

**Extract of the Minutes of the Children and Families
Overview and Scrutiny Panel
Friday, 16 November 2018, County Hall, Worcester - 10.00
am**

**344 Budget Scrutiny:
Reviewing the
2018/19 Budget
Position for
Children's
Services**

The Cabinet Members with Responsibility for Children and Families, and Education and Skills, the Assistant Directors for Social Work Safeguarding Services, and Early Help and Commissioning, and the Head of Financial Management had been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on the 2018/19 budget position.

In the course of the discussion, the following main points were made:

- Members were reminded that the focus of this discussion would be on the 2018/19 budget for the 6 months to the end of September (end of period 6). Proposals for the 2019/20 budget would be presented to the Panel in January.
- Following an overspend in 2017/18, an additional £10.5 million had been included in the budget to cover Children's Social Care placements and to increase safeguarding staff capacity. An additional £0.4 million was also invested in children's Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) transport.
- The forecast outturn for the end of period 6 predicted an overspend of just over £1 million. Predicted overspends in the budgets for Placements and Provision, and Home to School and College Transport were highlighted.
- A question was asked about the 7% underspend in Targeted Family Support. It was confirmed that this was a one-off saving as a result excellent work by contract management colleagues, which had resulted in some staff being brought back in house. A locality model was now being developed with each district having a manager and 6 targeted family support workers. Each team would have capacity to work with approximately 100 families. Work was now ongoing to obtain data to allow teams to focus their resources on those families where officers could make most difference.
- It was confirmed that the increasing cost of placements and provision was not due to

increasing numbers of children coming into care. Post-Ofsted there had been a rise in referrals and the Authority had more children in care than would be expected for an authority of its type. It had been difficult to get a baseline figure, as comparisons with previous years were not easy. However, the number of new children coming into care was now reducing and it was expected that this would reduce further once a good quality edge of care service was in place.

- Currently 45% of children in care had come into care in 2015 or before. Children who had been in care for this length of time were less likely to leave, as they were settled in stable long-term placements. However, for new children the focus was on achieving a timely turnaround. Members were informed that court proceedings had been massively speeded up and, according to national data, the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Local Family Justice Board was the top performing Board. This was an indicator of the quality of work done by social workers as courts would not accept paperwork if it was not of good quality.
- Members were informed that for the first 6 months of this year, the County Council had dealt with 15 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children compared with 13 for the whole of last year.
- The Panel was reminded that placement breakdown often resulted in a 'bounce' into residential care. Work was underway to provide support and challenge to carers to prevent placement breakdown. It was confirmed that, to a certain extent, children in care were presenting with more complex issues. The planned edge of care service would include staff who were professionally qualified to support children in their emotional health and well-being. It was confirmed that the service did access therapeutic foster care placements via Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). It was important to build in care and support for carers, especially given the rise in the number of family and friends carers.
- It was important to recognise that this was a demand-led budget with pressures changing from month to month, depending on the children presenting to the service. It was very difficult to predict demand for placements and the length of time those placements would last. For example, recently there had been 2 requests for mother and baby residential placements, which could only be met out of county. These requests were very rare and would only be agreed to if there was a

genuine need.

- Concern was expressed that the County Council was increasingly being asked to pick up work that had previously been done by the voluntary sector and capacity within the community was not always there. The Assistant Director for Social Work Safeguarding Services suggested that the capacity was there, but there was a need to help people to tap in to the help available.
- It was confirmed that health visitors would have an ongoing role in a child's welfare even if social services were also involved. In assessing need, health visitors would be aware of indicators of domestic abuse and problems with mental health.
- A question was asked about respite care for friends and families, given the big rise in the number of friend and family carers. In response, Members were informed that family group conferencing would take place to assess what support was needed. Family and friends carers were treated as formal foster carers and provided with a support and training programme which recognised their background.
- It was confirmed that there was no separate national data gathered on the proportion of friends and family carers, so it was not possible to compare with other authorities. In practice, it was something that social workers considered in every case. Members were reminded that friends and family carers received foster care payments, in the same way as other foster carers.
- In relation to home to school and college transport, a question was asked about why the budget was overspent. It was confirmed that most of the overspend was relating to SEND Transport and it was queried whether any consideration had been given to following the example of adult services and giving families direct payments so they could arrange their own transport. The Panel was reminded that this was a demand-led budget. It was confirmed that direct payments were promoted, but this was not always successful as extra support was often needed when children travelled. Children's Services dealt with the numbers of children involved and transport colleagues dealt with the routes. September saw the start of the new term and a review was currently being undertaken to check the figures. It was possible that the overspend would reduce but each case was assessed on its own merits against eligibility criteria.
- In response to a question from the representative

of Healthwatch about the budgetary implications of the development of Worcestershire Children First (WCF), it was confirmed that the budget for WCF was currently being reviewed. A fuller discussion on this would take place at item 7.

- It was confirmed that the forecast underspends for Education and Skills, and Resources and Recharges were as a result of holding staff vacancies.
- £52k of contract efficiencies relating to the Babcock Prime contract were currently showing as 'red'. It was confirmed that there had been a delay in negotiations and these savings were now on target to be delivered by the end of 2018/19. The Chairman expressed concern about the renegotiation of the contract with Babcock Prime and informed the Panel that schools had expressed concern to her about the value for money of services provided by Babcock.
- It was confirmed that the efficiencies in relation to the adoption service were now virtually delivered.
- Members were reminded that the Dedicated Schools Grant had not previously been part of the Panel's budget discussions. The overspend in relation to High Needs Pupils was of particular concern and Members noted that this was part of a national trend. There was a risk that the overspend would increase before the end of the financial year.
- Members were informed that the DfE was currently carrying out a consultation on the implementation of new arrangements for reporting deficits of the dedicated schools grant. It was agreed that this would be circulated to Members of the Panel. It was confirmed that there was not enough in reserves to cover the potential overspend and this would be discussed at the next meeting of the Schools' Forum to ensure an integrated approach.
- The number of new Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was rising and was particularly high in Worcestershire when compared with national data. The Chairman of the Panel suggested that this could be because, as an underfunded authority, mainstream schools were more reluctant to take pupils with special needs. The reasons behind this trend would be further explored with headteachers at the Schools' Forum. Children's Services was now consulting on guidance on a new graduated approach which set out expectations and what support was available.

- It was confirmed that 'high needs' and 'special needs' referred to the same group of children. The term 'high needs' was used in a financial context.
- The Panel was informed that Worcestershire County Council had seen the 13th largest growth in the country in the number of first time EHCPs. A question was asked about whether the 12 local authorities who had seen a larger growth were also poorly funded authorities in relation to the funding formula. The Head of Financial Management agreed to look into this.
- In response to the Panel's request, the Head of Financial Management agreed that for future budget monitoring reports, she would provide more narrative to accompany the figures, as well as details of both revenue and capital budgets.

The Panel's comments would be summarised and reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board at its December meeting.