

S25. SOCIAL WORK CHILDREN & FAMILIES BUDGET POSITION

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services providing information on the budget overspend in social work children and families service during the financial year 2014/15. The report also provided contextual information and information on actions to monitor and manage expenditure. Kathy McCarroll provided an overview of the report.

The committee discussed the pressures associated with placements for looked after children away from home noting that Falkirk had a higher percentage away from home than at home. Kathy McCarroll stated that the service was investigating the trend in this area, particular in relation to the higher number of children looked after away from home. There was some evidence to show that the increase in the number of younger children becoming accommodated and the consequential increase in the number of permanence orders was linked to increases in drug and alcohol abuse. In relation to Children's Hearings decisions she advised that the service did not track the recommendation of the social worker compared to the final decision by Children's Hearings. However, this information would be available in the near future. Robert Naylor stated that the Reporter was being invited to visit the services available in the area to ensure that decisions were being taken in that light. Kathy McCarroll advised that since January there had been two cases considered by the Sherriff Court which had resulted in decisions for secure accommodation which the Council was liable to implement and fund.

Members asked about the progress of the former Focus School in Laurieston. Robert Naylor stated that it was hoped that more children who were currently looked after away from home would be able to return home as their education needs would be catered for in the area. There was also work ongoing to upskill staff at the Mariner Support Service to cater for those children and young people currently in residential care.

The committee sought information on how significant the increase of drug and alcohol abuse had been compared to previous years. Kathy McCarroll stated that the number of children on the Child Protection Register had increased over the last two years mainly as a result of the increase in substance abuse in this area.

Members discussed the rates paid to foster carers compared to those available in the private sector. Kathy McCarroll advised that fees were paid to foster carers and that in addition to this there was an age related payment per child. Some external agencies pay one flat rate and others do not provide information on the breakdown of their payments. The service continually tried to recruit new foster carers and she advised that the feedback received was that the fees and allowances paid were satisfactory. There was evidence that the Council was losing foster carers to external agencies. In response to a question on having had foster carers switch from external agencies to the Council, Kathy McCarroll stated that she was not aware of a significant movement in this direction and that the level of pay was likely a barrier to those already associated with external agencies.

The committee asked about the approach taken to sibling groups in care and if they were ever split up. Kathy McCarroll stated that the service tried to keep siblings together when first accommodated but that beyond this it was determined by individual need. Recent legislation limited foster carers to three children per household. Where adoption for siblings was considered a together or apart assessment was carried out. She advised that there had been an increase in the number of sibling groups who needed to be accommodated.

Members highlighted that priority needed to be given to collaborative early intervention work on drug and alcohol abuse. Fiona Campbell stated that the Drug and Alcohol Partnership had commissioned work to identify what the key issues are. The clinical advice was that rehabilitation facilities were not good for long term outcomes. The outcome of this work would be available to the Community Planning Partnership in December.

The committee asked for further information on the process of engaging external foster care agencies. Kathy McCarroll stated that there was a public social partnership approach to external agencies adopted in 2012. She advised that the Scottish Government had a national contract on foster care and residential school care which the service was looking at in considering whether to renew the local contract or not.

The committee requested a report once work had been progressed to address the overspend and that a further budget position update was provided.

Decision

The committee agreed to request an update report on the implementation of actions identified in the report, to provide updated information on the budget situation and categorisation of reasons for children becoming accommodated to a future meeting.