

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

NOTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 15 July 2021 at the Virtual Meeting - Web ex meeting.

PRESENT:

Cllr Alastair Chambers	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Fiona Crouch	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr David Drew	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Cllr Nick Housden	

Officers in attendance: Andy Dempsey - Director of Partnerships and Strategy
Andrew Ireland - Independent Chair Children's Services Improvement Board
Rob England - Head of Quality (Children and Young People)
Chris Spencer - Director of Children's Services
Lyn Green – Participation Officer

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch

3. MEMBER DEVELOPMENT - CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

- 1.1 The purpose of the member development session was to give members an overview of the children's services improvement journey following the Ofsted inspection in 2017. Andrew Ireland, Independent Chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board was in attendance.
(A recording of this development session is available at this link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtZqHm9_dtw.)
- 1.2 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) described the journey that the council has been on following the Ofsted Inspections in 2011 (Requires Improvement) and 2017 (Inadequate).
- 1.3 The improvement journey has been challenging and was ongoing. The Ambassadors for Vulnerable Children and Young People still reported that children in care were commenting on the number of different social workers they receive.
- 1.4 The DCS informed members that there had been a significant reduction in the number of agency social workers in post during this time. The Social Work Academy had been established to support newly qualified social workers and to provide opportunities to change the culture; this also supported the council's aim to 'grow its own' social workers.
- 1.5 The council had received funding from the DfE to support the training and development of social workers. An accredited training system was in place and the aim was to ensure that every social worker undertook the course. The last Ofsted focussed visit had made reference to the training and the improved practice.
- 1.6 The overarching ambition was to provide a service that our young people deserved.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

- 1.7 The quality audit process was described, including that each month dip sampling was undertaken. The Ambassadors were involved in this process.
- 1.8 The Independent Chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board informed members that he agreed, on the whole, with the view of the DCS. There was a fighting chance that the council would achieve a requires improvement rating at the next inspection. This would depend on the robustness of the performance reporting, and on cases not being identified as having areas of concern (this did not happen during the last focus visit).
- 1.9 There had been challenges regarding the robustness of the ICT systems. It was explained that this had impacted on staff morale; this had come through clearly on the latest staff survey. Plans were in place to improve the system; it was expected that the changes would be in place by Christmas. During the inspection it would be important to demonstrate what was being done to mitigate/negate the impact of this risk on practice. The Independent Chair indicated that that ICT had been included in his report as an area of concern. He was clear that this was a risk for the inspection. It would be a serious risk if the system failed whilst the Inspectors were in-house; it was also explained that the inspectors would spend a lot of time sitting with the social workers and would therefore hear their experiences first hand.
- 1.10 It was explained that early in the lockdown period the number of referrals to the MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) had reduced by 50%. This did not mean that children were not at risk but rather that they were not in school; schools were one of the biggest referrers to the MASH. The number of referrals were now increasing and we were now at pre Covid-19 levels of activity. It was important to note that Covid-19 had negatively impacted on the resilience of families.
- 1.11 It was agreed that it was important to look at the attendance rates for the training programme. It was explained that it was easy to see how children and young people would be chosen over attending the training, but that it was important that this was progressed. There was a list of people who have not completed the training, and the Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care was addressing this. It was important to raise the quality of practice as well as do the operational work.
- 1.12 Members were informed that social workers have done a fantastic job over the period of the pandemic, particularly their ability to work well within the new arrangements; but there was now a sense of a certain level of Covid-19 fatigue.
- 1.13 Members were informed as to how the performance suite of reports was used by the leadership team. The Independent Chair informed members that the Improvement Board found the quality assurance report to be the most helpful; the only issue being that Board members would prefer to see more audits taking place. Evidence suggested that lessons were being learned from them; officers were drilling down into the audits to identify where the concentrations of weaker practice had been. However, there was still much to be done to strengthen the service.
- 1.14 It was explained that these reports were part of a wider selection of reports that the inspectors would review. The Self Assessment document was not required but was expected. There were approximately 100 pieces of evidence. A summary would be provided for committee members.

ACTION: Andy Dempsey

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- 1.15 The Ambassadors present explained how they participated in the quality audit process. Members were also informed that the Ambassadors would be piloting virtual feedback sessions with social workers, identifying the positives and what could be improved.
- 1.16 Members were informed that the multi agency focus across some issues had been a weakness in the past, but it was felt that the Working Together arrangements had improved this aspect. The audits were now being audited by the partnership but the critical thing was to ensure that the conclusions were implemented.

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 11.55 am