

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 months, to highlight progress and areas where further work is required.
Is this for information or decision?	For information.
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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 report for the Council's Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 10 October 2019 is substantially based upon the report to the Improvement Board meeting of 24 September 2019.
- 1.2. It has been slightly amended to reflect further information which was shared with the Improvement Board at its meeting and also reflects a meeting with the Department of Education which took place two days later.
- 1.3. I apologise for the fact that I am unable to attend the meeting in order to present my report to the Committee in person.
- 1.4. It will detail my activity as Chair and my commentary upon the progress being made in the Improvement journey. It will also be strongly influenced by the fact that the system has now received what is anticipated to be its final Ofsted monitoring visit. At the time of writing the letter from that visit has not been published but I have received some feedback from the Director of Children's Services of the verbal comments made by inspectors. The letter may be available by the time of the meeting.
- 1.5. The key issue which the Committee has to address from this point is that of anticipation of the full inspection to come. It needs to consider not only what further work or initiatives does the Council need to take to achieve a positive outcome, but equally what actions do all of the partners need to take in order to achieve the same. How does the system as a whole seek to present itself most effectively.
- 1.6. Clearly the date of the inspection is unknown, no matter how informed the speculation may be, consequently the Board meeting was asked to give these matters detailed consideration and to ask itself some searching questions.
- 1.7. This report will seek to highlight what those questions need to be and give some indications of the Chair's view of what the answers need to be.
- 1.8. The meeting also needs to take account of a further review meeting being held by the Department for Education on 26th September. It will be important to be able to give the DFE greater assurance than it took from the last such review of progress, pace and shared purpose.

2. Activity Programme

- 2.1. In the period following my last report in May my approach to the role has remained along the same lines. I remain in close contact with the service visiting offices and having direct conversations with front line staff enabling me to make my own assessment of the sustainability of improvements made and gauge the feelings and morale of staff in the localities.

- 2.2. I am also able to gain a sense of the operational issues facing staff and managers as well as their sense of the drive behind improvement as well as meeting demand. I am able to reflect these issues in my conversations with senior leaders within the Council and beyond plus explore the quality of practice with the QA team.
- 2.3. In detail in the period since my last report I have:
- Reported to the Council's Scrutiny Committee
 - Met and held regular discussions with the Director of Children's Services
 - Met the Cabinet Member and Deputy Leader
 - Held equivalent discussions with the Chief Executive.
 - Reported to and participated in the DFE review
 - Held a 1:1 meeting with the Board member from CCG
 - Visited the Under 11's team in Gloucester from which I gained interesting insights into the flow of work and on caseloads which I have reflected back to the Director.
 - Visited the Cheltenham office holding conversations with social work staff and managers
 - Saw and explored the legal tracking system used by the Council which I found to be impressive and comprehensive so long as the flow of information allows.
 - Visited the Early Help service in Cheltenham and explored with them what appeared to be a powerful model of multi agency partnership working focused on prevention in addition to the family support work
 - Visit to meet managers and staff at the Cotswold office, including sitting in on a Legal Planning meeting
 - Visit to meet staff and managers at the Cinderford office
 - Meetings with senior Directors within the service
 - Meeting with the LADO examining the allegations management system.
 - Meeting the QA manager in order to discuss the audit system development and to explore the position of quality of practice across the service.
 - Meeting with the Chair of the Safeguarding partnership.
- 2.4. The scheduling of visits over time has meant that I am now able to visit some offices and services for the second time enabling me to assess progress and whether this has been continuous over the months or perhaps where staffing issues or other factors have intervened to make the improvement gradient less smooth.

3. Analysis

- 3.1. The general theme of successive reports has been that there is evidence of improvements in the service, that most of the key elements are in place to enable such improvement, that there is no major initiative that senior leaders might have taken which would make a significant difference which they have not but that plans and the drive for improvement have not gained

the traction to enable improvement to progress at a pace at which all are comfortable.

- 3.2. To a large extent that description of the situation remains the case. The recent Ofsted visit would appear to be recognising some further improvement, some areas where the system can be reasonably confident that an acceptable standard of service and practice is being achieved consistently, in particular in the MASH and the work with children in care.
- 3.3. Increasingly the system has been able to feel more comfortable that a number of issues have been dealt with and this is correct. Also, increasingly this fact has the impact of focusing more and more attention on quality of practice as the high risk area remaining, in particular in the Assessment and Family Support teams.
- 3.4. The Board has been exercised for a number of months now by the reports on the outcomes of audits. It will be encouraged, therefore, to see some improvements in the figures reported in July with a further significant reduction in August along with the suggestion that there is expectation of this being sustained. It is right to be so. It does remain the case, however, that the reported rate of inadequate work does not yet fully allow for comfort and that any reversal of this movement would be a cause for concern.
- 3.5. At its last meeting the Improvement Board had the opportunity to hear a presentation about the remedial work being undertaken to ensure that the improvements to casework found to be inadequate and to bring them up to a satisfactory standard. I have had the opportunity to explore this work further with the manager involved and it continues to work in a detailed and thorough way. There is confidence that the remedial action is being taken.
- 3.6. There are two questions that need to be answered. Is this work moving sufficiently quickly? Are the specific remedial actions being translated at scale into a general raising of standards? The service needs to be able to have a clear answer to these questions, and if there is insufficient evidence to give a clear answer in the positive further action will be needed.
- 3.7. It is clear that the quality of practice will be the determining factor in whether a successful outcome is achieved in the inspection. In considering this issue there are further complications to take into account. In my view the most important of these is variability. It is clear both from Ofsted monitoring visits and from my own observations that not all of the elements of the service, in particular local teams are at the same level of development or achieving the same in terms of standards of practice. This is equally evident from the Q.A. report coming to the Board for this meeting.
- 3.8. From my observations some offices would appear to have made consistent and steady progress over months whereas this is not consistently the case. I have not yet visited a service which does not appear to be in a better position than on my previous visit but that does not always reflect what might have been reasonably expected over time. There are a number of

possible reasons for this, not least staffing instability and changes in management, both of which are real, but senior and middle managers have to account for the degree to which improvement in practice is being driven hard and to which all involved are being held to account for progress.

- 3.9. The analysis which the Board has received over the last few months about causes for audit failure give all of the information required about what needs to happen. Again, the question needs to be honestly addressed as to whether sufficient of the right people have been consistently addressing this.
- 3.10. The Director of Children's Services has brought in additional senior capacity to add some extra concerted attention to the improvement task. I fully support this initiative. It is of paramount importance that there is no distraction from this or pulling away into other activities. It is also vital that the whole system supports this initiative.
- 3.11. What has also been an interesting facet of the work in recent months is the effectiveness of partnerships. There are clearly some very strong positives such as the new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and the process which brought them into being, the MASH and some of the safeguarding operations which have been deployed.
- 3.12. In addition, it appears to me, from my recent visit, that there is a very dynamic multi agency partnership in Cheltenham. Having recognised these, however, there are some tensions in relationships between agencies at an operational level plus the Board itself has discussed some such tensions over specific issues in recent months. Although there has been one notable exception recently at this Board, a number of these issues occur within the longer term work as opposed to within the MASH. This is also where some of the geographical variations also occur.
- 3.13. There is a clear imperative for consistency in multi-agency response across the whole county and the need to work on effective relationships at a local level as well as the strategic.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1. The written report from Ofsted will be of huge significance to the Committee and, assuming it has been received, will no doubt be discussed with it by the Director.
- 4.2. From the verbal feedback it seems unlikely that it is going to be sufficiently positive to enable the Board to feel as confident as might be expected at this stage. A successful inspection outcome would not yet appear to be taken as achieved. Much, therefore, may depend upon precisely when the inspection comes.
- 4.3. Additional senior capacity has been brought in to boost the final push that appears to be necessary. Given this, and the points made earlier in this

report, the task now is to form a clear view about how much and what needs to be achieved between now and then and is the right capacity in the right places to achieve that.

- 4.4. Specifically, the following questions, amongst others, need to be answered and be the subject of some reflection amongst senior leaders. The Board was asked to consider the level of assurance it has received on the following issues:
- How confident can the service be in the improvements in quality of practice that the audit report is suggesting?
 - Is the strength of the improvement trajectory sufficiently strong across each of the offices and teams?
 - Are all managers sufficiently focused upon this and succeed in not being deflected by concerns about managing demand as opposed to driving up quality?
 - Are things in place to make any adjustments now?
 - Is there a clear plan to how the additional capacity is to be deployed?
 - Is there an appropriate balance between the long term plans and the short term imperatives?
 - Are all partners clear about what is being asked of them and, if so, are they ready and in a position to deliver?
- 4.5. In my view these are legitimate questions because the answers are not immediately clear, at least in terms of being able to offer reassurance that they no longer need to be asked. The answers to all are likely to be yes in good measure but it may well be very small margins that will make the critical differences at this stage. It is extremely important that the Board look at them very carefully.
- 4.6. The clear message whatever the specific issues relating to the questions above is that the outcome of the inspection is most likely to depend upon the quality of social work practice. All indications are that this requires further work to see improvement.
- 4.7. What is more important is achieving better outcomes for children and young people in Gloucestershire through improved practice, emphasising that for any service, delivering high quality is likely to deliver the desired inspection outcome.

Andrew Ireland
Independent Chair of Children's Improvement Board.