

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 9 March 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.**

## **PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:**

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Beki Hoyland
Cllr Linda Cohen	Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington
Cllr David Drew	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Cllr Tim Harman	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Stephen Hirst	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People

**Substitutes:** Cllr Lisa Spivey

**Apologies:** Cllr Ben Evans

**Cabinet Members:** Cllr Philip Robinson  
Cllr Stephen Davies

## **1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Cllr Lisa Spivey substituted for Cllr Ben Evans

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

2.1 Cllr Rebekah Hoyland declared an interest as a mentor for Children and Girls.

2.2 Cllr Andrew Miller declared an interest as a foster carer for GCC.

## **3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2023 were accepted and signed.

## **4. EARLY INTERVENTION & HELP**

4.1 Ann James, Director of Children's Safeguarding and Care, presented this report. She explained that the report focused on areas of development, work that was underway and the impact of that work. An Early Help Sub Group had been formed and an Early Help Strategy was being developed. There had also been efforts to rebrand the approach to circumstances of parental conflict to focus on the strengths of child-parent relationships. The officer explained that the majority of families involved in social work were experiencing violence or had experienced violence so it was important

to intervene early and build family cohesion. There was also a better than target proportion of people being referred to social work services after having been supported by early help, indicating that these interventions were being successful.

4.2 A member asked how adverse childhood experiences were being targeted within this strategy. The officer explained that childhood trauma can take many different forms and that the approach used was to bring together a trauma informed relational approach with a systemic approach. It was important to raise awareness across all services within Children's Services and ensuring that the earliest interventions are equipped to respond appropriately to cases of trauma and to help children heal beyond their trauma.

4.3 A member asked whether this support would be universal or targeted and how it fit in with the work of other services such as Home Start that provided home visits. The officer explained that the Council's Early Help service offerings were targeted, but that Early Help co-ordinators were working within the community network and universal services such as schools to build capacity within universal services. Funding for the Supporting Families Programme was delivered by hitting targeted needs criteria and outcomes. Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services, added that there were efforts to look at making contracts in a way that could capitalise on the voluntary sector such as organisations like Home Start to support Early Help.

4.4 There was also discussion over how the Family Hubs model would provide universal initial access with targeted support afterwards and that the decision around Family Hubs had been delayed. This was so that Family Hubs were set up in the best way possible.

4.5 In response to more questions about Family Hubs and performance, it was explained that the current performance beyond targets was confirmed by the Officer for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED). It was also explained that Family Hub success was be measured in comparison to current performance.

4.6 It was suggested that it would be beneficial to come back to Committee with a review of Family Hub development once it had been put in place.

**ACTION – DSU to add a Family Hub Review to the long-term work plan.**

4.7 A member asked for clarification around payment by results. The officer explained that those were dependent on KPIs (key performance indicators) such as school attendance, reduced worklessness, reduced drug and alcohol use and reduced domestic abuse.

4.8 It was also questioned how many of the service providers had themselves been benefitted from Children's Services themselves. The officer said that they were unsure, but it would be worth exploring and providing that information to scrutiny. The officer also explained that she was keen for parents who have had children supported by Children's Services to get involved in training and becoming practitioners.

**ACTION – Ann James to come back to Committee with data of staff members/community practitioners who had been supported by Children's Services or were from the community they were supporting.**

## **5. SEND SERVICES UPDATE REPORT**

5.1 Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education, presented this report. She explained that the government had made announcements around Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) services on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2023 and that these were not included on the report due to the short notice. The officer explained that SEND was a broad system which spread across a number of services and that the SEND improvement plan published by the government still required further detail. The officer highlighted data in the report that outlined a 61% increase in demand on SEND in Gloucestershire. She also highlighted that a Gloucestershire SEND inspection was due imminently. She also explained that new schools were being opened to meet the SEND demand, and the Early Years Assessment Centre pilot had opened to support mainstream schools to take on SEND students and to support parents of SEND students to feel comfortable with mainstream schools. Serious concern was raised over the resources available for high needs SEND children particularly given two bids made recently for special school build projects were unsuccessful.

5.2 A member raised concern over a recent report that pre-school care was around £15,000 annually which might prevent people from wanting to get back to work. The member asked whether there were sufficient free spaces for SEND pre-school care. The officer explained that they were working very hard to ensure place sufficiency and it was being maintained but there was some difficulty maintaining staff. The service would ideally have a range of provision options to meet the needs of families with different requirements but certain provisions, like child minders, were decreasing. Nurseries were having to step in in such cases, but they might not be the ideal care provider in those cases, and it was becoming more expensive to provide pre-school care.

5.3 A member noted that a significant number of children were awaiting assessments. The officer explained that there had been a rise in direct demand from parents for assessments without the support of the school and this was contributing to the longer list of children awaiting assessments. The officer stressed that there is often a parental perception that specialist support is required when young people's outcomes are typically better in the mainstream school system. A shortage in educational psychological expertise was also slowing down assessments.

5.4 The officer also explained that they had been successful with an MTFs bid which would support taking on more staff to help ease caseload pressure, but this wouldn't solve the wider issue of a lack of high-level expertise. It was also suggested that reviewing recruiting practices would help make sure the right people are getting hired.

5.5 In response to a question about the new dual-system that was being implemented in April for all Education Health and Care Plan students (EHCPs) and Special School Students, the officer explained that the new system had been co-developed with schools and that two rounds of piloting with different schools had successfully demonstrated that the new system was better for schools and parents. It was also explained that funding for schools that take on EHCPs would be the same. The model that the County currently used for funding rewarded schools that hosted a higher number of EHCPs and that continuing to do this in the same way would cost an extra £5million. This process is not statutorily required and Local Authorities that did not use this model would not incur that extra cost so it did need to be considered carefully. The officer highlighted that the current SEND arrangements were incurring an annual deficit that had been growing for years.

5.6 A member asked if more Special Schools beyond Sladewood were being introduced and noted that parents will be more likely to ask for their children to be cared for in Special Schools if there are more spaces. The officer agreed with the member but explained that there were 130 children who had been assessed as requiring a place in a Special School that there was no more space for so there was a need to develop more schools. She also explained that they had received around

£14million capital funding around Special Education needs but that this alone was not enough to fund a single school.

5.7 A related point about inclusion was raised and the officer explained that the County could and should be more inclusive by supporting parents and mainstream schools to be confident in the support that can be provided to SEND students. This could be achieved through additional teacher training, as well as pooling expertise across nearby schools.

5.8 The officer also explained that it was likely that a number of SEND students who were home schooled were there because they did not feel the mainstream school could support them rather than actively wanting to be home schooled.

5.9 It was suggested that the work being done on home schooling be brought to the committee at a future date.

**ACTION – A report on SEND and home schooling to be added to the work plan.**

5.10 Phil Robinson, Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Bus Transport, highlighted that the Department for Education SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan, published on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023, represented a greater focus on SEND that has been long overdue. There would be the development of national standards as well as a national SEND implementation board and this would bring greater clarity about when specialist placements were appropriate, what mainstream schools were expected to offer for SEND students, and funding bands.

5.11 The chair recommended a SEND review agenda item in the future to bring to Committee how these new updates have affected SEND in Gloucestershire

**ACTION – DSU to add a SEND review for the long-term work plan.**

5.12 In response to a question about how many SEND children were refusing to go to school, the officer estimated that around 30, of the roughly 1300 home-schooled children, might have an EHCP.

5.13 It was explained to members that whilst it appeared schools were being paid more this year, due to rising costs of running the school, pay rises, and reductions in SEND benefits, most schools were posting deficits. Early intervention and prevention were highlighted as key areas to focus on to properly support children and families with significant needs whilst also minimising costs.

5.14 A member asked what avenues had been explored to help recruit specialist staff such as educational psychologists. It was explained that this specifically was a specialist field with high academic barriers and only certain universities offered educational psychologist courses. Work was already being done to work with universities to present Gloucestershire as an employer of choice. The Principal Educational Psychologist was working hard to bolster recruiting and GCC officers were being approached by other Local Authorities for help because of GCC's success in this area. The Social Worker Academy would ideally offer training for other roles that sat within Children's services but was in its early stages. It was also proposed that the Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Bus Transport might want to consider sponsoring people to complete educational psychology courses. It was doctoral level training which would be expensive, but so too was the current reliance on locum support.

5.15 Concern was raised over how the SEND support and process was explained and advertised to the public, particularly with the changes going on. It was explained that if a student is already on

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

the assessment process, they carried on with existing processes. The changes were only relevant to new EHCPs. The relevant websites were constantly being reviewed and updated and the user portal had been made more user friendly. Communications were a work in progress, but they were getting better.

5.16 It was highlighted that beyond communications, SEND was an area that needed significant work and there was concern that the local area SEND inspection would not be favourable when it came. Part of the difficulty came from needing more support from health to deliver a sufficient service and there was acute concern around the SEND budget deficit.

5.17 The Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Transport, expressed a willingness to lobby central government for more funding further down the road once they had been able to take stock of the recent changes and announcements. He also explained that being unsuccessful with both bids for funding for new schools was a surprise and that now was the time to take stock and adjust without that money in hand.

**ACTION – DSU to add placeholders for a report on the imminent local area SEND inspection to the Work Plan.**

## **6. SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY**

6.1 Chris Spencer gave a verbal update on the sufficiency strategy. He explained that it would be necessary to intervene in some way to improve the provision for young people. In particular, the market had not delivered enough good quality local provision, and this would not change without the County Council's intervention. Reports did suggest that investing in social care would be profitable long-term. There was a question over whether the Council should get involved directly or work with a partner. There were about 26 projects overall in the Sufficiency Strategy and the strategy had been renamed to 'Home at the Heart'. It was explained that too many children were in residential provision that were costly (£5000/week), were a long way from home and did not have great outcomes. Foster placement was the preferred provision to increase, with about 2/3 of fostering being run in-house, the rest provided by independent fostering agencies which were more expensive.

6.2 It was suggested that a sufficiency strategy report be brought to this Scrutiny Committee in May.

**ACTION – DSU to add a sufficiency strategy report for the May meeting.**

6.3 In response to a question about where the provision was currently, it was explained that all provision was being contracted out. Even Trevone House, which was owned by the County was contracted out to Homes to Inspire. It was explained that as there was a lack of providers in the market, it was becoming more likely that the Council would need to provide its own care provisions.

6.4 The officer agreed with a member who suggested that prevention would be a critical approach for supporting the County's young people.

6.5 A member raised concern about early intervention where children were kept within their own families. The officer accepted that that risk was always present but explained there were likely more scenarios where children were removed from their family when they should not have been

than scenarios where children were kept with their families when they should not have been. He explained that it was always important to risk assess each case very carefully.

## **7. TREVONE HOUSE INTERIM REPORT**

7.1 Chris Spencer gave a verbal update having received the Trevone House interim report on the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2023. He highlighted that there were a number of different investigations going on and went through each one for clarity.

- There was a police investigation into the death of a young person at Trevone House. That had concluded and the police had decided not to press charges against any individual or the organisation.
- There was an internal investigation by Homes to Inspire which reported that there was learning to be made but there was no indication of systemic failure.
- There was a GCC led review into the death through the Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board. Whilst the person was over 18, they were following the Child Death Overview Process as it was a more vigilant process than the adult equivalent. That report was still underway.
- There was an inspection of the wellbeing suites at Trevone House. At the last inspection 2 or 3 of the 5 dimensions evaluated were deemed as needing improvement. In this most recent inspection, all 5 dimensions were rated as good.
- The Institute for Public Care (IPC) and Oxford Brookes University were commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the Trevone House model and this agenda item was about this review.

7.2 Indications from this interim report were that the model was sound, and it was delivering positive outcomes for young people who lived at Trevone House. The interim report highlighted that the full evaluative study was ongoing, and the report had not yet been able to benchmark the model in comparison to alternative provision.

7.3 A member asked if it would be possible to see the internal Homes to Inspire report and whether the enquiry into the young person's death was a serious case review. It was explained that it didn't meet the threshold for a serious case review, so it was following the Child Death Overview Process. The officer also explained that he would check whether he can share the internal report but that if he could then he would share it.

**ACTION – Chris Spencer to explore sharing the Homes to Inspire internal investigation report.**

7.4 A member expressed an interest in having unbiased viewpoints from ambassadors for Trevone House. It was explained that the Trevone House review would explore the lived experiences of 15 young people who were associated with Trevone House and 15 young people from each of the comparison provisions.

7.5 In response to a question about whether unregulated accommodation was used for children in care in Gloucestershire, it was explained that at any one time there were usually 3 or 4 young people living in unregistered provision. It was explained that whilst those properties were unregistered, they were thoroughly investigated by Children's Services and that the Director of Children's Services was personally liable for the young people living in those accommodations.

## **8. BRIGHT SPOTS SURVEY RESULTS**

8.1 Mark Bone, Head of Services for the 11-25 Permanency Team, and Dan Gillingham, Head of Services for Children's Commissioning, gave an overview of the results of the Bright Spot Survey. This survey investigated the views of young people in care about their experiences. It was highlighted that Gloucestershire was doing well in comparison to other Counties on metrics such as young children in care's trust in the adults caring for them, their sense of safety and their satisfaction with their home and school environment. Survey results for care leavers were also presented. Loneliness, at 9%, was highlighted as better than other Local Authorities but still an area for concern alongside a number of care leavers reporting that they did not have good friends and were struggling to get by financially. The issue of social worker continuity was also flagged in these surveys. It was also explained that the surveys would be moving to once every two years to allow more time for implementation of improvements.

### **ACTION – DSU to add a Bright Spots Survey report to Committee in 2025**

8.2 A member raised concern over ratings of low life satisfaction but wondered whether it was a volatile measure based on recent events. The officer explained that the exact question asked was 'How did you feel today, and how did you feel yesterday?' and agreed that that might be reflective of a recent bad day at school rather than a long-term lack in life satisfaction.

8.3 Another member asked for greater clarity over a comment about foster carers' abilities to decide rules without social workers getting involved. The officer explained that there was a formal agreement that outlined which decisions would need to be referred to a social worker. They did try to delegate as much authority as possible to the foster carer, and that the longer a child was with their foster parents, the more authority those parents were given.

8.4 There was also a wide discussion around response rates which had dropped significantly. Members queried whether the appearance of improved responses might have been driven by less satisfied children simply opting to no longer respond. The officer explained that this survey did coincide with public examinations (SATs and GCSEs) which might have made it more difficult for students to respond to the survey. It was also explained that the results of the survey were triangulated with other forums such as the online pupils survey and the child in care reviews.

8.5 It was proposed by members and officers that the positive responses may well be overly positive given the less representative sample. It was also proposed that children in care may be responding as positively as they had due to how much better their foster or care experience was in comparison to what they had before. The Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People highlighted that children at the forums filled out surveys in groups and her experience was that children had productive discussions whilst filling out those surveys, so her sense was that young people were being honest and taking the surveys seriously. She conceded that those young people were still a self-selected sample.

8.6 Incentives were also explored for responding to these surveys. It was explained that for the care leavers survey, there were 4 random prize draws for all who responded, and they had offered a trip to a theme park during which many surveys were completed.

8.7 A question was also raised over how exactly the survey results were being gathered. It was explained that the survey was typically administered by teachers or workers from other services who were not directly managing young people's care as they wanted it to be given by an

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

independent person who was not the child's carer or social worker. It was also explained that there was a participation team that had ambassadors with lived experience of being in care of foster care.

8.8 A member raised concern about the younger groups having the fewest respondents whilst being the most vulnerable and officers agreed that more needed to be done to target non-responders.

8.9 In response to a question about what financial advice was given to young people that go through care, officers explained that for the 16+ cohort independent living skills programmes were delivered that did cover financial management.

8.10 A member also suggested that it might be prudent to advise social workers not to tell students that they would support them through their childhood given that there was such a lack of social worker continuity. It was explained that efforts were being made to build in more social worker continuity in the service.

8.11 A member asked whether young people who go through the care system were well placed to become social workers or foster parents themselves. It was explained that a number of care leavers go to train as social workers, and some were social workers in Gloucestershire now.

## **9. PERFORMANCE REPORT**

9.1 The performance report was noted.

## **10. WORK PLAN**

10.1 In response to a question about the GCC communications team, it was explained that a marketing communications officer would be brought to a future meeting to discuss what work they were doing around fostering.

10.2 It was also explained that previously a brand agency had given GCC an offer to help with recruitment but that offer had not been taken up. It was explained that a communications plan for foster recruitment would be included in the plan for increasing foster placements and carer. It was further stressed that GCC should be working harder to communicate recruitment plans and events through the communications team.

10.3 The following updates to the work plan were also noted:

- A Sufficiency Strategy report to be brought to the May 2023 meeting
- A Fostering and Adoption report to be brought to the May 2023 meeting
- The Pulse Survey to be brought to the July 2023 meeting

## **CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 13:34