

S39. SOCIAL WORK CHILDREN & FAMILIES BUDGET UPDATE

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services providing information on budget expenditure from 1 April 2015 to 31 December 2015, the main pressure areas, contextual information and actions being taken to manage the budget. Robert Naylor provided an overview of the report.

Members asked for further information on the removal of the departmental admin and capital charge budgets. Robert Naylor stated that the departmental admin budget had been removed due to the implementation of the SSTAR project and that the capital charge budget would be integrated in a Children's Services budget by Finance by 1 April 2016, where this had previously been separate for Education and Social Work. He stated that there were no specific cost savings as a result. Danny Cairney confirmed that both alterations were the result of internal accounting adjustments.

The committee asked if there would be a sustained overspend in relation to external foster care placements. Kathy McCarroll stated that this would be the case and that year on year there had been an overspend in that area. Members asked if the budget figure was therefore unrealistic and could not be met. Danny Cairney stated that the costs which would be incurred were fixed and that realignment could be looked at but as Council resources are finite budgets would need to be moved from elsewhere. He stated that the pressure would still need to be managed by the Service and that budgets should be fit for purpose. He commented that the Service was broadly on budget as Education spending was under budget while Children and Families Social Work was over which nearly balanced out. The committee stated that the budget, if not fit for purpose, should not appear in the same form next year. Danny Cairney stated that as the cost was fixed the budget could be realigned and that in the previous year's budget there had been a £2m provision for spending pressures. The committee asked if this matter could be referred to the Executive. Colin Moodie confirmed that this could be done.

Members asked why there were differences in cost across residential school placements. Robert Naylor stated that the most expensive placements were for secure residential placements which could involve two to three staff members being with a young person at all times. He advised that there was variation in what level of service was provided, where the provision was and the availability of placements. In cases where the Service's preferred provider was full then they must try other providers until one is able to offer a placement for the young person. Kathy McCarroll stated that there are four secure residential placement providers in Scotland and that £3,050 was the approximate average cost per week per placement. Robert Naylor stated that at the point of placement the issue was outwith the Service's control but that work was being done to prevent young people being put into residential placements and to decrease the number of young people appearing before Children's Panels. He commented that placements were usually not long term and that there were subsequent hearings and case conferences to identify if alternative provision would best meet a young person's needs.

The committee asked how the current level of Council foster carers compared to that previously. Kathy McCarroll stated that the number had been increased but not by as much as the Service would like. She stated that a number of Council foster carers had many years service and as new carers were recruited others were lost through retirement. The Council did not enforce a retirement age for its foster carers. It was stated that in the next 12 months it was likely that one or two foster carers would stop being carers. With this in mind the Service would run a recruitment campaign in March.

The committee discussed the importance of reducing addiction as it affected so many budgets. Members commented that the national budget to Drug and Alcohol Partnerships had been reduced. Fiona Campbell stated that the Community Planning Partnership had set out four priority areas and that one was substance misuse. There would be a workshop on each priority area to identify what the issues were locally and how these could be addressed. The substance abuse workshop was to be held later in the month and would have input from the Scottish Government.

Members requested an update report later in the year.

Decision

The committee agreed to draw the information in paragraph 2.7 of the report to the attention of the Executive and to recommend that action is taken to set a realistic budget for external fostering.