

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Report Title	Progress report on the work of the Gloucestershire Improvement Board.
Purpose of Report	To brief the Committee on the work of the Board over the last six months, to highlight progress and areas where further work is required.
Is this for information or decision?	For information.
Author	Andrew Ireland - Independent Chair of the Improvement Board
Key Issues:	
To report on the progress in the work of the Board, the role of the Chair and the cross-partnership aspects of the work. In addition to reflect upon developments within the service, performance improvements and to highlight the critical areas where progress is needed in order to secure the sustainable improvements sought.	
Recommendations to the Committee:	
To note the report.	
Financial/Resource Implications:	
There are no new financial implications directly contained within the report.	

1. Introduction

1.1. This is the first report submitted to the Committee in my capacity as Independent Chair of the Gloucestershire Children's Services Improvement Board. The report attempts to summarise the work to date and set out some of the themes for the future.

1.2. The appointment as Independent Chair was made with effect from July 2018. This followed a period post the 2017 Ofsted report when the Council was required to set up an Improvement Board which was then chaired by a Department for Education nominee. Having reached the point where the Council were no longer required by the DfE to continue with the Board, it took the decision to retain the Improvement Board model with an independent chair of its own appointment. I was approached and agreed to undertake the role.

1.3. The role of the Chair as agreed with the Council can be summarised as follows:

- To agree agendas, reports, minutes for the Board meetings and chair the meeting itself. The Board formally meets once every two months.
- To ensure that the Board effectively monitors progress against the Improvement Plan.
- To meet regularly with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, the Director of Children's Services and other senior management staff.
- To work with all Board members to ensure the effective functioning of the Board, to address any issues within the partnership including assisting in ensuring that services for vulnerable children are given the necessary degree of priority across the key agencies in Gloucestershire.
- To visit teams and staff on the ground and formulate my own assessment of the degree to which the improvements are becoming embedded in daily practice.
- To share with the Council the experience gained in previous local authorities of leading the process of moving from and "inadequate" Ofsted judgement to one of "Good."
- To challenge the Council and others over areas where insufficient progress may be being made or over specific aspects of performance. The Leader, Cabinet member and CEO have been clear of the need for the role to incorporate the giving of uncomfortable messages and feedback where required.

1.4. As Chair I bring a body of experience having been Director for close on thirteen years in three different local authorities. The most recent of these was in Kent County Council where I was Corporate Director and statutory Director of Children's Services for six years. I joined the Council a few months following it having received an "Inadequate" Ofsted judgement. Kent was further inspected in 2017 and received an overall judgement of "Good." I retired from the Council at the end of 2017 and have subsequently undertaken work as an independent consultant. I therefore, am able to offer to Gloucestershire experience of having led a large county authority out of intervention and into a positive position, including having worked with an Improvement Board as part of that process.

1.5. This report will endeavour to brief the Committee on the work of the Improvement Board over the last six months and on the specific activity undertaken by myself as Chair. It will also provide some analysis of the key issues within the improvement process which have been the subject of discussion between myself and the Council, including reflections based upon direct experience of the process in Kent. The report will also offer some independent reflections upon the meetings I have undertaken with staff directly. It will then seek to outline the priorities for the Board over the next period.

2. Activity to date

2.1. In the six months since the current arrangement began the activity can be summarised as follows:

- Three Board meetings have taken place
- Monthly meetings with the Cabinet Member and the Director
- 1:1 meetings with the main Board members, including elected members across all parties
- Extensive discussions about the performance monitoring data available to the Board and the Quality Assurance systems
- Attendance at the whole system meeting convened by Essex County Council as part of their Performance Improvement Partnership with the Council
- Visit to the MASH
- Observation visit and meetings with staff at the Forest of Dean and Cheltenham offices plus the IRIS team
- Meeting with Prospects.

2.2. In addition to the practicalities of the administration of the Board and its smooth running, the value of this activity has been to:

- Ensure that, as Chair, I have been able to get up to speed rapidly.
- Develop coherent agendas and increasingly focus the work of the Board on the agreed key issues.
- Further develop the process of providing assurance to the various stakeholders of continued improvement in the performance of the service.
- Provide a further level of challenge to senior managers and members, including support as appropriate for specific strategies and approaches where they are appearing to have positive impact and being able to reflect the Kent experience on to these developments.
- The staff meetings provide an opportunity to test how well embedded a number of the practice initiatives really are and also opportunity to test morale amongst operational teams and their support for the initiatives being taken by senior leaders, particularly in relation to issues such as recruitment and retention, training and development, management and supervision.
- It has provided an opportunity to gain real insights into the position and priorities of other agencies in their support of the process.

2.3. The response of all involved and the willingness of staff to discuss their work in an open manner has been impressive and encouraging as well as of enormous help from the Chair's point of view.

3. Key Issues

3.1. Fundamentally, one of the key purposes of the role and the activity described above is to formulate some judgements upon the progress being made within the Improvement Plans and how those plans may be able to be accelerated. The report will here attempt to highlight some of the key points involved.

3.2. The first point to be made is that there is now a discernible performance improvement trajectory within the service. To be in a position to be clear about that has been a relatively recent development, supported by the findings of recent Ofsted visits. As is always the case, there is a degree of fragility about it but there are grounds for optimism that the position will continue to improve.

3.3. The above can not be unrelated to the fact that there is now a full, permanent senior leadership team in post. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this going forward.

3.4. There have been concerns expressed at the Board meetings about the results of case audit as reported to the Board. However, the last meeting received a report which demonstrated a clear improvement. The Board will be very much looking for that to be maintained. My discussions with front line staff about case audits have been very encouraging in terms of the value they place upon them and the recognition of their role in bringing about practice improvement.

3.5. Initial indications from the strengthening of the MASH are encouraging. My visit was within the first few weeks of the new arrangements but there was an evident strong sense of purpose and organisation. In addition, the enhancement of the partnership presence within the MASH can be expected to deliver the obvious benefits which should lead to a strengthening of decision making and strategy discussions. It was too soon at that point to see any change in referral patterns but the Council should continue to look for this.

3.6. The partnership working within the Board appears to have strengthened over this period. There have been some robust discussions which have led to very helpful clarification of some operational arrangements. NHS engagement has been strengthened with the CEO of the Hospital Trust now a regular attendee and Police engagement remains strong even if attendance is not at the most senior level. There is every evidence of a strong collective sense of purpose. This has been enhanced by presentations which the Board have received in recent meetings from young people who use services and from newly qualified social work staff. Both were a sharing of experiences both good and less so, but provided powerful and immensely valuable insights which will stand the work of the Board in the future in enormous good stead. Both also had a powerful impact in enhancing a shared understanding and harnessing a collective determination to see the improvement journey through.

- 3.7. This report referred earlier to the Board being increasingly able to focus upon a smaller number of issues where either the greatest level of improvement is still to be made, or, more significantly, where concerted action can make the greatest degree of difference. Without question the most significant of these are the issues of recruitment and retention across the piece, and / specifically on first line management and the need to achieve greater stability in that cohort of managers and supervisors. This will entail achieving a higher proportion of permanent managers who will have some commitment to Gloucestershire, appointing individuals of quality and potential and ensuring that there is a robust development programme and performance monitoring programme in which they participate.
- 3.8. Many of the building blocks are in place to achieve this and at its last meeting the Board was briefed on some recent successes in recruiting Team managers on permanent contracts. In fact, I have met some recent arrivals on my visits and was impressed with their quality. I must also say, in the interests of balance that I have met some interim team managers who have been with the Council for a significant period of time and who are leading their staff with great skill and commitment. This priority is not driven by a perception of permanent staff being good and interim being poor, the evidence across the country does not support that. What it is driven by is the need for greater stability and continuity of leadership at that level as a mean of providing social workers, many of whom will be newly or recently qualified, with effective supervision, a safe environment in which to practice and to develop their skills, which in turn creates an environment in which more good social workers will be attracted to come to Gloucestershire and to build their careers here.
- 3.9. Reflecting upon the Kent experience, it is not of great surprise that Gloucestershire has a relatively high number of interim and agency staff at this time, this not unknown at this stage of the process. What is less normal is the degree of churn experienced within the workforce. There is clearly a very competitive market in this part of England, with Councils trying to outbid each other on pay. Clearly this has proved a reason for some staff to move from Authority to Authority. Whilst Gloucestershire's offer is competitive, there remains work to be done to ensure that the experience is consistently of high quality which will encourage people to stay even if salaries are higher elsewhere. Too many social workers in Gloucestershire have experienced inconsistent team management and supervision. The Board is focused on seeing this proportion reduce, seeing this as one of the key planks of sustained improvement.

4. Reflections from visits to operational teams

- 4.1. The report has listed previously the settings where visits have taken place and meetings held with front line staff and managers and where practice has been observed. These have been invaluable in order to carry out the role in full and will continue to form a key part of the work plan.

- 4.2. The first observation to be made is that I have met some high calibre, dedicated people undertaking difficult work in challenging circumstances with determination and resolution. These would be staff that any local authority would be pleased to have in its ranks. It is vital that the Council is able to hold on to significant numbers of such people who represent the building blocks for the future and reason for optimism that the Council can achieve its objective of providing good services for children and young people. Clearly where there may be concerns these will be reflected back to senior managers.
- 4.3. In general terms my observation would be that morale amongst staff is good and to have improved. Staff are reflecting an awareness of, and belief in the direction in which the service is seeking to move. I am not hearing comments about lack of resources to do the work or of unreasonable workloads. There is support for the need to identify a clear model of practice. Many staff coming into the Authority have seen this functioning in their previous Councils and emphasise its value. The senior leadership team with the support of the Improvement Board are working hard on this and I am confident will have the support of the majority of staff in so doing.
- 4.4. The area of greatest concern from these visits goes back to the points made in para. 3.7. There is a clear distinction, from those teams visited, between staff who are, or have recently experienced continuity and quality in supervision and management and those who have not. This is affecting some staff in terms of their perception of the Council and of whether Gloucestershire is a place where one can build a successful career and is a place in which one can practice securely. Some conversations have provided the perfect illustration of the issues set out in 3.7 and the need for the Board to make this a priority.

5. Analysis and concluding remarks

- 5.1. From the perspective of the Chair the last six months has seen the Improvement Board take forward a number of key issues with robust debate along the way, increasingly focus on key issues in a climate where constructive challenge is increasingly the norm. As previously stated its work has been enormously challenged and enhanced by presentations of young people who have received or are receiving services and their experience. Equally the presentation from newly qualified social workers and their experiences in Gloucestershire which was heard at the last meeting considerably broadened the knowledge and understanding of the members of the Board. These in addition to the increasing clarity of performance reports and quality assurance reports, allied to the findings of the regular visits from Ofsted, are providing a clear agenda for the work going forward and will enable the Board to add further value over the next phase of improvement.
- 5.2. In addition to the above, a continued programme of contact with front line staff will enable further reflection by the Board on the experiences across the county, to be further reinforced by continuing contact with young people. The composition of the Board facilitates this and will be used. The forward agendas will reflect this and will continue to focus on performance, recruitment and

retention, management, the model of practice and evidence of outcomes for young people and their families. The work of the Board will need to continue to develop the partnership and that will continue to require some direct input from the Chair.

- 5.3. The Council has been clear that it is seeking improvement in order to ensure that services for children and young people are consistently good and not simply to improve its rating with Ofsted, although one would clearly expect one to lead to the other. In order to achieve this it will be necessary for the Board to broaden its sphere of activity beyond the narrowest confines for social care for children, potentially into such spheres as prevention and early help, non-familial abuse and exploitation in order to achieve a more rounded perspective set of outcomes.
- 5.4. Equally, in discussions about the role of the Chair, the Council at the most senior level was clear that it wanted to hear reflections and concerns no matter how difficult they may. Absolute determination to deliver major improvements was expressed. Experience to date has been that the Council has been true to its word and has not been resistant to uncomfortable messages or to a full debate taking place within the Board.
- 5.5. It is right that this initial report should end with a reflection of some optimism that sustainable improvement will be achieved. It has referred to an improvement trajectory now being clearer, to the building blocks very much being in place and to positivity amongst staff. All of these factors give cause for optimism but there remains a great deal to yet be done and achieving greater stability in the workforce remains the single greatest challenge which could undermine that trajectory.
- 5.6. The Committee is invited to note the report and comment on its contents.