

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**18 NOVEMBER 2015**

### **CORPORATE STRATEGY PLANNING AND 2016/17 BUDGET: CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

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#### **Summary**

1. As part of the Council's process for consultation on the 2016/17 budget, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Interim Director of Children's Services have been invited to discuss the budget challenges facing services in 2016/17 and how these are being addressed.

#### **Background**

2. The Council needs to ensure that it can continue to deliver services within a tight financial settlement and find solutions to deliver the necessary savings. The Council continues working to do things differently through the FutureFit programme, with a combination of efficiencies and savings proposals.
3. On 19 November 2015 the Cabinet will be considering the development of the Corporate Plan, FutureFit, and the next Medium Term Financial Plan 2016/17 to 2019/20, alongside savings proposals which have emerged from Corporate Strategy Planning 2015.
4. The report to Cabinet will set out the context for the budget, as well as feedback from local businesses and staff, the Council's Corporate Plan Priorities and a financial summary. The Cabinet report, including the savings proposals, will be available from 10 November 2015 and can be accessed on the Council's website [here](#).

#### **Children and Families**

5. Children's Services have responsibilities to all children in Worcestershire, including making sure all children have access to a place in a good school. We have a particular responsibility towards children who are vulnerable for any reason, to ensure they can make the most of the opportunities they have. Finally we have responsibilities to keep safe the small number of children who are at risk of significant harm, and may need to take some of these children into care.
6. Nine out of 10 schools in Worcestershire are rated as good or outstanding and 97% of children were allocated a place at a school which was one of their preferences. These achievements are impressive, but the Council's contribution is made more difficult as responsibilities and resources are reduced and also in large part transferred to schools (both academies and maintained). For this reason Learning and Achievement services have been externally commissioned and will be

delivered by Babcock International. Through increasing trading directly with schools, and the use of innovative delivery models, the infrastructure supporting school improvement and some pupil support functions could be maintained more efficiently and effectively than if the services remained in-house.

7. Early Help services, which offer targeted support for children, are being delivered in 6 area based contracts. They are being re-commissioned and integrated with the public health nursing responsibilities that are transferring to the Council. Even though savings will have to be made initially, the services need to become more focussed on addressing the symptoms which lead to children becoming in need of statutory interventions, and also to provide more case management capability for families at the edge of that intervention. A central part of this change will be to build on the success of the Connecting Families pilot, and take an holistic view of the needs of our families facing complex problems and having to engage with a large number of public agencies. This includes a focus on the adults in those families, since they are likely to be central to protecting children and also a potential source of risk.

8. The creation of a more effective “Family Front Door” which manages new work into both social care and early help services needs to ensure that all services have the capability to do effective work, enabling children to get the right service as quickly as possible. Social care services should only deal with children who meet the appropriate thresholds. This is because it is not in children’s interests to have cases escalated unnecessarily, as this can actually delay giving them access to the services that they need.

9. While urgent and decisive action needs to be taken to protect children from harm, there is a danger (in any local authority) that children can be further damaged by remaining in local authority care longer than necessary. Children have a right to a family life, and are best prepared for adulthood by experiencing it. Worcestershire can improve its performance in achieving permanency for children more quickly.

10. The Children’s Services workforce is no longer reliant on agency and temporary staff. It is critical that we develop and retain our staff, and this is another area where improvement is possible. Caseloads have fallen steadily over the last 6 months but need to fall further still. The two central issues in staff morale are the quality of front line management and having workloads that enable good quality work to be done.

11. The “back to basics” programme is designed to ensure that there is more consistency in social work practice, particularly in managing workflow, the timeliness and quality of assessments and reviews, having good plans and listening to the voice of the child at every stage.

12. The four main strands of work have been summarised as follows:

- Fixing the front door & ensuring children have their needs met appropriately by all services, not just in social care
- Securing permanency for children in care as quickly as possible
- Developing and retaining the Children’s Services workforce
- Continuous improvement in the consistency of social work practice through the back to basics programme.

13. These strands are mutually reinforcing. Improving outcomes for looked after children will also resolve the main savings issue. The Council has increased the budget for children's placements by £10.4m since 2010/11. As children achieve permanency more quickly, and as admissions to care are avoided, particularly for older children, spending on placements will fall. Even after account is made for continuing or additional spend on services for these children, significant savings will be possible, simply by doing the best thing for children.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

14. Last year's budget scrutiny task group gave a "light touch" consideration to equalities issues raised by savings proposals and suggested that the Diversity Manager should be invited to the Panel to help members consider the Equalities Impact of each Corporate Strategy proposal.

## **Purpose of the meeting**

15. The Panel is asked to consider and agree comments on the savings proposals for Children's Services, which the Chairman will feed back to the Budget Member Challenge Group.

## **Supporting Information**

- Report to Cabinet on 19 November 2015 – available electronically only on the Council's website [here](#)

## **Contact Points**

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## **Background Papers**

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Head of Legal and Democratic Services) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Agenda and Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 7 July 2015
- Agenda and Minutes of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 25 November 2014