

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 12 January 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the .

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Stephen Hirst
Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr David Drew	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Cllr Ben Evans (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr Tim Harman	

Substitutes:

Apologies: Cllr Emma Nelson and Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People

52. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Andrew Miller declared an interest as a foster carer for Gloucestershire County Council (GCC).

Cllr Beki Hoyland declared an interest as a mentor for the Young Girls Project

53. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair advised the Committee that he had spoken with the Chair of Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee, regarding the actions from the previous meeting and it had been agreed the CFSC would continue to monitor and discuss Children's Services ICT.

Resolved

The minutes of the meeting held on 24th November 2022 were approved as a correct record.

54. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE - GCC DUTIES

Phil Haslett, Head of Education Strategy and Development introduced the report and explained that attendance was a very important focus for the Department for Education as outlined in the White Paper and Schools Bill. It was also explained that changes to address attendance needed to be in collaboration with families and schools.

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

Attendance was reported as very good across Gloucestershire County in comparison to national averages and this was mostly consistent across the County. National policy had added focus on early intervention and support and this was something that was already being implemented in Gloucestershire. In response to a question about persistent non-attendance, it was explained that early help and support was used to help families and the Inclusion Team worked in cooperation with schools on an individual case-by-case approach.

A burdens assessment had been carried out that evaluated resource and funding implications of the changes in Local Authority responsibilities. The assessment found that it did not require additional funding but it was explained in reality it needed more resources and it was predicted they would have to adjust current resources accordingly to accommodate this.

The policy had changed to enable tracking attendance nationally more easily further to the pandemic and all schools were required to sign up to the government portal, WONDE, by September 2023. Local authorities were also expected to have an Attendance Support Team, however the significant change and resource requirement for Gloucestershire County Council's Children's Services Team would be termly meetings with each school. In response to members' questions, it was explained that these termly meetings could not be done with multiple schools at the same time but may be conducted virtually in order to assist with efficiencies.

Members were advised there was a meeting Department for Education Attendance Adviser allocated to Gloucestershire and meetings have been scheduled in January with a to support implementation of the new requirements.

A member raised a safeguarding concern about schools that had not been sharing attendance data but the officer explained it had typically been an issue of systems that were not aligned rather than schools that were being obstructive. It was noted there were no safeguarding concerns at this point.

In response to a question about whether there was more that members could do to help receive more national level funding, it was explained that all options had been investigated and there was some hope that there would be some leverage when the Bill progressed through legislation.

A question was raised concerning home-schooling arrangements. It was explained that children that had left a school to go into elective home education were picked up at school visits. It was also explained that Gloucestershire's elective home education service was seen as a better approach compared to other parts of the UK. It was clarified there was a general increase in home education numbers rather than children being expelled from schools, as some parents felt home education was the right education route for their child.

A member raised concern over the relationship between attendance and school performance. Officers explained they did not have direct data from within the County but accepted that there was a broadly accepted principle that attendance

was related to educational outcome. It was also noted the Authority received daily updates about attendance from schools that were reporting.

A member raised concern over the figure of 84% attendance from Alternative Provision Services (APS). It was explained there was only one APS that was reporting data and the Authority had been working directly with them to improve the level of absence. The Committee recognised that attendance at APS were consistently lower and this was also a national issue.

The Director of Children Services (DCS) explained that if children weren't in an education setting, then they weren't learning anything and this in turn presented a significant burden for Children Services in the long term. He recognised that educational attendance was an important factor, as it kept vulnerable children safe.

55. RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF CHILDREN SERVICES STAFF

Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services (DCS), gave a summary of this report. It was explained that multiple pipelines were being used to create a more stable workforce including; the Social Work Academy, the Open University, apprenticeships, student placements and international recruitment.

It was noted that 34% of social workers were agency workers as there had been high attrition rates in full time social workers, and recruitment agencies had been aggressively recruiting social workers into the agency market. The DCS remarked that Children's Services could save £2million if all agency workers were employed by the County Council.

Members raised concern that salary progression for Gloucestershire County Council social workers did not match up with other authorities and suggested this could have affected staff retention. Officers explained that remuneration was not the only reason for staff leaving and that salaries were arranged in collaboration with neighbouring authorities to avoid driving up wages. Paying staff more would undoubtedly help, but the staffing budget was already overspent.

A member informed the Committee that prior to the meeting, she explored how to become a social worker online and had found it difficult to find clear instructions on how to get started. Officers were asked whether enough was being done to recruit new social workers. Officers explained that ideally a national campaign for social work would be rolled out and that having multiple routes in to social work did complicate things. It was noted the social care sector was awaiting Department for Education implementation for a programme of progression into social care.

Several members raised the issue of housing being too expensive to incentivise young social workers to live and work in Gloucestershire and wondered what Gloucestershire County Council could do to help. Officers explained that accommodation support costs for social workers were offered up to £150/week but the Authority did not have housing stock that could be offered.

The Executive Director felt it was necessary to have discussions with the District Councils, in order to identify the problems and find solutions. A member suggested officers should contact Renishaw as they were a large employer in Gloucestershire and had experience with staff accommodation.

It was also explained that agencies were the biggest threat and that the Department for Education was on the cusp of legislative changes to prevent newly qualified social workers from going directly into agency work. It was anticipated this could be up to a two-year limit. Members felt there was a moral and ethical crisis in the profession and showed a willingness to contribute to lobbying for this change. The Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years supported the committee's request to lobby the appropriate organisations and agreed to progress the request.

In response to a question about recruiting those who had recently retired, it was explained there was scope but it was difficult to convince people to leave retirement and an effective strategy would need to be explored. The DCS agreed to explore this option.

During the discussion, a member asked for data that covered the length of time between placing a social worker job advert and a new staff member being on-boarded, as well as the conversion rate from accepted offers to new staff coming through the door. Members also asked if it was possible to produce benchmarks for these statistics.

56. SCHOOL UPDATE REPORT

Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education (DoE), gave a summary of this report. It was explained that from the 7th of December 2022, the Schools' Bill was set aside but communications since then from the Regional Director had indicated that certain aspects of the Schools' Bill would continue to be implemented. Members were advised that the consultation outcomes for the Green Paper were also on the horizon. Despite this turbulence, the plan was still for schools to become Academies but now without 2030 given as a deadline.

It was also reported that the local area SEND Inspection Framework was signed off by Ofsted in December 2022 and would be implemented as of January 2023.

Members were advised there had been a significant uptick in schools voluntarily converting to Academies since the White Paper. The secondary school sector had almost fully 'Academised' between 2010 and 2015, but the primary sector was still majority maintained. It was recognised most schools were very open to and pragmatic about the conversion to academy status but some schools were strongly opposed.

A member raised concern that the 'Academisation' approach did not take into account how small rural schools were run and how they were less able to fulfil the conversion. The DoE agreed, explaining that more work needed to be done to support these sorts of schools individually.

In response to a question over poor performance in Key Stage One, it was explained that curriculum shifts were required to additionally support children who's early education had been disrupted by the Covid-19 Pandemic and that some teachers had struggled at adapting to this challenge. It was also suggested that this poor performance could have been compounded by recently arrived international students. It was recognised regardless of the disadvantage, work had to be done to help children catch up.

It was asked if Gloucestershire County Council could be more proactive if it became an academy trust. It was explained that the Council could not become an academy trust. Education were awaiting legislation regarding whether Local Authorities could sponsor the establishment of an Academy Trust as was proposed in the Schools' Bill, but in the meantime Education are being proactive in looking at other routes to influence the development of the trust-led system in Gloucestershire.

A member raised concern over the increase in permanent exclusion due to physical assaults in the last 2 years. It was suggested this was likely due to social isolation caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic and that work was being done to support students with anti-social behaviour.

57. VERBAL UPDATE ON TREVONE HOUSE - HOW'S IT WORKING IN OPERATION/PRACTICE AND PLANS FOR FUTURE TREVONE HOUSES.

The Director of Children's Services, gave the verbal update. It was explained that the external report from the Institute of Social Care was underway and would be reporting on the efficacy of the Trevone House model.

It was noted that an interim report was due by mid-February, and the final report would be collated by the end of May. The report would give clear details on the efficacy of the model once it had been completed and the report would be scrutinised at future meetings.

A member reiterated his request for a copy of the scope of the review. The DCS agreed to provide the member with a copy but clearly stated that it was not sharing. The DCS advised the committee that Southfields was a different issue and the scope of the review was about the effectiveness of the Trevone House model.

58. BRIEFING NOTE ON THE RECOMMISSIONING OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY CENTRES.

The Director of Children's Services gave a summary of the report. It was explained the Authority proposed extending existing arrangements for 9 months to consult with the voluntary sector and contractual arrangements for Children's Centres. It was accepted this additional time would help with the planning synchronisation of the new Family Hubs.

The DCS explained the service had received feedback from the Children's Coalition and the voluntary sector, that the commissioning process favoured large national

charities and this had led to this delay. The Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years added that it was essential to see how the voluntary sector could scale up in order to offer provision in Gloucestershire, he added that it was essential to get it right.

59. ICT UPDATE REPORT

The Executive Director of Corporate Resources, gave a brief introduction to this report. The Committee welcomed the report and thanked officers for a clearer and concise report.

A member requested training to understand how the Liquid Logic system was used by social workers. Officers agreed to take this point away and investigate this best way to progress this request. During the discussion, a member suggested that any person viewing the Liquid Logic system should be DBS checked. Officers agreed to check the GDPR requirement before progressing any requests. In the interim, Members were requested to send their expression of interest to Democratic Services.

60. IMPROVEMENT BOARD UPDATE

The Director of Children's Services (DCS), provided a brief summary of this report. It was noted that the Executive Director of Corporate Resources had been appointed as the chair of the Improvement Board, and other members from Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee were on the Improvement Board. It was recognised that the architecture was now in place to continue on the improvement journey.

It was noted the poor attendance and the lack of Police involvement in the Improvement Board had been highlighted as a key concern. The DCS would continue to monitor the situation, it was noted that Senior Police Officers had been advised that the Improvement Board needed to be taken more seriously.

A member asked for data about how long the entire adoption process had been taking but the data was not fully available. Some figures were provided detailing expected time frames for the adoption stages but current end-to-end timing averages were not available. The member was asked to email specific questions regarding the adoption process backlog to Democratic Services and a detailed response would be provided in due course.

61. IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The report was noted.

62. PERFORMANCE REPORT

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The DCS advised the committee that it was important that reports were honest and members needed to be aware of the worst case scenario. He added that the service was still deemed to be 'Requires Improvement' and it was important for all involved to be aware of the current position, in order to keep the service moving forward.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee wished to thank the DCS and his team for all their efforts and remarked that he appreciated the frank and honest picture.

The report was noted.

63. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

The report was noted.

64. REVENUE MONITORING REPORT

The report was noted.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 12.20 pm