

### **Feedback to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board from the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

#### **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel – Children’s Social Care Placements (27 September 2023)**

The Panel recognised the considerable pressures on the budget for Children’s Social Care Placements and welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise this area in greater detail. Members noted the reasons for the forecast overspend including inflationary pressures leading to more expensive placements and a rise in demand which was outstripping capacity. The Panel noted that all Local Authorities nationally were experiencing similar budget pressures and acknowledged the initiatives which are already underway to reduce spend and demand such as focused support for families who were experiencing difficulties, ensuring that only those children who needed to be looked after by the local authority were taken into care and work to prevent placement breakdown and recruit more specialist foster carers.

The Panel was reassured that the focus of Worcestershire Children First’s work remained on the safety and well-being of children and, despite the budget difficulties, there would be no change in this ethos, an approach which was supported by the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Board of WCF.

#### **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel - Home to School Transport (HTST) Budget– (6 December 2023)**

The Panel received details of the significant cost pressures facing the Council on HTST, with a current forecast overspend of £9.5m, which would see a 29% increase in spend from the previous year. The increased demand for the HTST service had seen a 45% increase in mainstream pupils using the service in the past 4 years and a 49% increase in pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in the same period. The scale of this challenge was how to make the service more cost effective, whilst still maintaining an appropriate service for children. It was clarified for Members that HTST spend resulted from duties set out in both statute and policy.

The Panel acknowledged the national context of this issue, with the same predicament being faced by many local authorities across the country. The Panel was keen to learn what measures were being put in place in terms of a long-term, sustainable solution. Members discussed the importance of ensuring that joined up thinking took place from an early stage, so that for instance, when new housing developments were built, the access to primary and secondary schools and safe walking routes, were key considerations. The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport and the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations assured Members that these types of considerations were already in place, but that safe walking routes to schools needed to be developed further. The Director for All Age Disability also confirmed that when an extension of school places was being considered for SEN provision, close liaison with planning colleagues ensured that these matters were taken into account at an early stage in the process.

The Panel was informed that given the demand pressures on the service, the HTST Review would focus on the supply side, including commissioning and contract management arrangements. All aspects of operations were being reviewed, including route optimisation of the fleet, discussions with private operators on viable options, as well as consideration of the Council's in-house fleet and drivers. The importance of a more holistic approach was highlighted, with innovative solutions being required. The Council was currently networking with other authorities, and it was highlighted that there could be opportunities to make savings through, for example, cross border collaboration whereby the scale of operations would be increased across a wider rural area.

It was noted that the budgetary responsibility for this area had been transferred to the Environment and Infrastructure Directorate.