

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 7 March 2019 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT:

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Shaun Parsons
Dr Richard Castle	Cllr Loraine Patrick
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Brian Robinson (Chairman)
Cllr Colin Hay	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE
Cllr Dr Andrew Miller	

Substitutes: Cllr Suzanne Williams (In place of Cllr Chris Coleman)

Officers in attendance: Rob England - Head of Quality & Safeguarding (Children & Young People)
Suzanne Hall - Finance Business Partner
Julie Rzezniczek - Director of Children's Safeguarding and Care
Chris Spencer - Director of Children's Services
Wendy Williams - Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning

Apologies: Cllr Chris Coleman, Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Brian Robinson declared a personal interest as a Foster Carer.

Cllr Shaun Parsons declared a personal interest as a trustee of the National Star College.

10. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2019 were agreed as a correct record subject to the following amendment: -

Cllr Richard Boyles, Cabinet Member Children and Young People had sent his apologies.

The committee was informed that the added members on the committee had not received the invitation to attend which was why they were absent. The Senior Democratic Services Adviser in attendance offered their apologies.

11. OFSTED OUTCOME LETTER

11.1 The Director of Children Services (DCS) informed the committee that this monitoring visit had been the fifth of six visits by Ofsted and that the council could expect a full inspection in the Autumn. He also explained that if it was felt necessary the council could negotiate for an additional monitoring visit ahead of the inspection. The next monitoring visit was scheduled for 30 April 2019.

11.2 The DCS drew committee member's attention to Ofsted's comments relating to the level of churn in the social worker workforce, the negative impact that this was having on the consistency and quality of practice, and that the council was making insufficient progress in improving services for its children. It was noted that these comments were in line with concerns raised by committee members.

- 11.3 In response to questions the DCS indicated that he felt that whilst progress had flat lined for the first 12 months post inspection it was now picking up, and explained that the Ofsted process looked at the whole improvement journey and was why this improvement was not reflected in the letter.
- 11.4 Members agreed with the DCS that stabilising the workforce was the key factor going forward. The DCS outlined the activity in place to improve this position, including the Social Worker Academy, the recruitment of social workers from India and the agreed (by Cabinet) increase in the number of ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment).
- 11.5 In response to questions the DCS explained that the main issue in retaining staff was instability within teams; the level of churn meant that it was hard for people to receive the level of support and supervision that they needed to prosper in the role.
- 11.6 Members were concerned about the impact of multiple changes in social worker on the individual child/young person. The DCS informed the committee that Ofsted saw this as a real weakness in practice which reinforced the need to stabilise the workforce. Members were concerned as to how trust could be maintained between the child/young person and the social worker in these circumstances. The DCS informed the meeting that it was important for the social worker to be honest and upfront with the child/young person and properly manage expectations. The Chairman, who had declared an interest as a foster carer, stated that in his experience what these children wanted was consistency, what was said would happen happens – it wasn't necessarily about who came through the door, but have you delivered what you said you would?
- 11.7 In response to a question it was explained that the caseload level was not yet where the DCS would wish it to be.
- 11.8 He reiterated that sufficient resources were available – what was required was to stabilise the workforce.
- 11.9 The committee was informed that it was expected that the next Ofsted monitoring visit would focus on the areas of weakness identified at the time of the inspection eg. the MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub).
- 12. IMPROVEMENT BOARD UPDATE**
- 12.1 The DCS informed the committee that the Improvement Board had agreed an accelerated improvement plan in response to the weaknesses identified in the February 2019 Ofsted letter. This plan identified 4 key achievements:
- Quality of practice
 - Training of social workers and management development
 - Supervision and management oversight
 - Timeliness of visits
- 12.2 The committee asked about the decision to bring the Prospects Service back in house. The DCS reminded members that this service had received a requires improvement rating from Ofsted. Whilst the service sat outside the council he did not have a clear line of oversight and essentially could not best manage what he could not clearly see. He wanted to get a better managerial grasp back on these services, in particular to continue to try and get underneath the high number of referrals for high cost placements.

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- 12.3 It was questioned why supervision continued to be an issue. The DCS felt that the service was still dealing with legacy issues, specifically that supervision was not being measured. He felt that there remained some cultural issues in this regard. Ofsted continually raised this matter and it was important going forward that the impact of supervision, both on the social worker and thence on the child/young person could be evidenced.
- 12.4 The importance of being clear and honest with children so that expectations were properly managed was reiterated by committee members. It was suggested that schools were not fully engaged in the social care agenda as evidenced by the high number of school exclusions in the county. It was acknowledged that schools were in a very challenging position but that they could not abrogate responsibility for the children in their care; and should be offering more with regard to early help. However, it was acknowledged that this was a joint agenda that we needed to work through together, and that the Improvement Board had a clear responsibility here to ensure that all partners were 'on the same page'.

13. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK: PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT

- 13.1 The committee agreed that whilst there was evidence of some improvement in this process, it was of concern that the number of outstanding actions remained high, and that there was a lack of consistency in the risk assessments. Members were concerned that this meant that there was not an overall buy in to this process.
- 13.2 The committee was assured that these outstanding actions did not mean that children were in unsafe circumstances. It was more likely that this related to the level of churn and that there was again some cultural factors involved. It also related to managers not tracking actions on a daily basis; managers were being supported to better manage these actions. However, it was stated that it was important to remember that managers were being asked to do a lot and we were asking them to work over fifty hours per week. The DCS acknowledged that there did appear to be a stubborn 'underbelly' of improvement. He did however state that it was important to note that there has been an improvement in the number of cases rated good.
- 13.3 It was discussed whether the level of churn in the workforce was the main impact on the audits, or whether the main impact was on the follow through of the actions.
- 13.4 It was noted that the main themes coming through the quality and audit process matched those identified by Ofsted. This indicated that we had a clear understanding of the areas that still required improvement. In response to a question it was explained that work was ongoing with all teams to ensure that they were aware of this position and what it meant for them. Electronic message boards were being installed in the localities so that staff could receive real time information.
- 13.5 The committee was informed that the greatest challenges were in the safeguarding teams. It was important to note that these teams dealt with the most complex cases, had the widest span of work, and the most inexperienced and transient workforce. It was explained that whilst we could not change the workforce structure at present as the council needed to manage the Ofsted process, the DCS was talking to teams about options. A committee member stated that it should not be a surprise that there were challenges in the safeguarding teams; this was where the most stressful work took place. They emphasised the importance of ensuring that there was sufficient support for staff mental health and wellbeing.
- 13.6 Committee members remained frustrated that in some areas progress seemed to be stalled and some members felt that there was a void between the child and the process. The DCS

shared the committee's frustration, but reiterated that this was always going to be a two to three year turnaround; that this was a business that had thought it was good and then discovered that it was not. He was clear that the council was in a better position than at the time of the Ofsted inspection. As already stated the overriding issue was to stabilise the workforce.

- 13.7 The DCS informed the committee that the Head of Human Resources was leading on the work to address the cultural issues.

14. SCHOOL OFF ROLLING INFORMATION

- 14.1 The committee agreed to consider school off-rolling and the Permanent Exclusions Task Group update together as they were interlinked. The committee received a detailed presentation from the Head of Services for Children with Additional Needs. (The report and presentation slides were included in the agenda pack.)
- 14.2 The committee was informed that the number of permanent exclusions had levelled out since the significant increase between 2013 and 2016, but was still too high. In 2017/18 there were 3 secondary schools responsible for almost a quarter of the exclusions. These schools were Cheltenham Bournside School, Gloucester Academy and Beaufort School (Gloucester) The number of children in Gloucestershire home educated had been rising, although the number of new children has started to decline slightly. In general, the number of children home educated increased with the age of the child, with over a quarter of newly home educated children being in KS4. It was important to remember that parents did not have to inform the local authority that they were home educating their child; this made both the local and national picture unclear.
- 14.3 With regard to off rolling the committee was informed that Ofsted particularly focussed on years 5 and 6 and 10 and 11 as these were examination years for children. The presentation focused on KS4 (years 10 and 11) as it was known that there were more challenges in the secondary sector. Between 2016 and 2017 184 year 10 and 11 children left school; this equated to 43% of all children leaving secondary school, and a higher proportion were vulnerable children (this reflected the national position).
- 14.4 The committee was informed that the number of children leaving school in years 10 and 11 varied between districts from over a half of children in the Forest of Dean to a third in the Cotswolds. It was clear that there was work required to understand this position. The presentation showed that that the majority of secondary schools had lost at least one pupil, with 16 losing more than 5, and 7 with much higher levels. Ofsted had identified the 3 schools that had much higher levels than others over a two year period. Council officers have visited these schools to discuss the data and context and this will also be picked up by Ofsted as part of the inspection regime. These schools were Barnwood Park (Gloucester), Tewkesbury School and All Saints Academy (Cheltenham). In response to questions it was acknowledged that there were particular challenges in Gloucester.
- 14.5 It was hoped that the Department of Education Review of School Exclusions Chaired by Edward Timpson would offer helpful insights/advice and robust recommendations to government. The report was expected to be published April 2019. It was clear that off rolling was a complex issue and the Director of Education recommended a report from the ISOS Partnership/LGA which discussed whether the system had reached the tipping point with regard to spend on children with complex needs, and included detailed discussion on off rolling. (For information the report was available at this link <http://www.isospartnership.com/publications.html>.)

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- 14.6 The Head of Services for Children with Additional Needs informed the committee of the work in place in Gloucestershire which aimed to reduce the number of exclusions and off rolling. This included Restorative Practice and the development of local inclusion clusters. The committee was pleased to note that 61 exclusions had been mitigated since January 2017.
- 14.7 In response to questions it was stated that it was known that social deprivation does influence permanent exclusions and that traditionally data has been based on the school. However members were informed that officers were now looking at tracking exclusions by the child's place of residence.
- 14.8 The committee was reminded that the Cabinet had agreed additional funding for Restorative Practice (RP). The committee was informed that the mental health trailblazer programme was being linked into restorative practice, with some trailblazer staff being trained in RP. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Panel (ACEs) now had an education subgroup looking at these issues as well.
- 14.9 The Permanent Exclusions Task Group had recommended that schools be encouraged to take up the option of RP and there was some frustration at the number of schools that had signed up. However members were reminded that this was intense work that required a lot of school resources, and took time to embed. It was important that schools be in a position where they felt able to commit fully to this programme of work. The Clifton Diocese representative on the committee informed members that her school was taking forward RP and explained the intensity of the work involved. She also informed members that she was on the ACEs education sub group.
- 14.10 It was questioned whether officers interviewed parents who had removed their child from school to try and get underneath the issues. However, members were reminded that parents were not required to inform the local authority. Where the council did know about pupils home educated parents were offered support; the council was responsible for those children identified as missing education.
- 14.11 The School Exclusions Review led by Edward Timpson was due to be published this year and the committee would want to understand the implications of this report for Gloucestershire.

15. UPDATE ON THE PERMANENT EXCLUSIONS TASK GROUP REPORT

Please see minute 14.

16. CHILDREN'S CENTRES - A POSITION STATEMENT

- 16.1 The Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning informed the committee that this was the first report following the redesign of Children's Centres. There had been some delay to this report due to data not being collected as expected. The redesign had been about a more targeted approach to supporting children and families. The redesign also met the needs of the Families First agenda. The committee was informed that all targets had been exceeded.
- 16.2 It was questioned whether the targets had been set too low as they had all been met. It was explained that in the redesign of the service it had not been known exactly what the need would be, and the level of referrals had been higher than expected but that the service had been able to keep up with demand. In setting targets data previously identified had been used. Stretch targets could be included if required. Members were assured that

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children on a protection plan were a priority and the contract had been configured to reflect this. It was also explained that the contract was based on an outcome model approach.

16.3 ICT specialist support was required to embed the data system into the process. This has been purchased but not implemented due to lack of resources (staff availability).

16.4 It was agreed that committee members would visit the children's centre in their division. The committee would also receive a further broader report on this matter later in the year following on from the planned review.

17. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

17.1 The Director of Safeguarding and Care informed the committee that there had been improvement in some areas including those relating to timeliness, although the high number of re-referrals remained a concern. The number of children subject to a section 20 order would suggest that we were not making permanent arrangements quickly enough. Pressures remained regarding the number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan although the spike in numbers over the last year had been steadily reducing.

17.2 In response to a question committee members were updated with the current position regarding the new adoption arrangements delivered through Adoption West.

17.3 Members remained concerned with the data relating to some of the schools in Gloucestershire which indicated that many pupils were being let down. The committee would be able to discuss these with the Deputy Regional Schools Commissioner when they attend the committee's May 2019 meeting.

18. REVENUE MONITORING

18.1 The Finance Business Partner updated the committee on the revenue budget position as at December 2018. The current forecast for non-DSG funded services was an over-spend position of £7.97 million (7.5% of budget). The underlying over-spend was £10.57 million, £6.23 million being external placement costs, which reduced to £7.97 million when offset by £2.6 million of Business Rates Retention pilot income. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funded services were forecast to be over-spent by £5.7 million in-year. The announcement in December 2018 by the DFE of additional funds to support children with special educational needs had reduced the over-spend by £1.35 million and balances brought forward of £2.3 million reduced the net over-spend to £2.05 million against the ring-fenced grant.

18.2 In response to questions the Finance Business Partner and Director of Children's Services went through the actions in place to address and manage this process. In particular that costs relating to external placements would only be reduced once we have developed the local market; and agency costs would not reduce until the workforce had been stabilised.

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 1.10 pm