

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 25 January 2021

The committee made no formal recommendations, but asked questions and put comments in relation to:

- The proposals on Children's Centres – noting that Children's Centres are key in areas of the borough where demand on services is greatest, and to support service delivery in more rural areas – and would want to understand more how a proposed income of £10k from the hire of Children's Centres could be met, particularly in the current situation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 'Prevention and Early Help Service – Reduction of frontline workers in Prevention' and considerable concern that this does not marry up with the recent 30% rise in referrals to Children's Services. Members raised further concern that this savings proposal more than doubled in the following year 2022/23 and what overall impact will be of this £953k saving.

In response, it was noted that considerable work had been undertaken to review where within the Children's Services directorate the most effective, appropriate savings could be made, and that any saving brings a risk.

- 'Prevention and Early Help Service – Locality working and changes to the management structure of the Family Service' and the fact that when the council has Children's Services that per Ofsted, 'Requires Improvement', will using greater numbers of volunteers to address this help the service to improve as it needs to.
- 'Fund the Cygnet programme for cared for children from pupil premium' and what impact this would have on the council's overall Dedicated Schools Grant for its schools.

Officers informed members that it had no impact on the Dedicated Schools Grant.

- 'Reduced capacity in Family Information Service' and concern that those households without access to broadband or other IT equipment, would not be adequately communicated with by the council following reductions to the Family Information Service.
- 'Review of the use of the Cheshire East Lifelong Learning Service' and what the exact underspend within the service had been during 2020/21, and concern that one of the council's high performing services will be impacted by less funding and resources.

Officers responded to members' queries and advised that there was no impact on the service as the savings were linked to the underspend.

- 'Reduction in cost of external placements for cared for children' and concern that the high sums proposed to be saved over the coming three financial years through 2023/24 are an unrealistic target, as the council has not been able to achieve such savings in these areas in previous years.

Members noted that within the Pre-Budget Consultation documents, the total savings regarding children's safeguarding totalled nearly £1.5 million, which was of concern particularly in light of the known increase in safeguarding issues, mental health and domestic abuse associated with the restrictions and lockdowns put in place since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The committee raised concern that reductions to these services would disadvantage the council's long-term response to the wider mental health and wellbeing impacts on children and young people from the pandemic.