

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 18 July 2024 commencing at 10.00 am at the Committee Room - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Cllr Linda Cohen (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Paul McLain
Cllr Dr David Drew	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chair)
Cllr Ben Evans	Cllr Emma Nelson
Cllr Beki Hoyland	

Substitutes:

Cabinet

Members: Cllr Stephen Davies, Cabinet Member for Children’s Safeguarding and Early Years

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch, Cllr Nick Housden, Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People and Cllr Pam Tracey MBE

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 16 May 2024 were approved as a correct record.
- 2.2 In an update on the actions from the last meeting, a private briefing for Committee members on the Children’s Services member communications protocol would take place following this meeting.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee noted the updated Terms of Reference.

5. RECOMMENDATION FROM COUNCIL - MOTION 939

- 5.1 Ann James, Executive Director of Children’s Services, presented the report, produced in response to Motion 939 – Apology for the forced adoption of children of

unmarried women, which had been agreed by full Council at its meeting on 22 May 2024.

- 5.2 The motion asked the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider how the Council could better signpost victims to the information and services available via Adoption West for those affected locally to deal with the impact of historic forced adoptions.
- 5.3 It was explained that adoption support, including for those who had experienced forced adoption, was provided through Adoption West, the regional adoption agency of which Gloucestershire was one of five local authority members.
- 5.4 Ann James recognised the lifelong impact forced adoption had on those affected and therefore the importance of support being easily accessible.
- 5.5 It was noted that, in response to the findings of the inquiry to understand the experience of unmarried women whose children were adopted between 1949 and 1976 in England and Wales, which was published by the Joint Committee on Human Rights in July 2022, the Government had introduced legislative amendments to ensure adoption support and counselling services were more easily available to those who required it.
- 5.6 It was noted that GCC met the requirements of the regulatory framework via the Adoption West Birth Links service. This service provided access to adoption records, signposted to intermediary services, and could provide up to 6 sessions of emotional support to those who required it.
- 5.7 It was recognised that whilst these services were largely accessed by those involved in adoption processes today, they had been accessed by those who had experienced forced adoption in the past.
- 5.8 The limited resources of the Adoption West Birth Links team were acknowledged; however, members were reassured that the team worked to a three-month allocation standard.
- 5.9 Members noted that officers had considered the Adoption West website, which they had found to be easy to use and informative. However, officers felt that GCC's website could be clearer in terms of signposting to the Birth Links service.
- 5.10 Members were advised that work was underway with the Communications Team to develop a specific Council webpage to make accessing this information much easier. Additionally, all 'front door' staff at the Council would have the knowledge to signpost to Adoption West's services.
- 5.11 Tammy Wheatley, Head of Service for Corporate Parenting and Children in Care, added that the Council worked alongside Adoption West to ensure that responses were timely and to consider providing extra support to those who required it.

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

5.12 A member queried whether a press release was issued following resolution of the motion at full Council in May 2024. They added that there could be an opportunity following this meeting to highlight the services available. They also asked whether the numbers of people affected by forced adoption between 1949 and 1976 was known.

5.13 It was confirmed that a press release had not been issued after the Council meeting in May due to Purdah restrictions. Ann James agreed to liaise with the Communications Team on promoting the services available once the Council's webpages had been updated.

ACTION – Ann James

5.14 It was also explained that there was no record of the numbers of people affected. Services were reliant on people coming forward to request support. The member suggested that the press release should highlight this.

ACTION - Ann James

5.15 A member asked whether it was possible for relatives other than the birth mother to access records relating to the adoption of a child.

5.16 It was explained that relatives could access these records if they had permission from the birth parents, where they were still alive. If the birth parent had passed, relatives would need to evidence their relationship to them, as well as providing evidence of the birth parent's death certificate.

5.17 In response to a query, it was understood that in most historic adoption cases, there was only limited information recorded regarding birth fathers.

5.18 In response to further queries, it was noted that information should still be available to the County Council even if adoptions were made through private agencies, and that the numbers of children who were sent overseas following adoption was not known.

5.19 It was requested that the Committee have sight of the mock up for the updated Council webpages, for members to be able to provide feedback for further improvement.

ACTION – Ann James/ Tammy Wheatley

5.20 A leaflet which provided details about Birth Links would be circulated with members.

ACTION – Tammy Wheatley

5.21 It was also proposed that the press release promoting the services available be included in Members Matters.

ACTION – Ann James/ Laura Powick

6. KINSHIP CARING AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS

- 6.1 Tammy Wheatley provided the Committee with a presentation on Kinship Caring and Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs). The presentation was attached to the agenda papers for the meeting.
- 6.2 A member sought clarification as to what an Eco-Map was, which was required as part of the full SGO assessment process. They also asked for clarification regarding the data for the number of SGOs for 2023/24. It was explained that the figures relating to previous kinship determined the numbers of SGOs which had been granted where children had previously been living under kinship fostering arrangements. This data had only begun to be collected from this year.
- 6.3 The member also asked about the outcomes for children living under SGOs compared to the outcomes for children in care. In response, it was explained that nationally, there was no differentiation in outcomes. There were instances where SGOs had broken down and children had come back into care, such as when teenagers were living with grandparents who were getting older. In order to address this, work was being undertaken with potential SGO carers to help them to understand what the future could look like under these arrangements, and for them to consider their support network and who could care for the child should they no longer be able to.
- 6.4 However, it was known that kinship caring arrangements provided children with more stability and more sense of belonging as they were living with someone with whom they could connect. It was noted that the University of Bristol had conducted some research in this area which highlighted an improved sense of identity and emotional wellbeing for children being cared for under kinship arrangements. Tammy Wheatley proposed speaking with colleagues from the kinship service in Birmingham as to whether there was any specific data on outcomes.

ACTION – Tammy Wheatley

- 6.5 Another member spoke of the positives of SGOs for children, and recognised that the barriers to these arrangements, for example, financial barriers, were being removed. Tammy Wheatley explained that in the longer term, SGO arrangements were more cost effective as the Council was not required to provide ongoing support services for the child. However, it did make a difference to kinship carers if the Council could provide them with financial support. It was noted that the Council was currently working on a capital programme looking at how to support foster and kinship carers with house adaptations.
- 6.6 The difficulties of maintaining relationships between birth parents and kinship carers when it came to issues of parental responsibility was acknowledged.
- 6.7 A member asked about the numbers of children being cared for under informal arrangements. In response, it was explained that it was almost impossible to determine how many children lived under informal care arrangements, such as

children living with grandparents. The Council relied on partners, such as schools, to come forward with any concerns relating to these arrangements.

6.8 Another member asked about the current attitude of the courts to SGOs, citing a period in the past when they were resistant to them. In response, members were advised that there had not been any concerns regarding the courts agreeing SGOs in recent years. It was noted that courts, in some cases, were concluding care proceedings with a care order, whereby the child remained living with a kinship carer with the order clearly stating that after 6 months if there were no concerns then they should proceed with an SGO.

6.9 The Committee thanked Tammy Wheatley for her presentation.

7. AUTISM STRATEGY

This Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting as the presenting officer was unable to attend this meeting due to unforeseen circumstances.

ACTION – Laura Powick

8. AMBITIONS PLAN

The Committee noted the report.

9. QUARTER 4 2023/24 PERFORMANCE REPORT

9.1 The Quarter 4 2023/24 Performance Report was taken as read.

9.2 A member asked for an update on workforce capacity in Children's Services. It was noted that there had been improvements in the workforce capacity in children's social care, with a reduction in staff turnover and a reduction in the use of agency staff. However, there was continued pressure within SEND services. To address this, Cabinet had recently agreed for additional investment in this area.

9.3 The member asked for further clarification regarding the workforce capacity issues in SEND services. Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education, explained that educational psychologists had a pivotal role in Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments. However, the recruitment of educational psychologists remained a challenge given that there was a limited pool for this specialist workforce that all local authorities were drawing from. Work was being undertaken with HR to consider how to attract individuals to these roles at GCC, including consideration of welcome payments and developing an apprenticeship style model for individuals to train at the Council. It was acknowledged that this single point of weakness had considerable implications for the EHCP process.

9.4 A member asked whether the increase in school suspensions and exclusions was a local issue or part of a national trend. In response, Kirsten Harrison explained that it was a national issue which was playing out locally, with numerous factors contributing to the increase, including limited funding in schools and growing

challenges relating to the emotional regulation and mental health of pupils. However, there were certain factors operating within the local education system that were also having an impact, such as the overlay of grammar schools on a comprehensive school system in the County. The importance of early intervention was highlighted, and it was understood that the Council was working on its outreach offer from The Altus alternative provision school, as part of the Change Partnership Programme with the Department for Education (DfE).

- 9.5 A member queried whether intervention needed to start from as young as 5 years old. Kirsten Harrison emphasised that intervention needed to start from birth as part of early years provision. Early Years SEND Assessment Centres had a role in identifying needs as early as possible. It was also emphasised that a child did not need a diagnosis for needs to be identified and addressed at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 9.6 The member continued to ask how many parents were aware of the help available during the early years. It was noted that the local offer had been redeveloped in collaboration with the Parent Carer Forum, however officers were aware that the information available in the Local Offer was not reaching everyone. Consideration was being given as to how to make the Local Offer more easily accessible and visible.
- 9.7 The member asked whether schools were providing this information to parents. Kirsten Harrison emphasised that schools were doing everything they could to meet the needs of children despite challenging circumstances.
- 9.8 A member asked a question regarding the Legal Gateway Panel. Paul Shallcross, Director of Safeguarding and Care, informed members that the Legal Gateway Panel had been operating for 6 months and worked to centralise and ensure consistency with decision making relating to the thresholds for care proceedings. There would be a review of the process in September 2024.
- 9.9 The member continued to ask whether the process had prevented children from entering into care unnecessarily. Paul Shallcross felt that it had, by introducing proportionality in decision making.
- 9.10 There was a discussion as to the expectations of parents regarding the responsibility of schools to support the needs of children. One member suggested that parents needed to take more personal responsibility for their children's needs. They felt that action needed to be taken to improve parenting skills.
- 9.11 Ann James highlighted the importance of establishing connections with families, which was where the Family Hubs would play a key role. They would enable the Council to work in partnership with families to provide children with the tools and skills they required. Paul Shallcross added that they had just launched their practice framework in children's social care, which focused on giving parents the skills they needed to parent as best they could.

10. WORK PLAN

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

10.1 The Committee agreed the need to schedule an additional Committee meeting, which was provisionally scheduled for 17 October 2024.

ACTION – Laura Powick

10.2 The Committee’s Work Plan would be updated as follows:

- The update on the Autism Strategy to be deferred to the meeting in September 2024.
- The Annual Safeguarding Report and exempt session for the private briefing on Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership local learning reviews, rapid reviews, and Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews to be moved to the additional meeting in October 2024.
- The Annual Adoption Report to be added to the agenda for the October 2024 meeting.
- The item on School Admissions to be included on the agenda for the November 2024 meeting.

11. FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings, including the additional meeting which had been provisionally scheduled for 17 October 2024.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.55 am