

S15. Children's Services – Performance Report as at 31 March 2019

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services setting out a summary of performance for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

The Director of Children's Services provided an overview of the report.

The report provided information on:-

- significant challenges, risks and changes in service pressures since the last update;
- relevant performance reports, audits and inspections
- progress towards achieving the priorities, outcomes and targets contained within:-
 - the Corporate Plan
 - Children's Services Service Plan; and
 - Council of the Future Projects
- Local Government Benchmarking Framework Indicators

The report set out an update on the following workstreams;

- Family Support Services
- Foster Care recruitment
- Supported accommodation
- Procuring for the future
- Family First approach
- Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE)
- Best Practice in Child Protection Systems

An update on the following links to National Strategies was provided:-

- National Improvement Framework
- Scottish Attainment Challenge/ Pupil Equity Fund (PEF)

Additionally the Scrutiny Committee had asked, in December 2018 (ref S24) for information on the arrangements for engaging with staff groups and pupils in general and in particular in regard to the Regional Improvement Collaborative. The information was set out at paragraph 4.1 of the report.

The committee commended the Closer to Home Strategy noting the Council's spend on residential care and the intent to provide locally based care. Cathy Megarry in response to comments in regard in particular to proposals by the IJB to utilise Bield Care Home in Bonnybridge gave a detailed summation of the Closer to Home Strategy. The current position whereby the Council procured expensive out of area care was not sustainable. She concurred with members' comments that historically the Council did not have the appropriate capacity and gave a detailed overview of projects to grow our own provision. The aim was for children to be supported where they need to be, closer to or at home. There was a need to be sensitive to legacy placements and not to disrupt those already in care placements, hence the need for a 5 year strategy. In regard to foster care the Council was aiming to 'grow our own' rather than use more expensive agency Foster carers. Renewed marketing had seen double the number of enquiries but this had yet to translate into increased number of carers. There was strong competition from private contractors. Ms Megarry confirmed that the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan anticipated significant savings from the Closer to Home Strategy.

The committee discussed the progress of PAR.06.13 – CS17 – 'work with and support management committees and local groups to take over the running of their community halls' - and sought detail on the support offered to the community to take over local assets. Gary Greenhorn confirmed that the Education, Children and Young People Executive had, on 4 June 2019, agreed to lease 5 community halls. He explained that support continued post transfer. There was a dedicated CLD resource to support the community – in particular in regard to achieving charitable status and attracting external funding. Additionally he set out the intention to integrate the school estate into a community model. It was proposed that there would be an interface with Falkirk Community Trust to better utilise schools out with teaching hours. He recognized that not all schools could be used in this way but work was underway to develop proposals for the PPP schools, whose contracts would end in 2025.

He recognized, in response to a question, that there was overlap in the facilities available in community halls, schools and sports centres but stated that each catered to different markets. For example community halls would not be suitable for badminton which required a higher ceiling. There was a need, he stated, to better market the facilities – not all assets were suitable for all groups. There had been an excess of 12,000 lets in the last year. The Council had to recognize where its strengths were and not compete, for example, with high end leisure markets such as gyms.

The committee discussed secondary school attendance rates. In 2015/16 attendance had been 91.4% and had been 90.7% in 2017/18. Members highlighted the link between attendance and attainment but also the need for parents to ensure that children were kept from school when suffering from

contagious illnesses – for example the norovirus. In such cases the need to stay off conflicted with the drive of schools to praise high attendance. Robert Naylor stressed that in the case of illness the health of pupils should always come first. In regard to the attendance indicator Mr Naylor stated that attendance was monitored for each child and low attendance was monitored closely at school level. It was important to understand if low attendance was an indicator of domestic or personal issues or whether the pupil simply was not going to school. The causes of absence were clearly monitored. Overall an average attendance of 90% meant that 10% of pupils were only at school 9 days in a fortnight and this was not acceptable. He again stated that in the case of illness the pupil's health should come first. Following a question Mr Naylor outlined an initiative to promote psychical and mental health amongst pupils. There were a number of initiatives in place, funded by Pupil Equity Fund monies, around mental wellbeing. The Scottish Government had provided £15m for bespoke counselling services for schools with the aim of 1 counsellor in every school. There was a need to understand the difference between mental health issues and other issues such as stress and anxiety. Often these were conflated. It was a complex issue. The Service was in discussion with head teachers in regard to recognising signs and intervening early before mental health issues manifest themselves, or to deal with life events which lead to stress.

Members then considered performance in regard to numeracy and literacy and sought information on engagement with parents of pupils whose performance was below expectations. The Director explained that Early Learning provided greater engagement opportunities with parents, including home visits before pupils start at school. The introduction of the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) had shown that significant intervention could take place at early stages. Where appropriate the Service was able to buy in additional targeted support. The performance was good and improving. PEF was aimed at closing the attainment gap and evidence showed that the gap was closing. Evidence showed that if by P1 pupils had not reached the required levels the chance of reaching it by P4 decreased so it was vital to target intervention at the Early Years stage. Members concurred and praised a briefing by the Service to elected members on Early Years.

Following a question, Robert Naylor explained the term 'positive destinations' in regard to school leavers. This, he explained, had been called NEET – Not in Employment, Education or Training. The term had had negative connotations and carried a stigma. It had been changed to cover Further and Higher Education, employment, training or activity placements. The aspiration was that all school leavers would reach one of the positive destinations. The figure was around 95%. He explained that the aspiration showed the journey taken by Education Authorities over the years. Previously there had been little focus on what happened after pupils left school. Now, from S2, schools talk to pupils about where their journey will take them. He summarised work, for example, with Forth Valley College to develop a younger workforce with courses aimed at the needs of the workplace. Previously a proportion of the 16-24 population left school and become unemployed. This was less likely to happen now. Following a question Mr Naylor described an activity placement at Larbert High which had recently won an award. Members followed up on this explanation by

asking whether the Service worked with employers, such as the NHS, to maximise opportunities for school leavers. Mr Naylor explained that the Service worked with Skills Development Scotland, formerly the Careers Service, to develop a programme of work experience. The Service also had links with Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to link with a variety of different companies and organised 'job fairs' for pupils and companies. The area had a higher proportion of pupils who go on to employment, with a slightly lower proportion going to University. This possibly reflected the area's cultural links with industry. However this was changing and the Service was looking at future employment opportunities in STEM, the NHS and teaching. The aim was to provide a wide range of options and to equip pupils with a wide range of transferrable and adaptable skills. By planning their journey and having the range of opportunity, pupils were far less likely to leave school with no idea about what they wanted to do. In their lifetime pupils may have 7 or 8 jobs. The idea of a job for life was outdated. Additionally there was, as shown in the United States, an increasing number of self employed workers. Pupils therefore needed people and communication skills in addition to transferable and adaptable skills. Mr Naylor also anticipated an increase in jobs centred around creativity and 'thinking' with traditional 'factory' jobs undertaken by machines. Members then asked whether, given this, primary school teachers identified pupil's skills and advised their secondary schools before transition to secondary school. Mr Naylor confirmed that at transition to secondary school a 'pastoral' file was created for each and every child which included their strengths (e.g. of more likely to tend to science or the Arts etc) work was carried out in the primary sector to expose pupils to opportunities, for example through tasks from large companies. The aim was to expose pupils at an early stage to a range of activities and jobs.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee approved the report and acknowledged progress by the Service in meeting the Council's priorities.