

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 13 July 2017 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT:

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Loraine Patrick
Dr Richard Castle	Ambassador for Vulnerable Children & Young People
Cllr Chris Coleman	Cllr Alan Preest
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Brian Robinson (Chairman)
Cllr Joe Harris	Cllr Jack Williams
Cllr Andrew Miller	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE

Officers in attendance: Neelam Bhardwaja - Interim Director of Improvement and Operations
Suzanne Hall - Finance Business Partner
Alison Williams – Interim Director of Children’s Services

7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Richard Castle declared a personal interest as a governor at Gastrells Community Primary School.

Cllr Brian Robinson declared a personal interest as a governor at Dene Magna School, as a member of the Management Committee of the Gloucestershire Alternative Provision School, and as a Foster Carer.

Charlotte Blanch declared a personal interest as an adoptive parent, and as Headteacher of the Catholic School of St Gregory the Great.

8. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

8.1 The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 15 June 2017 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to the inclusion of the following minute:-

15.16 The committee was informed, by the Clifton Diocese representative, that in another local authority area where the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) had been rated as inadequate that 2 schools, which had been following safeguarding guidance from that LSCB had received poor inspection outcomes from their own inspection regarding safeguarding. She sought assurance from officers that having followed safeguarding guidance from the GSCB that this situation would not be replicated here given that the GSCB had been rated as requires improvement. The Head of Education assured the committee that this would not happen here as the advice issued in Gloucestershire was robust, and he intended to place a message to this effect in ‘Heads Up’ the Headteacher e-zine.

8.2 The Liberal Democrat members felt that the timeline for the election of a Vice Chairperson should be clarified. The Chairman felt that this could be done later in the council year, and it was also suggested that this could be discussed at the next committee work planning meeting.

9. GLOUCESTERSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN ANNUAL REPORT 2016/17

- 9.1 The committee welcomed Mr David McCallum, Independent Chair of the Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board (GSCB) to discuss and debate his report. In response to a question it was clarified that this was Mr McCallum's report as Independent Chair and its purpose was to reflect the work of the GSCB over the previous 12 months and also challenge the wider GSCB partnership. It does not get signed off by the wider GSCB membership.
- 9.2 Mr McCallum informed members that a particular learning point from the Ofsted inspection process related to quality audits, in that the GSCB had not been undertaking audits that took in the whole journey of the child. He felt that this would have given the GSCB a better view of all the things (eg. poor practice) that could disadvantage children and young people. Going forward this would be rectified. Mr McCallum was also unsure as to whether all organisations had been undertaking a sufficient level of internal quality audit, and he intended to be much more searching in this regard going forward.
- 9.3 In response to a question Mr McCallum informed the committee that one of the biggest challenges related to the skill levels and capacity of front line officers and partners to be able to meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs. It was a struggle to recruit people with the right skill mix. Mr McCallum also felt that it was important that social workers were given the support that they needed to do what was a difficult job.
- 9.4 Given the pressures at the front door members questioned whether there was the resource/capacity across all partner organisations to be able to respond to the findings of the Ofsted Inspection report. Mr McCallum assured members that there was an absolute determination from all organisations to improve.
- 9.5 As in previous years the committee was disappointed with the level of attendance by some organisations at GSCB meetings and asked whether this was of concern. Mr McCallum informed members that attendance always drew comment; given the capacity and resource pressures across organisations attendance would be a challenge. He felt that it was more important that there was the right representation and attendance at the subgroup level. He also stated that he did have a line of communication with all organisations and that they would attend if needed. Members did feel that the level of attendance should be challenged. It was noted that there has been no attendance from Cotswold District Council (CDC) in the previous twelve months, and Cllr Joe Harris informed Mr McCallum that if he wished he would raise this at CDC.
- 9.6 Members felt that the unwieldy structure of the GSCB did not, in reality, facilitate the GSCB's work. Mr McCallum acknowledged this and explained that in the long term recent legislation (Children and Social Work Act 2017) would enable the GSCB to take a more permissive approach to membership and structure, and in the shorter term the GSCB was reviewing its structure.
- 9.7 It was questioned whether Mr McCallum was surprised by the outcome of the inspection. He informed members that the extent of the poor practice found was a surprise. He stated that he acknowledged the findings of the Ofsted Inspection and that this reflected a failing of the function of the GSCB and himself. He also stated that the GSCB respected what the Ofsted inspection and the HMIC Child Protection Inspection of Gloucestershire Constabulary were saying, and reiterated that there was a determination across all organisations to implement all recommendations. The committee was pleased to note that the GSCB would be represented on the Improvement Board.

- 9.7 Members questioned whether the voice of the child was sufficiently recognised across the GSCB. Mr McCallum stated that this had been a priority throughout his tenure but agreed that this was an area requiring improvement and whilst the GSCB did already work with the Ambassadors this was a priority going forward.
- 9.8 The committee was informed that the GSCB was looking to establish a practitioner reference group to ensure that the learning from their experience was taken forward and informed policy and practice.
- 9.9 It was noted that the membership of the GSCB represented the senior posts across partner organisations, and questioned whether this gave sufficient insight to what was happening at the frontline. Mr McCallum explained that Local Safeguarding Boards were statutory bodies and representatives must be of a senior enough position to be able to make decisions on behalf of their organisations and commit those organisations' resources. He acknowledged members' point that this did seem to be a disconnect and was one of the reasons why the GSCB was establishing the practitioner reference group.
- 9.10 Members wanted to gain a better understanding of how staff felt about their job, working for the council etc. It was agreed that the outcome of the annual staff health check would be shared with the committee. It was also questioned whether exit interviews should be mandatory, however, it was explained that this was not practical, but staff were encouraged to feed back.
- 10. OFSTED INSPECTION OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN IN NEED OF HELP AND PROTECTION, CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND CARE LEAVERS**
- 10.1 The committee was pleased to welcome Claire Burgess, LGA Children's Improvement Adviser, to the meeting to inform and advise the committee on how it might wish to frame its focus on the Ofsted Improvement Plan; and what support the LGA could offer the committee.
- 10.2 It was particularly helpful to members to see the learning from the work of the LGA and the ISOS Partnership 'Action research into improvement in local children's services: Practical implications for lead members and senior leaders' (2016). This clearly laid out the three key steps when embarking on an improvement journey, the defining characteristics at each stage of the improvement journey, and the key questions that elected members would need to consider. This research also made clear that we were looking at at least a two year journey of improvement. (For information - the presentation slides with a link to this report are on the GCC website.)
- 10.3 Some members reported that they were receiving a number of emails from members of the public who feel that the inspection findings called into question the outcome of their complaint(s). These members stated that it was understandable that they were being contacted, as due to the inspection findings, members of the public would not necessarily have confidence in council officers. The Interim Director of Children's Services and the Interim Director of Improvement and Operations indicated that they were also receiving a high volume of emails in this regard, and had asked the corporate Complaints team to contact other local authorities who have been in a similar position for advice and information on how they had responded. The outcome of this work would be shared with committee members. It was however emphasised that the management of complaints was a statutory process and regulations were clear on how the system must be managed. It was also important to recognise that complaints were managed by a central team independent of children's services, and that complaints panels were independent.

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

- 10.4 It was agreed that the committee would include the Children's Safeguarding and Care Service Complaints and Compliments Annual Report in its work plan.
ACTION: Andrea Clarke
- 10.5 In discussing its role in scrutinising the improvement process the committee was clear that it needed to be rigorous and constructive. The committee also agreed that although the council had agreed to invite the LGA in to undertake a review that it was also important that the committee understood how the council had got to this position. The committee would therefore invite the relevant parties to a future meeting to discuss this matter, and recognised that some of its activity might duplicate aspects of the LGA review.
- 10.6 The committee also agreed that it needed to ensure that it had a clear sightline down to the front line and would be exploring different approaches to achieve this; and would also hold additional committee meetings, as necessary, to ensure that sufficient scrutiny was given to the improvement plan.
- 10.7 Mr McCallum informed the committee that he had reported to the committee in 2016 on his concerns around the significant pressures on the front door, and the level of newly qualified social workers and the impact that this could have on the system, but had not felt that there had been a significant challenge from elected members at that time.
- 10.8 In closing the meeting the Chairman stated that it would be important to ask the 'so what' questions to challenge whether improvement was happening.

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 12.22 pm