

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 14 September 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.**

## **PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:**

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

**Apologies:** Charlotte Blanch, Cllr Paul McLain and Cllr Kathy Williams

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

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

2.1 The Chair declared an interest as a foster carer for Gloucestershire County Council.

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

3.1 The Committee accepted and the Chair signed the minutes of the meeting on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2023.

## **4. REPORT ON THE CHILDREN'S HOMES PROVIDERS THAT GCC WORKS WITH**

4.1 Rob England, Acting Assistant Director for Integrated Commissioning (Children, Young People & Families), gave an overview of this report. He explained that there had been a rise in the numbers of children in care nationally and that this had meant that in Gloucestershire, demand had outstripped supply. He also explained that 80% of the accommodation provided in Gloucestershire for children in care was delivered by private for-profit companies. He explained that these private providers were not giving the quality of care that had been hoped for and these providers typically accepted children with the least complex needs, charging significantly higher prices if they took on children with more complex needs. These providers were also operating at high levels of debt which raised concerns around the potential for disorganised exits. He added that research was showing that in-house provision was consistently higher quality than private provision and expressed

concern that private providers would prioritise profit over care provision. He explained that 102 Gloucestershire County Council children in care were in commissioned residential settings with 51 providers and that this was a considerable rise over the last decade. GCC were slightly above the national average for providers that were rated good or outstanding, but highlighted that it was still preferable for children to stay in county and close to home and ideally in a foster family arrangement. The officer highlighted upcoming changes to recommendations and standards following the results of the Care Management Matters care review 2022 as well as Department for Education (DfE) pilot programmes. He also highlighted that GCC's Sufficiency Strategy was the planned local solution to the challenges faced nationally in provision for children in care.

4.2 In response to a question about statistics across neighbouring authorities, it was explained that as providers were not regulated, it was not always easy to access data for children from other counties. He explained that it was difficult to have the oversight and governance that GCC would like.

4.3 In response to a question about the changes coming in October 2023 around unregulated provision it was explained that officers were engaging with providers and working to ensure all providers were registered in the correct way in time for the deadline. However, he was aware that there was still a risk of homes not being properly registered in time. It was also explained that unregistered homes would become unlawful after the deadline and that could have repercussions for GCC. It was also explained that where necessary, cease and desist letters and prosecution could be resorted to for providers that were non-compliant. It was highlighted that through this process, officers would prioritise what was best for the children and would not move children unless absolutely necessary.

4.4 A member asked if complication in the legislative landscape for providing care provision was contributing to a shortage of placements and a lack of diversity in the options available in the market. The officer explained that legislation could be discouraging. He highlighted that legislation in Scotland and Wales had made it harder for for-profit companies to operate in those areas and England not having that legislation meant that more children from England were being placed in Wales or Scotland. He also explained that GCC was working with the NCB (National Children's Bureau) provided tools that GCC were using to support working with local providers.

4.5 In response to a question about models elsewhere for market disruption, Ann James, Director of Children's Services, explained that there were other local authorities that were exploring providing their own provision. She was aware of Surrey, Sussex and Somerset that were at different stages of providing and running their own provision. She explained that GCC were taking an incremental approach to ensure this was being approached as safely as possible.

4.6 A member asked whether conversations had been had with independent schools in Gloucestershire about accommodation provision. The Director explained that conversations with those schools typically occurred in an academic sense. She

agreed that those schools did have experience providing accommodation for children but she was not sure that it was suitable for GCC's children in care.

4.7 In response to a question about the upcoming registration process, it was explained that the Children Act was very clear that responsibility for children would remain with their original local authority. She also explained that it was the original local authority's responsibility to update the local authority of residence whether the child was moving within or out of the County. Checks were made regularly to ensure all children were accounted for.

## **5. TREVONE HOUSE - FINAL OUTCOME REPORT**

5.1 Ann James introduced two researchers from Oxford Brookes University, Agnes Turnpenny and Fiona Richardson, as well as the Director of Care for Homes2Inspire, Philip Cass. She also gave an overview of the report, explaining that this was an independent evaluation carried out by Oxford Brookes to compare Trevone House to other similar types of provision in the sector. She explained that the findings were broadly positive but also mixed giving lessons to be learned for commissioning of future provision and it particular the development of Southfield House.

5.2 Officers from Oxford Brookes highlighted that it was a draft report, with the final report expected to be ready the following week. They explained that there were some difficulties with missing data and that it was difficult to find comparable provision in the UK.

### **ACTION – DSU to update the item as a draft report**

5.3 Philip Cass gave an overview of the Shaw Trust's involvement with Trevone House, explaining that their ambition was to innovate and design high quality services and Trevone House was one way of doing that. He highlighted that new projects would also carry a level of risk but that the report confirmed for them that this work should be replicated within Gloucestershire and shared with other Local Authorities. He particularly highlighted the outcomes from the wellbeing suites and the cost savings of caring for residents at Trevone House.

5.4 The Ambassador explained that she had visited Trevone House the previous day and asked about the criteria for a child to be accepted to Trevone House as only about a dozen were currently residing there and her understanding was that capacity was up to 30. It was explained that the intention was to have up to 17 residents and 30 could only be achieved if rooms were shared. It was also explained that the criteria for acceptance would be revisited.

5.5 A member asked if it would be possible to send questions directly to the researchers. He also asked whether they had been involved with GCC before. The researchers explained that Oxford Brookes had worked with the County Council in the past, such as doing some research into GCC's current Sufficiency Strategy, but no specific advice had been given regarding the development of Trevone House.

**ACTION – DSU to facilitate communication between the member and the researchers**

5.6 In response to a question about what Trevone was compared to, it was explained that the Trevone model was unique and that primary comparisons were made with other provisions in Gloucestershire.

5.7 A member raised concerns that the report was positive, but not an unequivocal success. He asked whether the Cabinet Member was still confident basing the Sufficiency Strategy on this model was still sensible. Stephen Davies, Cabinet Member for Children’s Safeguarding and Early Years, explained that regardless of the report, it was clear that GCC needed to make its own provision. He further explained that whilst the report was not perfect, there were parts of Trevone House that were working and that with the right lessons learnt, this would shape thinking moving forwards. He explained that the strategy would be adjusted according to the results of the report and that he was confident GCC still had to enter the market with their own provision. The Director added that the Sufficiency Strategy went beyond just repeating Trevone House.

5.8 A member asked the Ambassador what her peers thought of Trevone House. She explained that the ambassadors did have their doubts and saw the areas that needed improving. She highlighted more trauma informed training as a necessity and expressed a hope that it would be possible to build from this report.

5.9 In response to a question about whether the report gave confidence to go ahead with developing Southfield House, the Cabinet member explained that lessons would be learnt from the report and that he was confident that Southfield House development should continue. He also explained that an improvement plan would be taken to Trevone House residents to ensure they were satisfied with the planned improvements. Following a request to scrutinise that plan, the Cabinet Member agreed to bring it back to this Committee when appropriate.

**ACTION – DSU to add the Trevone House Improvement Plan to the work plan**

5.10 A member asked for clarification over Trevone’s maximum capacity.

**ACTION – DSU to liaise with Rob England and Philip Cass to clarify**

5.11 A member asked for more practical data from Trevone House’s operating that was not covered in the report. Members also raised their interest in visiting Trevone House to get a better understanding of day-to-day operations.

**ACTION – DSU to help facilitate a Trevone House visit**

5.12 In response to a question about whether Trevone House was value for money, it was explained that the report did speak to value for money but more work would go into properly calculating the value of the improved life outcomes for residents of Trevone House. The Cabinet Member added that plans regarding creating provision

would only go ahead with a solid business case that they were confident would deliver value for money.

## **6. CHILDREN'S SERVICES IT UPDATE AND USER SURVEY FEEDBACK**

6.1 Mandy Quayle, Director for People and Digital Services, gave an overview of the report. She highlighted that progress was being made in updating staff software and social worker's laptops and these improvements were helping staff work more effectively. She explained that the technical set up of liquid logic had gone well, but concerns around reporting tools meant that rollout was delayed until the week of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2023. Further work was summarised in the liquid logic roadmap. A number of new tools were being piloted, some with positive feedback, but some, like mobile conferencing equipment had not been as successful. A new 'Modern Desktop Solution' was being rolled out for social workers and this was showing a positive start. She also highlighted that feedback from the IT survey had been mixed. The officer was keen that levels of satisfaction with IT support should be higher than reported in this survey and identified Outlook issues as a common concern. Actions had already been progressed on these and other concerns raised in the survey. A new ICT induction training programme had been developed and would be going live in the coming months. It was also explained that another pulse survey was planned for next year to capture planned improvements. The officer also discussed joining up data with health services to help improve the care given to children in care. Finally, the officer summarised the performance report, highlighting that there had been significant improvements since last year with incident reports dropping and customer satisfaction for incident reports stable.

6.2 A member asked how many staff were mentioning IT problems in their exit interviews. The officer explained that she would come back to the member with specific figures but did highlight that in the last quarter IT issues had not been mentioned once as a contributing factor for staff leaving.

**ACTION – Mandy Quayle to provide figures on IT problems being cited in exit interviews.**

6.3 In response to a question about the delays to liquid logic, it was explained that officers wanted to be absolutely sure that the hosting platform would perform in the correct way. This was particularly important given feedback from colleagues at other councils that they had had difficulties with liquid logic performance. It had been thoroughly tested and they were now confident it would work.

6.4 A member asked about feedback from the new ICT induction programme. Sherrill Holder, Assistant Director of Digital and ICT, explained that they would test reception of the training and testing if it was meeting staff needs. Some feedback they were already aware of was a requirement for different modes of delivery for the training. She explained the intention was to develop general digital skills among staff as well as tailored requirements based on department requirements.

## **7. LGA SEND PEER REVIEW REPORT**

7.1 Kirsten Harrison, Director for Education, introduced Helen Ford, the new ICB (Integrated Care Board) SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) Senior Responsible Officer. She explained that lots of improvement work had been going on around local area SEND services and that the LGA (Local Government Association) SEND Peer Review had been invited to test GCC's self-evaluation and examine its improvement plans. It had been a helpful benchmarking process with a number of learning points. She explained that an Ofsted- CQC Local Area SEND inspection was expected in the coming weeks and significant work following the LGA review should mean there would be improvements recognised in the upcoming inspection.

**ACTION – DSU to explore involving HOSC Committee members when the Ofsted Local Area SEND inspection comes to CFOSC.**

7.2 Helen Ford explained that they were taking a joint approach with a joint strategic improvement plan. A programme board had been set up with different work streams to address specific areas that needed improvement. They were currently advertising for a programme manager and investment had been secured for additional staff in the community trust who would be able to assess health needs in Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) more rapidly. The officer also explained that a joint commissioning strategy was being worked on.

7.3 A member asked for more information on how the review process worked. It was explained that the LGA had been asked for experts by GCC and the LGA identified an experienced team to undertake the review process in April 2023. The upcoming Ofsted inspection would be similar to the Joint Target Area Inspection (JTAI) in format and duration except it would be led by an education HMI (His Majesty's Inspectorate) and the exact number of inspectors was determined by the size of the authority. It would be a three-week inspection, with the first two weeks involving field work, surveys and conversations with children and their families. The inspectors would also oversee a multi-agency audit process around EHCPs and triangulate the outcome of those with conversations with the children and parents and other evidence. The officer explained that it would be a very thorough inspection process against 11 inspection framework criteria.

7.4 In response to a question about involvement of families that had written to Ofsted to complain about GCC, it was explained that the inspectors would have access to all communications and complaints to them and they would consider all the data available and whilst they may interview those people, they would not necessarily seek out those individuals as part of the interview process.

7.5 In response to a question about training for staff in maintained schools and academies and support for SEND co-ordinators (SENDcos), it was explained that workforce development was a key focus. There was already lots of training available and it was important to make sure teaching staff and SENDcos were aware of those resources and were able to use them fully. It was explained that more could be done to be more co-ordinated at a strategic level in workforce

training mapping. From September 2023 there had been investment to ensure every school had a named educational psychologist who would support children and support the school in making sure staff were aware of inclusive practice. School colleagues also now sit on EHCP panels. It was highlighted that the Ofsted inspection would be focusing on impact, and that this would follow from the correct planning and mobilisation.

7.6 A member noted that SEND support seemed strong for early years but deteriorated in older age groups. It was explained that the excellence noted for early years and primary was not being sustained across all phases and that the transition from primary to secondary had challenges. It was expected that with new special schools opening, there would be more provision for those that were not adequately supported in mainstream schools and this should help outcomes for these children.

7.7 Philip Robinson, the Cabinet Member for Educations, Skills and Bus Transport, explained that a lot of work had begun since the review in April. He highlighted that high needs block funding was in a significant deficit and that the national funding formula was not adequately providing for children with SEND needs. He also highlighted that this under-funding would not be taken into account by Ofsted. Efforts were being made to campaign for greater funding.

7.8 In response to a question about the 11 judgement criteria used in the review, it was explained that there were 11 framework criteria that areas were assessed against with 3 main outcomes. The member was reassured that the process was presented to parents in a way which would not be overwhelming. It was also clarified that parent experiences were taken into account as part of the review.

## **9. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK**

9.1 A member asked what was being done about persistent absence from school. It was explained that those concerns were shared. The national covid-19 lockdowns were cited as a contributing factor. The officer explained that 27% of children in care in Gloucestershire were persistently absent and that compared with 24% nationally. About a quarter of that was due to illness, and it was explained that persistent absence was more likely if children were moving homes and/or schools and that would affect children in care in particular. It was also explained that the continuous improvement board was presented with a report on persistent absence and a briefing sheet was being prepared for scrutiny members. The officer summarised that there was no single solution and a targeted nuanced approach would be needed to bring persistence figures down.

9.2 Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education, added that if a child in care was moved to provision out of county, they would remain on their original school's roll and would be contributing to the permanent absence figure.

**ACTION – DSU to liaise with officers to circulate the reports.**

9.3 A member asked whether the young women and girls mentoring programme was having any effect on absence figures. It was explained that attendance was an element of mentoring but it was too early to say what effect it was having.

9.4 A member raised concern that the number of children in care was rising from what had looked like a plateau. It was explained that they were analysing what was driving that. Suspected contributing factors were increases in taking on unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Gloucestershire and taking on large sibling groups. She said that the Committee would be kept up to date on developments.

9.5 A member asked about schools grant spending and asked whether GCC were recouping money through services that they could offer academies or through school improvement. It was explained that Academies would not necessarily purchase services from GCC and larger ones were often in a position to provide in house. Academies were also encouraged to source school improvement through organisations outside of GCC. The officer highlighted a need to pivot services in a way that would encourage academy uptake.

## **10. REVENUE MONITORING REPORT**

10.1 A member raised concern around the projected overspend for children's services. He asked why GCC was consistently budgeting this incorrectly. The Cabinet Member explained that GCC had statutory duties that had to be fulfilled and would be fulfilled even if that meant going over budget. He explained there were efforts in place to mitigate costs but that these were focused around the second half of the year so the effects of those plans were not yet being realised. He explained that the budget setting process for the next year was ongoing and that adjustments would be made based on how spending progressed. He highlighted the long term plans for reducing costs such as investments in provision for children in care.

## **11. WORK PLAN**

10.1 The following items were discussed for the work plan:

- The Home School Transport planned for the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 2023 to link in with the Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years
- An information item covering School Improvement Plans, how the secondary sector approached them, created them and implemented them.
- To remove Youth Service Provision from upcoming items.
- To add a multi-agency data integration item
- To add the requested Gloucestershire Childcare Sufficiency Duty Report 2023 to the 23<sup>rd</sup> October meeting.

**ACTION – DSU to make the above changes to the work plan.**

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

**CHAIR**

Meeting concluded at 12.55pm.