

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 4 March 2021 at the Virtual Meeting - Web ex meeting.

PRESENT:

Cllr Phil Awford	Cllr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Dr Richard Castle	Cllr Loraine Patrick
Cllr Stephen Davies	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Cllr Colin Hay	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE (Vice-Chair)

Substitutes: Cllr Stephen Hirst (In place of Alan Preest)

Officers in attendance: Rob England, Suzanne Hall, Gail Hancock and Chris Spencer

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch, Cllr Chris Coleman and Bernard Fisher

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting on Tuesday 1 December 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

The minutes of Thursday 14 January 2021 were agreed as a correct record subject to the following amendment:-

Charlotte Blanch, Clifton Diocese Representative was in attendance.

3. ACCELERATED IMPROVEMENT PLAN UPDATE

3.1 The Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care gave a detailed presentation of the plan. They highlighted that the evidence showed that the quality assurance work was moving in the right direction, and that monthly activity was in line with the action plan.

3.2 Family Court proceedings remained on track; a robust recovery plan was in place to support this work. The virtual court system implemented by Gloucestershire has been positively received by Ofsted, and recognised nationally.

3.3 Permanence planning has been a specific focus. A Permanence Project is in place, led by the Interim Assistant Director, with phases one and two having been completed. This process would be repeated in April 2021.

3.4 Being aware of members ongoing concerns with regard to the budget the Interim Director informed the meeting that the service was now in a position where it could more accurately forecast what the ongoing future budgets would be for placement needs.

3.5 The safeguarding of children and young people outside of the home was a significant concern. We were working closely with the Gloucestershire Public Protection Bureau on this matter, particularly to prevent young people becoming involved with county lines.

- 3.6 The Interim Director acknowledged that some areas remained hard to move on, eg. re-referrals. However, through a targeted approach staff and teams were being actively tracked to improve practice (the team improvement project), this was proving to be successful. The numbers were showing movement in the right direction.
- 3.7 The committee was informed that the service has moved away from 'inadequate' and was now in a more clearly evidenced 'requires improvement' position.
- 3.8 In response to questions the Director of Children's Services (DCS) reiterated the (improvement) journey the council has been on since they joined the council. At that time the quality assurance process was rarely identifying a 'good' case, with 'inadequate' predominant. The current position showed how far the council had come. They informed members that reviewing the data on a quarterly basis showed a steady downward trend; 35% of case work was now considered 'good'. This improvement would continue as long as the focus was maintained. The DCS also commented that it was important to note that even local authorities classed as 'good' could still include a proportion of casework that was 'inadequate'.
- 3.9 The Head of Quality, Children's Services, stated that the trajectory indicated positive improvement; they were working to understand the variability in cases. They informed the committee that there had been a pool of weak practice, which had been fairly widespread, but was now seeing a shrink in the number of 'inadequate' cases and also in weak practice. There was a robust process around children of concern which was monitored at a senior level; cases were only signed off once all issues had been addressed.
- 3.10 A member commented that having previously expressed concerns it was good to see the improvement and consistency in practice. They questioned whether staff were being trained at the rate that we would wish to see. In response, the DCS explained that the essentials training programme was not being utilised as much as they would like. However this was a modular programme and at any one time a proportion of the workforce would be undertaking training; this training was complete once all three modules had been completed. Training had recently been discussed by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and it was agreed that a refresh, and, reinvigorated approach was necessary to ensure that all Social Workers participated in the training programme.
- 3.11 It was questioned how the whole family was supported. In response it was explained that an intervention approach was used, based on a crisis intervention model. The key to the success of this model was to be able to respond quickly. The family have a single point of contact who was able to respond quickly and continue to provide support to the family for six weeks. The named worker would have other people supporting them, eg. specialist services for drug and alcohol problems and financial advice. This model was aimed at older young people; this cohort presented the most challenges for the service in Gloucestershire. This was in essence a wrap around service.
- 3.12 With regard to questions relating to where the weakest practice was and whether this cut across both permanent and agency staff it was explained that there was no correlation between teams where there were agency staff and other teams. If agency staff were not meeting the required standard the service was robust at exiting them; permanent staff would be subject to formal proceedings relating to competency. This was where the team improvement project came in, working with teams and staff where there was the weakest practice. It was important to note that the number of agency staff had now significantly reduced. The DCS added that a degree of stabilisation of the workforce was still required. There were a number of interim appointments and these posts needed to be filled on a permanent basis. This included posts at the senior level.

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- 3.13 The DCS acknowledged that there were still services that needed to improve, but that by and large these were at the macro level.

4. DFE GLOUCESTERSHIRE HIGHLIGHT REPORT

- 4.1 The DfE Advisor to the council gave a detailed presentation of the report highlighting that it was clear that the council knew itself well, and was presenting an improving picture. Her perspective as the DfE representative was that this was positive, but that it was important to maintain this focus and momentum; this had not always happened following previous inspections.
- 4.2 It was noted that it was helpful that the council had been successful in its bid to the DfE Children's Social Care grant; this funding supported the Transformation Programme. The DfE Advisor stated that the council's response to the pandemic had been really good; the senior leadership team (SLT) and front line staff had, and were, managing this situation well.
- 4.3 Challenges recruiting to the workforce was a national issue, and was recognised by the DfE. Gloucestershire's decision to 'grow its own' social workers was a good one. The DfE Advisor informed the committee that she was impressed with the Social Work Academy. The committee was also informed that an analysis of exit interviews was undertaken; most reasons related to family issues.
- 4.4 Going forward it would be important to keep an oversight of partnerships.
- 4.5 The DfE Advisor stated that although ICT was an issue for many councils in Gloucestershire it was of particular concern and it would be important to maintain close scrutiny of this issue. The DCS informed the committee of the ongoing challenges with the council's current ICT provider. The current situation was affecting performance and staff morale. He had been assured that colleagues in ICT were doing everything they could to address the current problems. The DCS advised the committee to wait until the new provider was in place before deciding whether it wished to scrutinise this matter.
- 4.6 The DCS acknowledged the point made with regard to partnerships. They informed the committee that it was often the case that issues relating to partners did not always become clear until there had been improvement, this highlighted the challenges. The DCS had written to the Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group (GCCG) discussing concerns, particularly around the contact rate. It was clear that work was needed with the health community to ensure that the council's thresholds were clearly understood; a lack of understanding in this regard meant that some children and young people were being inappropriately referred into the service.
- 4.7 Members expressed concern that the neglect toolkit, which had been agreed with partners, was not being utilised. The toolkit provided evidence as opposed to subjective views; this was paramount given the complexities relating to neglect. The DfE Advisor stated that given that there had been signoff of this toolkit that there needed to be clear messages disseminated across partners to ensure that the toolkit was used. This issue also related to the need for a change in culture such that staff recognised that they must integrate this toolkit into their role.
- 4.8 Members were concerned to read that 'a dip sample looking at 19 children's records identified that recording was largely 'colour blind' and failed to take a child's race, ethnicity and culture, language, and religion into account'. The Interim Director explained that Social

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Workers were required to assess the needs of all children who came into our service. It was important to ensure that this was undertaken in the same way for everyone, we must ensure that there was no unconscious bias in our approach. The Principal Social Worker, in partnership with the Social Work Academy, has developed a training programme to promote the use of the 'Social Graces' learning tool as well as adding an additional module to the Essentials 3 programme to increase focus on equality, diversity and inclusion. It was also important to ensure that staff were treated fairly and equitably, work was in progress with the Black Workers Network on this matter.

- 4.9 Members were concerned with the impact of the pandemic on access to mental health support. The Ambassadors informed the committee that this was also one of their main concerns. The Interim Director informed members that they had regular discussions about this issue with health colleagues; it was on everyone's agenda. The committee was also reminded of the recent children and young people's mental health briefing, and that this would be repeated, as part of the member development programme, in the new council.

5. SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY

- 5.1 The Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning gave a detailed presentation of the strategy. The committee was informed that an entry to care panel had been established, this was about having more information to plan the right placement for the child/young person; this was in its early days. It was noted that there had not been so many complex children needing to be moved in crisis this year. It was important to be able to commission stable placements.
- 5.2 With regard to Trevone House members were informed that the young people placed there felt that the staff really cared about them. The opening of Trevone House had also enabled an understanding of some of the vulnerabilities that other young people were experiencing in semi-independent accommodation where we did not have 24/7 oversight.
- 5.3 Members were also informed that mental health nurses were on site 24/7 at Trevone House; these were some of our most complex young people. A trauma informed model of care was used. It was noted that Trevone House was a fantastic offer but this did, in effect, create a two tiered service for some young people; it was important to consider how to respond to this. Consideration of Trevone 2 needed to be undertaken at pace.
- 5.4 The committee was reminded that from September 2021 young people under the age of 16 could not be in unregistered placements, and registration of facilities would be required. Trevone House could be registered, but we would struggle to register some of the smaller houses used. It was important to be aware of how this legislation would affect the service.
- 5.5 The Assistant Director outlined the planned capital programme of future developments. Early years provision would be included as it was important that children had a good start with good parenting. For children and young people with complex needs this was about building them lifelong homes.
- 5.6 The committee congratulated officers for their hard work to bring Trevone house to fruition and looked forward to receiving an update in the next council on the other properties in development.

6. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK: PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT

- 6.1 This matter had been discussed as part of earlier agenda items. The Head of Quality, Children's Services, reiterated that there was a positive trajectory of improving practice, and that where we previously saw high rates of children at risk of imminent harm this was

not happening too much now. The service had moved onto a firmer footing, but was not yet secure.

- 6.2 It would be important to improve performance relating to the inclusion of children and families in audits; the senior leadership team (SLT) had mandated that an audit was not complete until this aspect had been addressed.
- 6.3 A member stated that as a previous critic of this process they were very pleased to see that the service was turning a corner. They were however concerned with regard to identified actions not being followed through. The Head of Quality acknowledged that this was an issue and had been challenged by Ofsted. The SLT reviewed this situation on a monthly basis.

7. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

- 7.1 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) informed the meeting that many of the targets were stretch targets, and we compared well with good and outstanding local authorities. They stated that they were cautious when there was too much 'green' in performance reports as this could indicate that the targets were too easy to achieve/not appropriate. Of those targets where performance had deteriorated many were still within the target range; it did not mean that we were failing.
- 7.2 The DCS acknowledged that the performance did look like it had dipped a little. This was potentially in response to the ICT issues that the service was experiencing; it could also relate to the resilience of the workforce after a year in lockdown. It was important to take this position seriously.
- 7.3 Members expressed concern as to the latent demand in the system which could become clearer as the schools reopened. The DCS explained that a lot of work had been done to try and predict the numbers, and steps had already been taken to manage this situation, including setting aside £400k in the budget to employ additional staff as required. It was possible that we might not see the numbers come through until September. Members were informed that this issue was regularly raised at Bronze meetings, and at south west region meetings. It was noted that no local authority in the south west has reported a significant increase as yet.
- 7.4 In response to a question it was explained that discussions have taken place with health colleagues with regard to dental assessments. It was important to note that dentistry fell within the purview of NHS England and the council has written to them outlining its concerns with access to dentistry for our children. This issue has also been raised and discussed at the Corporate Parenting Board. A letter from NHS England had been received outlining the way forward. Members were informed that it was anticipated that children in our care would be fast tracked and prioritised. It was expected that this position would start to shift from 8 March 2021 when schools reopened.
- 7.5 It was questioned why the NEET target for care leavers was only at 50%; it was felt that this should be higher. The DCS acknowledged that young people had suffered the most during the pandemic, and the overall NEET figure had risen significantly. This matter was discussed with the Cabinet Member on a regular basis. It was important to note that this situation did not just affect those young people without qualifications, but graduates as well. The council had been successful in its bid to the Kickstart scheme and was offering 298 apprenticeships across the public sector in Gloucestershire; the first young person had already been placed. It was important to note that it was not expected that this position would improve until the economy had opened up again.

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8. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

- 8.1 The Finance Business Partner gave a detailed presentation of their report. The committee was informed that with regard to any latent demand the costs in the new year could be met from part of the Covid-19 general grant which the council would receive. It was recognised at the senior level that that this might need to be invested in children's services.
- 8.2 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) stated that whilst costs had been stabilised over the last few months it was important not to lose sight of the fact that we had had an extra sixty young people requiring placements. The work that the Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning was doing around sufficiency and quality was beginning show in the budget.
- 8.3 The DCS informed the meeting that we were seeing the budget coming back under control and being managed more effectively.

9. COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

The committee agreed that to recommend the following items for inclusion in the committee's workplan in the new council: -

- Receive an update on permanent exclusions
- Meet with the new Director of Education to discuss/identify issues for further examination, particularly how to engage with Academies/Regional Schools Commissioner on these issues
- Safeguarding Children, including understanding how the learning from Serious Case Reviews is taken forward
- Child Friendly Gloucestershire
- Adverse Childhood Experiences

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 1.29 pm