr Jordan Bowden, with Cllr Emma Flint attending as substitute
Cllr Jane Senior
Andrew Graham, Church Representative (Church of England)
Nick Tones, School Staff Representative

65 Minutes - 29 November 2023

In reference to Minute 58 a concern was raised around a follow up item on the Impact of Asylum changes on children and young people in Leeds not featuring in the work programme despite previous discussion on the subject. The Chair noted that it is still very much under consideration and will be brought forward at either the newly planned April meeting or earlier if possible.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 November 2023, be approved as an accurate record.

66 Financial Reporting 2023/24 (Month 7)

The Board considered a report from the Head of Democratic Services which provided an update on the in year financial position in respect of the Revenue Budget and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), highlighting the budgetary position of services within the Board's remit.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Jonathan Pryor, Executive Member for Economy, Culture, and Education
- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Phil Evans, Chief Officer Transformation and Partnerships
- Tim Pouncey, Chief Officer – Resources & Strategy
- Louise Hornsey, Senior Head of Finance - People

The Executive Board Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships made some introductory remarks setting out the scale of the challenges being faced by local authorities in managing children's social care budgets.

The situation in Leeds, like elsewhere, is twofold. There is an increase in the number of children requiring care and more significantly the increase in cost of care in recent years. If the issue were only linked to increased numbers the budgetary position would be more manageable, but the costs of placements are now much higher. Key measures to reduce overspend is reducing the numbers entering care and supporting children and young people to leave care, some of those measures are highlighted in the paper being considered by the Board.

Responding to comments and questions from board members the following issues were discussed:

- The Chair sought clarity on the overspend position contained in the report, does the overspend represent a worsening position based on the last time the report was considered by Executive Board and are there any estimates of a possible worst case scenario in terms of overspending on children looked after budgets. The Board heard that the position has worsened since the last report and the next update on this will be reported to Executive Board in February and as such work is ongoing on the projection and is not yet finalised. There are plans to do more detailed work on the projection to the February Executive Board, assessing the areas of risk in the budget and putting forward a projection that presents a position that will be less likely to change by the financial year end.

Resolved: The Board noted the content of the report and the financial position in relation to service areas that fall within its remit.

67 The Proposed Budget 2024/25 and Provisional Budgets for 2025/26 and 2026/27

The Board considered a report from the Head of Democratic Services that introduces the Council's proposed budget for 2024/25 and provisional budgets for 2025/26 and 2026/27 for consideration, review and comment on matters and proposals that fall within the Scrutiny Board's remit. Following consideration of the report feedback from this board will be incorporated into a composite report that will be submitted to Executive Board for consideration on 7 February 2024 as set out in the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

In attendance for this item were:

- Cllr Jonathan Pryor, Executive Board Member for Culture, Economy and Education
- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Phil Evans, Chief Officer Transformation and Partnerships
- Tim Pouncey, Chief Officer – Resources & Strategy
- Louise Hornsey, Senior Head of Finance - People
- Rob Clayton, Principal Scrutiny Adviser

By way of introduction the Senior Head of Finance – People, set out that key elements of the report which were the overall £58.4m saving requirement that the Council will need to make to deliver a balanced budget in 2024/25, for Children and Families the saving requirement is £16.5m and these proposals have been detailed in reports to Executive Board in October and December 2023. All local authorities are required by law, to set a balanced budget.

In terms of wider context, the Director of Children and Families highlighted the funding challenges around children looked after. In terms of numbers of children in care Leeds is performing well when compared to statistical neighbours, the numbers have increased but not on the same scale as in other areas. It was noted that increases in child poverty is a driver for children entering care, and in Leeds deprivation levels have increased and lower super output areas have increased with 12 neighbourhoods classed as being in the most deprived 1% in the UK. In addition to this there has been an increase in adolescent populations in the most deprived areas which has further added to demand pressures.

In response to comments and questions from board members the following discussion took place:

- Board members were supportive of the invest to save approach which will see more in house provision delivered through new children's homes. However, there was also concern around the lengthening timescales of delivering the new small group living homes and the risks that are identified in the papers around successful delivery. In response it was noted that the timescales have been subject to robust testing and there is a desire to be cautious and as rigorous as possible. Risks associated with establishing the homes are linked to staffing, refurbishment and registration of the homes which can be a lengthy process. Mitigation of risk is ongoing, a good example of that being the discussions taking place with Ofsted around how registration of the homes can be expedited as quickly as possible by establishing a 'pipeline' approach of other means.
- Members were also interested in ensuring that the need to reduce costs does not mean that we are 'over keen' to avoid placing children in care and potentially increase risks for those children. The Board heard that this approach is more about prevention approaches and safely reducing the need for care through providing family support to those that most need it, it is not a blanket approach to reducing numbers. This preventative approach is delivered in partnership with other agencies, is evidence based and aims to deliver timely, restorative support to families often living in poverty and in adverse circumstances.
- The Board wanted to know more about the proposals in the budget to Cease the Multi-Systemic Therapy for Child Abuse & Neglect (MST-CAN) service and whether it will be withdrawn. In response the Board were informed that the proposal is still in the budget and results from the difficult financial circumstances that the authority is in following successive years of reductions in funding. It was also noted that none of the proposals put forward are decisions that are taken lightly. The Board were concerned that this proposal could impact 60 families that access support and that it is used as a service to prevent children from entering the care system. The risk being that the saving of £330,000 that will be delivered by the proposal could be significantly outweighed by costs in the care system further down the line as potentially more children enter care. The Board also heard that no decision has been taken on this yet and that the point about the consequential impact of the proposal will be a key part of the decision making process through impact assessment.

- On the same saving proposal (MST-CAN), board members wanted to know more about the methodology being used to calculate savings – specifically the £330K saving and why this does not reflect cumulatively for 2025/26 which would be £660K based on two years of savings. In response the Board heard that the £330K is removed from the base budget and is therefore recorded only in 2024/25 as opposed to the cumulative impact approach that would see the £330K recorded each year.
- It was reiterated that the proposals in the budget are difficult and given the legal requirement to deliver a balanced budget there is no other choice but to bring forward very difficult proposals. As part of this process, it was noted that part of the work on the budget is how to do things differently and in respect of MST-CAN services consideration is being given to how the staff will be retained through a multi-agency approach within the plans to develop Family Health services.
- The Chair referenced the working group held in preparation for this Budget item and noted some of the key discussion from that session, these were: Commissioned Services - the Board wanted to hear more about the planned review of commissioned services to understand which services would be most affected and what impact if any, this would have on services to Leeds residents; Life Coaches - the Board sought and received assurances around the life coaching staffing resource which will be integrated into family support and early help services; Skills - in light of the possibility that staff will leave the authority through voluntary redundancy or other measures, the board expressed some concern that valuable skills and experience could be lost; Financial Challenge - a key discussion theme at the working group was the need for additional funding to meet demand pressures and the higher costs of providing foster care; Overall Budget - the Board sought reassurances around sufficiency of budget for the Directorate in 2024/25. The concern being that despite additional resource the same budget pressures emerge within children looked after budgets which place pressure on the overall council budget in 2024/25; Children's Centres - the Board sought reassurance around the scope of the review and how integration and co-location might look and impact communities in the city; and the Board were concerned about service review proposals to cease the Caring Dads and Multi-Systemic Therapy for Child Abuse (MST-CAN) services given the valuable assistance they provide to children and families in the city.
- In addition to the comment on the Working Group the Chair also highlighted concern around the proposals to reduce the Youth Activity Fund and the potential impact it might have on vulnerable families across the city. There were also concerns around the possible impact of parking charges on the activity of children and families in the city.
- Board members referenced the demand led nature of the services provided by Children and Families and the pressures it can create due to the statutory nature of the services, set against the legal requirement to deliver a balanced budget as a local authority.
- On sufficiency of budget the Board heard that the directorate is confident in the budget it has proposed but it was clearly set out that the cost of care in external residential placements and the care system generally is a

major risk due to demand and costs of the services and the need for more funding.

- The Board noted that some of the strategies in the budget are high risk on the risk register. In response members were informed that risks have been highlighted in the spirit of openness and transparency and to highlight the pressures being faced and the difficult decisions that are having to be taken to balance budgets.
- The Executive Member for Economy, Culture and Education highlighted the impact of inflationary pressure on the budget and that the challenges posed by that have come following successive years of budget reductions which has led to some difficult proposals being put forward in the budget for 2024/25.
- The Board were informed about the strong officer and member oversight, governance and scrutiny measures in place in Leeds to manage budgets and deal with the pressures being faced by services in the directorate. It was further noted that the financial pressures within the directorate have been the main focus of work in recent months at senior officer levels and at senior elected member level.

Resolved:

The Board noted the content of the report and appendices and that a summary of the deliberations of all five Scrutiny Boards during the period of consultation on the Executive Board's proposed budget will be submitted for consideration by Executive Board on 7 February 2024.

68 Performance Report

Members received a report from the Director of Children and Families which provided a summary of performance information relating to outcomes for children and young people in Leeds.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Jonathan Pryor, Executive Member for Economy, Culture, and Education
- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Chris Hudson, Performance Programme Manager
- Dan Barton, Deputy Director – Learning

The Director of Children and Families provided a brief introduction. The report is intended to provide assurance around the health of the children's social care system in Leeds along with details on key performance information. It is also worth noting that this is the first performance report brought forward since the refreshed Children and Young People's Plan 2023-28 was agreed and there is an update provided on the three obsessions within the paper.

It was noted that the Key Stage 4 figures for 2022/23 could be subject to change as a final data release is awaited from the DfE. The Annual Standards report which regularly comes to the Board will provide more detailed information on attainment, in addition to the headline figures that are covered in today's report.

In response to members questions and comments the following points were covered:

- The Chair raised a question in relation to EHCPs and statutory timescales, seeking clarity on the number of EHC assessments issued within the 20 week timescale. In response the Board heard that there has been a significant increase in demand for EHCPs in Leeds (118% increase in demand since 2016 and in 2023, 954 completed assessments compared to 374 in 2022) which had driven both the internal improvement work being led by the directorate and the inquiry work being undertaken by the Board.
- The Board asked for more details on the attainment figures and comparison with statistical neighbours. performance in Leeds is broadly in line with statistical neighbours and in respect of Progress 8 Leeds is ahead. Members were keen to understand some of the changes in attainment data with Leeds performing better in some areas but with national figures in some areas appearing to have fallen. The Board were informed that post pandemic there are changes in attainment data in part attributable some of the experiences of children during the pandemic i.e. reduced access to school and nursery provision. In summary the figures presented are linked to both improvement in Leeds and some reduction in attainment at national level. The Board noted that this could be considered as a future item of scrutiny in the next municipal year.
- Board members asked about attainment in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 and any mapping that has taken place around when improvements might be seen in those cohorts. The Board heard that the Council has high ambitions for attainment at all stages of education and that work done at an earlier age will have a greater impact further down the line in terms of attainment, it was also noted that improvements will be delivered working in partnership with schools.
- Responding to a question in relation to registration of new children's homes by Ofsted the Board heard that the directorate is taking a proactive approach to working with Ofsted to develop in house provision. Meetings have taken place at a high level between officers and Ofsted in order to try to speed up registration.
- On overall CLA figures Leeds is above the national average in terms of the rate per 10,000 children but is below statistical neighbours. It was also noted that Leeds has a strong focus on reunification of families through invest to save measures and that 60% of children in the care system in Leeds are cared for in house either through foster carers or in kinship arrangements, which compares well to other local authority areas. Leeds performs particularly strongly in respect of kinship arrangements, and this has been noted by a recent all-parliamentary group.

- Members noted the demand that children's services are under and that this is backed up by the referral rate figures in Leeds, this is 642 per 10,000 set against a national figure of 544.5 per 10,000, which reflects the challenges faced by the city both in terms of overall demand and complexity of needs.
- It was noted that on Progress 8 Leeds has taken significant steps forward backed up by the attainment figures for 2022/23. An improvement of 0.12 in Progress 8 is actually a major improvement in performance.
- The Board heard about plans for Early Years and Foundation Stage development. Work is ongoing with health colleagues to increase the range of the Best Start Programme from 0-2 years to 0-5 years. It is hoped that this will deliver improvement in attainment and across a whole range of measures in the future. It is hoped that this approach will deliver a strategic, multi-agency focus on this age group targeting issues such as reading and an added focus on the 0-5 age range as a whole as opposed to just the 0-2 age group. This approach will tackle the increasing prevalence of children of school age being non-verbal or still using nappies.
- On Attainment, the Executive Board Member for Economy, Culture and Education stated that the recent improvements in performance are positive indicators for attainment in the future.
- The Board wanted to know more about breakdown of foster placements and any analysis of the reasons why a placement breaks down. In response it was noted that breakdowns are more common with adolescents and there is a need to provide more support to carers who are caring for adolescents. The importance of becoming a trauma informed city was also noted as an important step in providing support to carers.
- Returning to the issue of adolescents it was noted that there are additional challenges today linked to use of technology and devices, with adolescents often being 24/7 connected to phones or tablets. The Board asked about training and skills development for carers on these aspects of teenage life today. In response the Board noted plans for an Adolescent's Service or specific resource to target support at that age range and provide training and support to both carers and professionals.
- The Board also asked about any correlation between foster placement breakdown amongst adolescents and increased NEET rates. The Board heard that the strong focus on education and 3 As Strategy is a key element of the approach to tackle NEETs, ability to read being a major determinant of overall outcomes, for example.
- The Executive Board Member for Children's Social Care and Health Partnerships outlined the impact of poverty on families and that families facing financial crisis display higher instances of domestic violence, mental health issues and substance misuse which are often the main reasons why children enter care.
- Members highlighted ongoing concerns with increased primary and secondary school absence, NEET levels and the number of suspensions in schools. The Board accepted that based on national comparisons Leeds is performing reasonably well albeit the figures are increasing. The Board were informed that the impact of covid is still resonating in terms of

school attendance and a 'change in psyche' around school attendance with it not being seen as essential in all families following long periods when schools were closed. The Board also heard that additional resource has been allocated to dealing with NEET rates through a new colleague who is focussed in that area and on reducing the NEET figures.

- In respect of NEET the Board also heard that there has been a reduction in the number of young people who are classed as Not Known, by around 200 which is a significant positive set against the overall increase in NEETs.
- The Board wanted more detail on re-offending rates noting that there was an error in the report in terms of where the direction of travel was indicating. The Board heard that in the main the re-offending rates are being driven by a small cohort who are committing more serious crime and at a higher volume. It is a focus of the Youth Justice Partnership Board to tackle re-offending rates. In addition, local data on re-offending is showing a reduction and this will feed into the figure in future performance reports.
- The Board also expressed concerns about the obesity levels amongst children and young people.

Resolved:

The Board noted the updates provided on the progress being made against the refreshed Children and Young People's Plan (2023-2028).

69 Provision of EHCP Support Working Group feedback & Inquiry Session

The Board received a report from the Head of Democratic Services providing a summary from the EHCP Inquiry Working Group held in November 2023 and details of the latest Executive Board report from December 2023 – *'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) - Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) – Review Process – Update Report'* setting out the latest position on the ongoing, directorate led review of EHCP and SEND services in the city.

In attendance for this item were:

- Councillor Jonathan Pryor, Executive Member for Economy, Culture, and Education
- Councillor Fiona Venner, Executive Member for Children Social Care and Health Partnerships
- Julie Longworth, Director of Children & Families
- Dan Barton, Deputy Director - Learning
- Phil Evans, Chief Officer Transformation and Partnerships
- Maria Adams, Co-Vice Chair Leeds Parent Carer Forum
- Heather Jafar, Co-Vice Chair Leeds Parent Carer Forum
- Julie Hutchinson, LPCF Steering Group
- Rob Clayton, Principal Scrutiny Adviser

The Principal Scrutiny Advisor briefly introduced this item, setting out key elements of the report and appendices. The item brought together two work streams for Board member consideration. At Appendix 1 a December Executive Board report was provided to the Board which set out the latest position on the improvement work being undertaken by the directorate supported by PwC and at Appendix 2 a summary of a Scrutiny Board Working Group held on 23 November 2023 which was an evidence gathering session aimed at hearing the lived experiences of parents and carers in Leeds through feedback from the Leeds Parent Carer Forum (LPCF). These two areas of work, one led by scrutiny and the other by the directorate have similar aims in that they are intended to drive improvements in the provision of EHCP support in Leeds.

During board member questions and comments the following points were covered:

- The Director of Children and Families welcomed the feedback received from the LPCF through the working group and working group summary document. The directorate is committed to hearing from children and families and recognised that parents and carers are experts in the lives of their families.
- The significant problems in the delivery of EHCP support in the city have been identified and prioritised, not just in terms of meeting statutory EHCP timescales but more broadly there is a need to deliver improvements in the whole SEND system. This led to the commissioning of an independent, 'root and branch' review of EHCP and SEND services in Leeds, which is now being delivered in partnership with PwC.
- It was noted that this review has come at a financial cost, but it was felt that this was necessary in order to deliver a rigorous and far reaching review with concrete outcomes and development of a new vision and clear improvement plan for these services.
- The Chief Officer Transformation and Partnerships introduced Appendix 1 and pointed to the detail at paragraph 1.3 which set out the principles of the improvement work being done by the directorate, these are as follows:
 - Codesign a future way of working with families.
 - Design processes that retain the focus on the Child and value-adding staff effort.
 - Create an approach to the Code of Practice which aligns with the Leeds Way.
 - Ensure Leadership which is stable and consistent.
 - Deliver a Culture which promotes equity and is obsessed with the voice of the child.
- The Board also heard about planned timescales, with an aim of delivering a sprint based approach to launching a new set of internal arrangements in April 2024. This will be followed by a piece of work, independent of PwC, focussed on how the authority works with schools in readiness for the start of the new academic year in September.
- The Chair raised a slight concern around the use of jargon and whether there was enough depth and detail in Appendix 1. The Board were

assured that there is significant detail and volumes of background work but that this was intended as a headline report setting out principles and challenges. The Board also received assurances that this is a high priority in the directorate and there is a clear commitment to improvement driven through a child centric approach and co-design with families.

- The Board were concerned that there is a group of people or families who feel let down and need help and that needs to be addressed in this work. In response it was made clear that the views and comments from parents and carers have been heard and that there is a commitment to reflecting the need to help children and families impacted by this and that it is a clear priority for the directorate. It was recognised that there is a need for a change in culture and practice, practice over process and restorative, respectful practice that enables the views of parents and carers to help shape services.
- The Deputy Director Learning noted that there is a need to build relationships with parents and carers and committed to meeting with representatives of the LPCF on a regular basis in the future.
- Members asked about recent comments made in public that suggested that the approach to placements could be seen as 'scatter gun'. In response the board heard about the ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and that the benchmark for the services being delivered are what the Director would like to see provided to their own family members and that there is no room for complacency and a commitment to change and continuous improvement.
- Members highlighted the improvement journey that is needed, the main area for improvement being the need to improve how the council listens.
- The LPCF commented that the Working Group session had been an effective forum and that they had felt listened to. The LPCF were slightly disappointed that the report at Appendix 1 does not reflect that albeit accepting that the audience it was intended for was not solely parents and carers in the city. In response to that there was both an apology and a commitment to ensuring that the directorate does evidence that it has listened to the feedback and a further commitment to working with parents, carers and families on the ongoing improvement work.
- The Chair sought to clarify that one of the aims of today was to formally bring the feedback received through the scrutiny working group into the work being done by the directorate and added that there is a commitment from scrutiny to ensure that the voices of parents and carers are heard and that this is monitored going forward. In addition, the Chair noted that the feedback from the LPCF will be an important consideration when the inquiry conclusions and recommendations are finalised.
- It was accepted by the directorate that language is important and that there is a need to take the feedback away to inform future reports on this work.
- Moving on to finance the Board highlighted the funding cap that Leeds is subject to through the DSG. In response the board heard that this is a national funding formula which caps the amount of funding an authority can receive linked to population.
- The Executive Member for Economy, Culture and Education added that he has written to the Government on this on a number of occasions to

highlight the impact it is having in Leeds as the city has triggered the cap for a number of years and it is leading to Leeds falling behind on funding for these services.

- The LPCF highlighted some concerns around an ongoing survey of both parents and carers and children and young people being carried out by the directorate, and whether this has been circulated directly to families. In response there was an undertaking from the directorate to take the feedback away and respond to it.
- In closing remarks, the LPCF also noted that they were pleased to have the opportunity to work alongside the directorate and the Scrutiny Board on this area of work.
- The PSA and Chair set out the next steps in the inquiry. This will see some adjustments to the work programme with feedback on the ongoing survey of children and families an option for the Board's February meeting.

Resolved:

The Board:

- a) noted the aims and ambitions of the directorate led improvement work set out in Appendix 1
- b) noted and formally brought onto the record the working group summary at Appendix 2 which set out feedback on EHCP support services in Leeds from the Leeds Parent Carer Forum (LPCF)
- c) agreed that the timescales for the inquiry should be reviewed to enable feedback from the ongoing survey of children and families with EHCPs to feature at the February meeting of the Board, if possible
- d) agreed to the scheduling of an additional Board meeting in April that would enable completion of the inquiry work in 2023/24.

70 Work Programme

The report of the Head of Democratic Services requested Members to consider the Board's work programme for 2023/24 municipal year.

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser informed the Board that Appendix 1 was the latest draft of the work programme for the year.

Noting the discussion that took place under item 10 regarding a possible, additional meeting in April The Adviser set out options for that and noted both Easter and Passover as dates to avoid. The Board agreed to the additional meeting which will assist with the completion of work on the Provision of EHCP Support in Leeds.

In addition, the PSA referenced that the Board will now be considering the Draft Youth Justice Plan as part of the Budget and Policy Framework process at its March meeting.

Plans for a further item on the Impact of Asylum Changes on Children in Leeds will be included in the work programme for March or April 2024.

Lastly it was noted that the Board has discussed a specific SEND co-opted member for 2024/25 and it was agreed that the PSA could commence work on this and bring a report back to the Board in February.

RESOLVED –

The Board:

- a) noted the work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year.
- b) agreed in principle to an additional Board meeting in April
- c) agreed that a report on a SEND co-opted members could be brought to the next meeting.

71 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Board will take place on 22 February 2024 at 2.00PM. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at 1.45pm.

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