

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 16 July 2020.

## PRESENT:

Charlotte Blanch	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller (Chairman)
Dr Richard Castle	Cllr Loraine Patrick
Cllr Chris Coleman	Cllr Alan Preest
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Brian Robinson
Cllr Bernard Fisher	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Colin Hay	

Others in attendance: Andy Dempsey - Director of Partnerships and Strategy  
Gail Hancock - Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care  
Chris Spencer – Director of Children's Services  
Andrew Ireland – Chair Children's Services Improvement Board  
Claire Burgess – DfE Adviser  
Cllr Richard Boyles – Cabinet Member Children's Safeguarding and Early Years  
Cllr Patrick Molyneux – Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills

## 1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Dr Richard Castle declared a personal interest as a member of the Plan4Sport consortium providing additional mental health support (Covid-19) to GCC.

## 2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 March 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

## 3. CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY AND COVID 19

- 3.1 Andrew Ireland, Chair Children's Services Improvement Board, gave a detailed presentation of his report. He reminded members that at the time of his last report an inspection was potentially imminent. At that time his view was that the pace was not as he would want and that the outcome of an inspection would be too close to call. (NB. This report was included in the agenda pack for the extraordinary meeting on 24 March 2020. This meeting was cancelled due to the Covid-19 lockdown. The reports are available on the council's website.)
- 3.2 A recent change in the senior leadership team had had the effect of a stronger sense of purpose and energy, and a clearer direction of travel; staff were responding positively to the change.
- 3.3 Mr Ireland indicated that he could not say that there was evidence of sustained improvement, but that there was a fresh drive, the focus on a forensic detail to practice was now clearer, and there were grounds to feel that things were moving forward.
- 3.4 The committee was informed that the way in which the council had approached the Covid-19 arrangements had identified many strengths. The strength of the communication

channels with clear and consistent messages, and the speed with which the necessary ICT kit had been rolled out to enable staff to work from home were highlighted.

- 3.5 Members heard that the council had done well in comparison to others in getting vulnerable children to school. The new Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) was focused on the right areas, and was endorsed by the Children's Services Improvement Board. The multi agency work had held up well, in particular the local NHS should be commended for maintaining the changes to children's services, ie not reassigning these staff to the Covid-19 response. It was also stated that it was expected that there would be a surge in demand for children's services once schools returned, and it was important that the council was prepared for this so that the improvement journey was not derailed. Mr Ireland reiterated that he could not point members to clear and unambiguous outcomes but was confident about the council's progress.
- 3.6 In response to questions Mr Ireland explained that when discussing practice improvement this was more than the recording of cases. The evidence of audits over a period of time demonstrated the impact of the Essentials and Fundamentals training, with the recording of the purpose of visiting, and effectiveness of plans, being better identified. What was now needed was to drive inadequate practice out of the system and to get to a position where more than 50% of practice was judged to be good or outstanding. With regard to communication between managers and teams, even though staff were not able to see their manager face to face feedback was that staff did feel supported in a practical sense, and felt that there was greater stability and consistency.
- 3.7 The Director of Children's Services (DCS) reiterated the timeline for improvement that had been discussed at previous committee meetings – 2 years from their appointment to get the council to RI (requires improvement) and another 2 to get to good. They informed members that staff surveys had been undertaken during lockdown and the response from staff was positive. Members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) had undertaken webinars with staff – some were practice specific. The DCS was clear that the impact on the child's life was the key factor in practice improvement; it was difficult to evidence this aspect.
- 3.8 The DCS informed the committee that they were disappointed to hear Mr Ireland say that there was no discernible evidence when the audits demonstrated the improvements from two years ago. The MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) data platform identified good performance; in many respects the council was matching good/outstanding local authorities (LAs) on some performance indicators. During the lockdown Gloucestershire had been the highest performing LA in the South West with regard to visiting children (93% of CP (Children on a Protection Plan) seen within 2 weeks compared to regional average of 86% and 77% of CIN (Children in Need) seen within 4 weeks compared to regional average of 66%). It was also explained that with regard to responding to risk in the MASH initial visiting and visiting to children on a plan have been sustained and/or improved. Our performance compares favorably with the region and we were able to understand the difference between face to face and virtual activity.
- 3.9 The council's dependency on agency staff was reducing, and we were hearing good and consistent comments on practice. An Ofsted inspector was now working with council reviewing the preparation for court and they had not identified any inadequate work. Performance indicators were moving in the right direction. Evidence was available. However the DCS stated that Mr Ireland was right to say that the council was 'not out of the woods'. They informed the committee that the Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding and Care had brought a tenacity and focus to children's services, and had provided good support.

- 3.10 Members acknowledged the statements made but it was questioned why it had taken so long to drive forward the level of change required, why had it taken so long to achieve the necessary changes at senior management level? The risk to the authority of receiving a requires improvement rating was significant.
- 3.11 Mr Ireland acknowledged the concerns raised. He clarified that there had been substantial progress, the issue was sustaining the pace of change – he was of the view that the pace of change had picked up. He also stated that that the pace was now being pushed faster. It was important that people in key positions were present and well enough to supply the necessary energy on a daily basis; this was now happening.
- 3.12 With regard to a question on care leavers it was explained that the challenge related to the underlying quality of work and maintaining this in a lockdown situation. The Ambassadors for vulnerable children and young people were clear that the issues were straightforward. If an individual received good and consistent support from their social worker this would really make a difference in their lives; it did not need to be interventionist it just needed to be consistent. There was evidence that this was happening.
- 3.13 In response to a question the DCS informed members that the virtual court system had been driven by Julie Miles (Children’s Services Head of Service), she had essentially made this happen. Committee members asked that the DCS pass on their thanks to Julie and commend her for her innovative approach.
- 3.14 The DCS discussed the actions undertaken by the SLT during lockdown. He clarified that the audit process had not been stepped down and remained a priority but had taken different forms during the lockdown period, including a focus on targeted and thematic reviews.
- 3.15 Mr Ireland stated that it was important not to see Gloucestershire in a bubble; the council was not responding to a unique set of problems, these issues were also reflected at the national level.
- 3.16 In response to concerns regarding staffing levels it was explained that due to Covid-19, there was a delay in the second cohort of Indian Social Workers arriving. It was now expected that they will arrive in April 2021. It was also explained that there were 40 newly qualified social workers due to start with the council in September 2020; the council would support them in their first Assessed & Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). There have been several previous cohorts of ASYEs and this has proven to be a very healthy pipeline to grow a stable, qualified social worker workforce and has over time reduced our reliance on agency social workers (from 247 to 111 currently).
- 3.17 The DCS acknowledged member’s concerns with regard to the outcome of a future Ofsted inspection, and stated that they had hoped that the council would be further along but felt that the council was now making good progress.
- 3.18 Mr Ireland informed the committee that it had not been his intention for his report to be viewed negatively, but rather as one of greater hope and optimism. The Improvement Board was due to meet on 28 July 2020 and he anticipated that the reports received would reflect his confidence in the council’s direction of travel.
- 3.19 Some members expressed frustration that it would seem that some people were working incredibly hard and others not so. Wendy Williams, Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning, was identified as an officer regularly going above

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and beyond and the committee asked that the DCS pass on its thanks to Wendy for her commitment and dedication in support of the vulnerable children and young people in the council's care.

- 3.20 The committee was informed that in order to support cultural challenge the council was about to embark on a piece of work with the DfE looking at the council's values and what did they mean for children's services. It was questioned whether members could be part of this work. It was explained that the DfE would be leading on this and it was therefore up to them; the DfE Advisor was at the meeting and they would therefore be able to feed this request back.
- 3.21 In response to a question with regard to coaching the Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding & Care informed the meeting that a proposal has been submitted to the DfE to support this work. Informal feedback indicated that the proposal was being viewed favourably.
- 3.22 With regard to the concerns that not all staff members were using the LiquidLogic system properly the Interim Director explained that they had made it clear that there would be zero tolerance of non-compliance. They now received a monthly report on this issue, and discussions with the HR Business Partner were ongoing as to action that could be taken. They acknowledged that behaviour was hard to change but their predecessor had also impressed the need for compliance and it could be expected that by this time people would be compliant. The committee asked that this data be received at a future committee meeting.  
**ACTION: Andrea Clarke**
- 3.23 Members requested a briefing on what was being done to support children and young people returning to school. This briefing would support/complement the committee's agenda item on this matter in September 2020.  
**ACTION: Andrea Clarke/Charlotte Jones**
- 3.24 The DCS acknowledged members' concerns with regard to the statements made about the physical disability service in the Ofsted Monitoring letter (March 2020). They agreed that this was disappointing, and explained the context and challenges that had been in place at that time, including management changes. An internal Improvement Advisor (previously an Ofsted Inspector) was now working with this team. Members asked to be kept up to date with this service.
- 3.25 The DCS also shared their concern with regard to the Child Protection Conference Chair service.
- 3.26 The DCS stated that the manner in which children's services had responded to the Covid-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated that this was a responsive service. The data showed that the council had performed well across most indicators during this period, and the audit figures were improving (June 2020 overall monthly audit outcomes: Inadequate 19%, Requires Improvement 48% and Good 33%. This was the lowest proportion of Inadequate and highest proportion of Good on record.)

**CHAIRMAN**

Meeting concluded at 12.00 pm

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