

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 21 November 2018 at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

**PRESENT:**

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Brian Robinson (Chairman)
Dr Richard Castle	Cllr Jack Williams
Cllr Chris Coleman	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Suzanne Williams
Cllr Shaun Parsons	

The following were also present:

Officers in attendance: Rob England - Prospects  
Suzanne Hall - Finance Business Partner  
Chris Spencer – Director of Children’s Services

Apologies: Cllr Dr Andrew Miller, Cllr Loraine Vivienne Patrick and Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People

## **39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllr Brian Robinson declared a personal interest as a Foster Carer.

Cllr Shaun Parsons declared a personal interest as a trustee of the National Star College.

## **40. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

40.1 The minutes of the meeting on the Thursday 13 September 2018 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

## **41. OFSTED IMPROVEMENT LETTER**

41.1 The Director of Children’s Services (DCS) informed the committee that he felt that this letter presented a balanced view of the council’s progress to date. Overall he felt that the direction of travel was positive. There were still significant issues but these were being addressed.

41.2 The DCS, and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, particularly welcomed that the letter stated that staff morale was good with social workers talking positively about the support that they had received to assist them in developing their practice. He stated that it was good to see this as members would recall that following the original inspection staff morale had dipped and it has taken time to rebuild.

- 41.3 The DCS informed committee members that the comments relating to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) have already been actioned. Members reiterated their wish to visit the MASH and it was agreed that visits would be arranged as soon as possible, preferably before the next committee meeting in January 2019.
- 41.4 In response to questions the DCS informed the committee that the level of churn in the social worker workforce was a serious issue. The council was very reliant on agency workers to maintain the system (currently about 40% of the workforce was agency staff). Until the workforce became more stable it was difficult for there to be consistency in practice. The DCS outlined the work being taken to address this area and committee members welcomed his approach. It was disappointing that having invested in the ASYE social workers (Assisted and Supported Year in Employment) that many of them were not choosing to remain with the council. A particular concern was the impact on development. The DCS informed members that he did not believe that the level of pay was a factor in retention of social workers. Exit interviews indicated that it was more to do with whether management had sufficient oversight and grip on cases, whether there was consistency. Newly qualified social workers benefitted from having access to more experienced colleagues to 'bounce' ideas off and if they felt that there was a lack of quality of supervision this would not encourage them to remain in post.
- 41.5 As previously discussed at committee meetings current market forces favoured the experienced social worker not the local authority. The DCS informed the committee that resources were not an issue in Gloucestershire.
- 41.6 In response to questions the committee was assured that agency staff were robustly managed and if not at the required standard their contract would be addressed appropriately. It was also explained that previously only short term contracts (3 months) had been offered to agency staff; this approach did not support stability in the workforce and this had been changed and longer term contracts were now negotiated. The DCS was however clear that in the longer term it would be important to reduce the reliance on agency staff. It was unlikely in the current market that the council would be able to achieve zero agency staff but it should aim to reduce the number to 10% of the social worker workforce.
- 41.7 A member expressed the view that the news release following the publication of the Ofsted Improvement Letter had not represented the reality but had 'spun' the detail. The Cabinet Member expressed the view that it was important to acknowledge to staff that the situation was improving and that the news release had stated that the council was not complacent.
- 41.8 With regard to how committee members can better scrutinise the system the DCS agreed to put in place a programme of visits to teams that reflected the journey of the child through the system. This would support member's broader understanding and also help members to identify areas/issues that the committee should look at in more detail. This would also add a qualitative dimension to the quantitative information that the committee receives through the reports received at committee meetings. It was suggested that the committee might wish to invite ASYE social workers to present to the committee.  
**ACTION: Chris Spencer/Andrea Clarke**
- 41.9 The next Ofsted monitoring visit would likely be on 15 and 16 January 2019. The DCS anticipated that the next full inspection would be Summer/Autumn 2019.

## **42. IMPROVEMENT PARTNER - QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT**

- 42.1 The committee noted that the issues highlighted in this report had also been reflected in the Ofsted monitoring visit letter; it was agreed that it was good to see this triangulation. The DCS informed the committee that he welcomed the challenge from Essex on practice particularly whether the council intervened in cases too readily - were we being overly intrusive in family life, were our thresholds being applied appropriately? He stated that given our current situation the level of intervention was understandable and reflected the pattern in other local authorities in the same position. It was also important to bear in mind that partners might also not feel fully confident in our process at present. The DCS also informed the committee that he thought that our Improvement Partner was in essence telling us that we needed to get back to 'good old fashioned social work'.
- 42.2 The committee was informed that the focus at present was on compliance in basic social work practice rather than just quality. Processes had not been being undertaken in a timely manner and so close monitoring was essential. In the current position it was necessary to be prescriptive and social workers would need to discuss decision points with team managers; autonomy in practice had to be earned.
- 42.3 Case loads had improved but a challenge from Essex was whether they were disproportionate across the system. The DCS accepted this challenge indicating that he acknowledged that the balance was not always right, but reiterated that resources were not an issue.
- 42.4 It was questioned whether front line social workers would benefit from training in restorative practice; would this help them in challenging circumstances. Members were informed that practitioners were in the process of receiving training in this approach. It was one of the 'tools in the box'.
- 42.5 It was questioned that as well as the Improvement Partner did the council link in with local authorities in the same position as Gloucestershire? It was explained that we did not partner with similar authorities. However there was the South West Partnership, and officers did work across authorities at a personal level (through professional bodies).
- 42.6 It was questioned how social workers could maintain their objectivity and detachment. It was explained that this was part of basic training. Also, social workers would not be allocated to families known to them, and issues such as these should be covered during supervisory sessions. The DCS thought that there were secure mechanisms in place.  
It was noted that the next QPRM will be in six months.

## **43. IMPROVEMENT BOARD UPDATE**

- 43.1 The DCS informed the committee that the main point of discussion at the Improvement Board meeting in September 2018 was the stability of the workforce. He outlined the planned recruitment activity which included the planned cohorts of social workers from India, a fast track course for graduates, family support workers being trained as social workers through the Open University, the social work academy and recruiting additional ASYEs.

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- 43.2 The committee was concerned with regard to some of the feedback from the Bright Spot programme, in particular that some children do not know why they are in care. The DCS assured the committee that all the points raised through this programme were being responded to. He acknowledged that the conversation with a child as to why they were in care was a fundamental part of social work, and that all children should understand their circumstances.
- 43.3 The committee agreed that it would be helpful to invite the (new) Chair of the Improvement Board to a committee meeting in 2019 to discuss the improvement journey directly with him.  
**ACTION: Chris Spencer/Andrea Clarke**

#### **44. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK: PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT**

- 44.1 The Ofsted Monitoring letter had noted improvement in the auditing of cases and that actions are increasingly focused on improving children's circumstances. However the committee was aware that the letter did also identify concerns relating to actions not being sufficiently progressed and children and their families and social workers and managers not being routinely involved in the audit process.
- 44.2 The committee noted that Ofsted had indicated that these factors could limit the opportunities for practitioners to learn from experiences with children and their families. This concern was reiterated by the Head of Quality Children and Families in that he did not want practitioners to see this as just a compliance activity.
- 44.3 The Head of Quality Children and Families informed the committee that the data showed that 20% of cases audited were rated as inadequate. There was also a shortfall in the number of moderators and external capacity was being brought in until we had 'grown our own'. Members agreed that it was important that people did not become complacent about this activity.
- 44.4 The Ofsted improvement letter had also commented on the lack of evidence of audits making a positive difference to the child/young person. The Head of Quality informed the committee that it was difficult to evidence the impact on the child but that a mechanism was being developed to try to address this gap in process.
- 44.5 The committee agreed that it would be important to continue to closely monitor this work.

#### **45. PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

- 45.1 The DCS informed the committee that the Ofsted letter and this report indicated that the performance data set was emerging and that there was some improvement in performance against targets, for example, the timeliness of decision making at the front door. Repeat work was still too high, much of this was a legacy issue. It was important to get to the position where we got it right first time.
- 45.2 Committee members were aware that delays in process could be as a result of the social worker not recording information in a timely way. The DCS informed the committee that all social workers now have access to ICT kit which should support them in this process. However training on how to get the most out of the kit and

make it work for them was a significant factor, and would need to be addressed going forward.

- 45.3 Concerns were again raised with regard to youth justice in that children and young people might be being inappropriately held in police cells overnight. The DCS informed the committee that in response to the concerns raised at the previous meeting he had commissioned the Director of Partnerships and Strategy to undertake a review of this matter. It was agreed that a briefing be prepared on this matter.

**ACTION: Chris Spencer/Andy Dempsey**

- 45.4 The DCS reiterated that he did not think that resources were an issue in Gloucestershire. Funding benchmarked well against comparator authorities. The DCS informed members that he has commissioned external consultants to look at the effective use of resources and this report should be with him by Christmas. As previously discussed the issue was stability in the workforce.

- 45.5 External placements remained a concern. The committee was pleased to note that the DCS continued to review each case to ensure that the provision met the individual's need. Many of these placements were made in emergency circumstances which indicated that the case might not have been considered appropriately in the first instance; practice needed to improve.

- 45.6 In response to questions it was explained that there would always be a need for out of county placements, eg. where children and young people were at risk from gangs and child sexual exploitation. It was also explained that the county continued to be a net importer of children from other local authority areas but that these were in the main placed with independent advisors.

## **46. REVENUE MONITORING**

- 46.1 The Finance Business Partner informed the committee that the report highlighted the position as at September 2018. The current position for non-DSG funded services was an overspend position of £6.4 million (6.04% of budget). The underlying over-spend was £9 million, £6.23 million being external placement costs, which reduced to £6.4 million when offset by £2.6 million of Business Rates Retention pilot income. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funded services were forecast to be over-spent by £3.24 million in-year and this exceeded uncommitted balances resulting in an over-spend of £0.84 million.

- 46.2 The Gloucestershire Schools Forum had discussed the DSG position at its meeting on 15 November 2018 and approved a number of actions, although these did not cover the overall deficit.

- 46.3 The committee agreed that the amount of money spent on external placements could be seen as inappropriate by the general public. It was important to understand that these were complex cases involving our most vulnerable children and young people who could be at risk of child sexual exploitation and from gangs. The committee applauded the work that the DCS was leading on to review each case and agreed that it would be helpful for a briefing paper to explain the context and issues involved.

**ACTION: Chris Spencer**

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- 46.4 The committee was also concerned with regard to access to Children and Young People (Mental Health) Services (CYPS). The DCS agreed that the delay in access to services could have a significant impact on the individual, and that it was not appropriate to be in a position where a young person needed to harm themselves in order to access the help they needed. He was aware that the government had made additional funding available (£20m) that Clinical Commissioning Groups could bid for. He would ask the Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group why it had not put in a bid to this funding.

**ACTION: Chris Spencer**

**CHAIRMAN**

Meeting concluded at 12.45 pm